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Arab Thought and Revolution as Event: Towards New Affective Registers of Critique

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Abstract

Historical events create the conditions under which thought processes develop in ways that make them symbolic of a whole generational shift, where a new cultural temporality comes to the fore both as un-concealment and as strategy. Significant shifts in the production of knowledge often suggest an epistemic and temporal break with the past where the relationship between event and theory is moved not merely by the new forms of knowledge it creates, but also by the new cultural temporality that these forms of knowledge bring to the fore as a strategy. In this article, I rehearse questions of an epistemological nature that grapple with the relationship between the people's movements in the Arab region, as ethical events, and how these may have played a role in shifting the focus of Arab philosophical debate concerning questions of time, history and the body. Here, I rehearse the following questions: What kind of a thought/event conjecture are we dealing with in the case of the Arab/North African region? What is the connection between the movements as events, and the emerging Arab intellectual subject? And finally, what have the movements taught us about the relationships between thought, theory and the everyday?

Key words: Event, Theory, Arab Thought, Body, Every day, Possibility, Revolution

How, then, should you prepare yourself [for event]? First, by remaining faithful to a past event, to the lessons given to the world by that event. This is why the prevailing order fights tooth and nail on this point. It tries to show that past events haven't created any new possibility...The other way of being prepared, related to the first, is criticism of the established order. Even supposing that the established order is master of the possibilities, it's a matter of showing that these possibilities are, in our view, insufficient. (Alain Badiou 2013: 13)

As the fervour and the hopefulness of the revolutionary movement in the Arab region is now replaced with apocalyptic images of destroyed towns and cities in Iraq, Yemen

and Syria, drowned refugees and ISIS eschatology, we return yet again to another form of intellectual impotence, one in which shock and stammering become the only tools available to us. Historical analysis of events certainly loses none of its complexity, even after a *semi-longue durée* had set in. What is clear, however, is that the ethical demands made by people across the Arab region since the 2010 Tunisian revolution, have already made their mark on the history of the region. In this article, I rehearse questions of an epistemological nature that grapple with the relationship between the people's movements in the Arab region, as ethical events¹, and how these may have played a role in shifting the focus of Arab philosophical debate. The aim is to map the ways in which ethical events, as plural and open processes, enter a dialectical relationship with both theory and temporality. Historical events create the conditions under which thought processes develop in ways that make them symbolic of a whole cultural change, where a new cultural temporality comes to the fore both as unconcealment and as strategy. Significant shifts in the production of knowledge often suggest an epistemic and temporal break with the past. In this case, it is reasonable to argue that the relationship between event and theory is moved not merely by the new forms of knowledge it creates, but also by the new cultural temporality that these forms of knowledge bring to the fore as a strategy. What kind of a thought/event conjecture are we dealing with in the case of North Africa and the Middle East? What is the connection between people's movements as events, and the emerging Arab intellectual subject? What qualitative temporal multiplicity emerges from the people's movements, and how does this manifest itself at the level of thought? Finally, what have people's movements in North Africa and the Middle East taught us about the relationships between thought, theory and the everyday? To inject a dose of intellectual modesty into this work – I need to remind the reader of my position – that of stammering – a position, which denies the person doing the stammering either objective truth or finality. However, what I can say with some confidence, is that the relationship between thought and the everyday – the everyday being site of new antagonisms - is one of reciprocal violence. Thought does violence to the 'everyday' by imposing on it a kind of language/hermeneutics—a language that can only feign coherence and understanding – for here, coherence is an impossible intellectual task – and, equally, the 'everyday' in the form of event/eventfulness does violence to *thought* when it makes it redundant, when it exposes its temporal confusion, the incoherence of its semantics. Lineages of thought that remain eminent for generations are exposed, brought into question,

refuted, and torn apart by events. Amid this epistemic site of demolition, a new kind of language emerges/submerges which makes flight possible. It is partly through these violent and cacophonous relationships among thought, the everyday and event that the possibility of new registers of critique can arise.

This work will show, by using examples from contemporary Arab philosophical debate (and focusing mainly on the work of Abdul-Aziz Boumeshouli, Abdelsamad Al-Ghabass, Driss Katheer, Hassan Aouzal and Ahmed Barqawi), how a third generation² of Arab philosophers have been inspired by the people's movements in the Arab/North African region, beginning with the Tunisian uprising of 2010, to make a temporal break with the grand projects of contemporary Arab philosophy that have achieved a status of transcendence for more than half a century. I have argued elsewhere (2010) that Arab philosophical and political reasoning have, since the occupation of Palestine, been polarised by two schools of thought that had achieved a status of *immanence*: an historical materialist, pan-Arabist discourse that saw Marxism's Western historical materialism as the only way out of Arab failures, the other, I call the 'cultural Salafist' discourse, which saw, and still sees, in a mental emigration to an elusive, glorious, bygone-socio-cultural temporality as the only means through which to establish an authentic and historical Arab identity. These two positions have become, according to many voices from the third generation of Arab philosophers with whom I engage here, redundant – dead illusions – the kinds of 'words man writes and dies for', words that, as Rancière put it, 'never entirely keep their promise'³ (Rancière, 2011: 248). Arab philosophy's post-1967 grand projects, inspired by different readings of 'historical materialism'; a Foucauldian excavation project into heritage (see Mohammed Abed al-Jaberi and Mohamed Arkoun), as well as attempts to de-westernise/de-imperialise Arab-Islamic thought (see Taha Abdurrahman), have all become ill suited, at the level of theory, to analysing the change caused by the people's movements in the Arab/North African region. The grand projects of Arab philosophy, and their historical Marxist variants, have succumbed to a new reality to which they cannot adapt. People's movements were not merely driven by a struggle for dignity, justice and freedom, but also for a different cultural and political time. What these movements have managed to do, as an event, is to create a break with the grand Arab philosophical projects that have been driven by specific historical events, mainly the occupation of Palestine in 1948, the nationalisation of the canal Suez in 1956, and the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967

and 1973. Although they are still important, these events, no longer constitute the *telos* for the emergent Arab intelligentsia, many of whom now strongly argue that the inspiration for a new type of philosophical life lies not in variants of Marxists' historical materialism, or in archaeologies of heritage, but in the everyday and lived experience.

Encouraged by a recent survey on the state of the Arab social sciences, which was conducted by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (2017), and which showed an impressive increase in political science book publications in North Africa after the Tunisian revolution of 2010⁴, we can already argue, with some certainty, that that 2010 event has had a substantial effect on theoretical debate and on the production of knowledge in this region. Furthermore, based on evidence from qualitative interviews⁵ with key philosophers from different parts of the Arab/North African region, including Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Lebanon, I argue that the year 2010 signalled the birth of a coherent and systematic Arab philosophical discourse, led by a third generation of Arab philosophers, who agree on the following ideas:

- the redundancy and inadequacy of the pan-Arabist philosophical project and its registers of critique,
- the positioning of the 'everyday' and lived experience as the main site for new antagonisms,
- transcending of the role of the intellectual as a leader or legislator of truth,
- the debunking of collective identities and teleologies of becoming in favour of alterity, difference, and pluralism,
- focusing on the present 'tense', as an ethical right and a source of agency, and, finally,
- engagement with the body and desire as drivers of history.

These philosophical concerns signal the end of the grand Arab philosophical project, which was based on the reworking of heritage (also known as the heritage/modernity debate). However, rather than contend that 2010 was the sole driver in this epistemic shift in Arab thought, which would be misleading, I'd like, instead, to argue that what the 2010 event succeeded in doing was to reposition a whole pro-pluralist, anti-essentialist discourse from the margins to a more significant position in Arab contemporary philosophy. December 2010, was key in decentring the second

generation of Arab philosophers by focusing on the revolutionary potential of *history*, bringing it down from the towers of intellectualism, *res cogitans*, to *res extensa*, the corporeal and the everyday, which form its real agents and movers. Reading through Arab Marxist literature, especially since 1967, one is struck by how the term ‘history’ (and the need to be inside rather than outside it) had reached a sort of immanence, which, unwittingly, made ‘history’ alien to the materialist conception formulated by Marx and Engels: history is made by the masses, ordinary people, not by intellectuals as legislators towering above the crowd. In this sense, Bou’azizi inaugurated an ethical event through an act of sacrifice that gave birth to the ethical subject as hero, and, in so doing, his act signalled not only the possible death of an authoritarian regime, but of a whole *regime de savoir*, in which intellectuals acted as leaders and as legislators of truth.

However, while philosophical debate has been energised in the Arab region since the Tunisian revolution, a teleological discourse—that of cultural Salafism—seems to be gaining ground as a movement in the Arab/North African region. Here, I argue that while many of the voices from the third generation of Arab philosophers are aware of the workings of cultural Salafism as an anti-avant-gardist movement, and many, I am aware, are in direct confrontation with its interlocutors; few from this third generation of philosophers, (especially since they mostly agree that the ‘everyday’ is what inspires their new philosophical language), have been attentive to the significance of cultural Salafism as a cultural, everyday practice. Here, I need to make two crucial points before I present evidence and further analysis in view of the temporal/epistemic shift that I argue has taken place in Arab philosophical debate since 2010.

First, while the third generation of Arab philosophers have succeeded in de-centring the grand Arab philosophical projects of the mid to late 20th century, the language with which they have articulated the emergent themes in Arab philosophy (the body, desire, the everyday, experience) does not yet amount to a new register of critique, for a new register, I argue, is more likely to emerge from an interdisciplinary, epistemic type of borrowing, an interfusion of the kind that, for example, gave structuralism and post-structuralism in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s France an advantage over historical materialism as a theoretical framework of analysis (Perry Anderson: 1983). The registers of critique on which structuralism/post-structuralism relied in France were the

product of a serious conversation between several disciplines, including: linguistics (semiotics and the arbitrariness/unity of the sign), anthropology (cultural systems as language/communication) and psychoanalysis (the subconscious is structured like language). Repositioning 'the everyday', and 'event' at the centre of debate in Arab contemporary philosophy necessitates bold, epistemic diversions into anthropology, cultural studies, media studies, linguistics, and other disciplines in the humanities. Lest this inter-disciplinary conversation be active, it will be much more sensible to argue, at this stage, that while the third generation of Arab philosophers have enunciated a temporal break with their teachers (from the second generation), they are perhaps still in the early stages of carving out the new language that has yet to congeal to thus form new registers of critique.

Secondly, I use newness to refer to registers with some hesitation, as I have already shown elsewhere (Sabry 2010) how efforts had already been made in the 1980s, by key voices within the anti-essentialist position in North African thought, to steer philosophical debate beyond the theoretical confines of historical materialism. Abdelsalam Binabd'al'ali, a North African thinker and philosopher, more than three decades ago, stressed that Arab thought could not move forward unless its problematics were framed within key changes or 'revolutions' in contemporary world thought:

- 1- a semiological revolution that led to a re-examination of *interpretation* and the creation of meaning;
- 2- an epistemological revolution that disturbs the philosophy of the *cogito*, and
- 3- the philosophical revolution that reversed Platonism, championing the truth of the body, or the body as truth.

Thought, in the Arab cultural repertoire, had become stagnant, affirmed Binabd'al'ali, back in the early 1980s, because it became disconnected from event and thus called for a reconnection between Arab philosophy and *event* (Binabd'al'ali, 1983: 18)⁶. With this *a priori* knowledge in mind, rather than asserting that the 2010 event was the main determinant in de-centring the immanence of the authenticity debate as a dominant focus in late twentieth century Arab thought, and where structure was ruthlessly privileged over experience, it is safer to argue that it may instead have played a significant role in re-energising a position in North African thought, that went against

the grain by debunking Marxist variants of historical materialism and championed 'experience' as an essential framework of theoretical analysis.

The body, desire and the temporal question

In his philosophical treatise, a *Critique of the Construction of Arab Reason* (1991), the Moroccan philosopher, Mohamed Abed Al Jabri, strongly and systematically argued that the deficit in the contemporary Arab cultural repertoire is due to an unconscious and non-linear understanding of time. In this seminal thesis, Al Jabri also plants the seeds for a serious intellectual engagement with the question of Arab cultural temporality (See Sabry 2010, 2012), and he asks difficult questions, such as: what does it mean for culture to have a time, and for time to have a culture? Using Jean Piaget's concept of '*L'inconscient cognitif*', Jabri makes a connection between cultural time and unconscious time, arguing that:

... the unconscious has no history since it does not acknowledge natural time. It has its own time which is different from conscious time, the time of wakefulness and consciousness. Unconscious time resembles, to a degree, dream time, as it is unable to acknowledge temporal or spatial distances and orders, nor is it able to acknowledge the law of causality. The same can be said about cultural time and the time of a reason's structure that belongs to a certain culture. Thus, cultural time is like unconscious time in that it overlaps and extends in a spiral way, making it possible for many cultural phases to coexist in the same thought (*fikr*) and thus in the same reason's structure, just as repressed desires from different psychological and biological stages coexist in the gloominess of the unconscious. (1991: 41)

Using this comparison between the 'unconscious' and 'cultural time' allows Jabri, as an epistemologist, to critique not only the Arab-Islamic repertoire and its production of knowledge, but also its intellectuals. The deficit produced by the overlap in cultural temporality in this repertoire, argues al-Jabri, is both epistemic and ideological.

At the epistemic level, the Arab intellectual is still, as he was in the Umayyad era, consuming old modalities of knowledge, as if they were new or contemporary. This was the case yesterday, and it is still the case today. At the ideological level, this intellectual still relives past struggles in his consciousness from the Umayyad era, which coexists with his present struggles ... The overlapping of cultural time in the thought of the Arab intellectual covers both synchronic and diachronic levels in ways

that make it difficult to impose any kind of order or chronology on his awareness. (1991: 45)

Abed Al-Jabri, like other philosophers who have grappled with the notion of time and cultural temporality in the Pan-Arab context, have, because of their approach and method, mostly done so through a structural, archaeological method. Although one can see how nonlinearity in cultural (epistemic)-time may pose a problem for an epistemologist who is dealing with thought structures, since engaging with everyday human experience throws up different concerns. Nonlinearity in cultural time, at the level of consciousness, is not merely suggestive of a Piagetian unconscious cultural state, as Al Jabri argues. It is, if looked at anthropologically, part of a complex process of temporal mounting, of intersectionality, of forgetting, of remembering, of appropriation/re-appropriation, of resistance, and of being mnemonically temporal in the world (Sabry 2018). Post-Jaberist philosophers, including Aouzal, Al Ghabass, Boumeshouli, Katheer and Khatibi, all Moroccan philosophers, argue for the necessity for an ontological approach with which to engage with the question of cultural time, that takes its cue not simply from archaeologies of knowledge, but also from experience and everyday life, as sites of agency. Here, cultural times compete, in a Bergsonian, multi-layered time-consciousness (See Bergson 2001 [1913]), for a place in a *metis* and trans-temporal Arab cultural time, which manifests itself in plurality and intersections (rather than in essence) and where the experiential is taken as the basis for a new philosophical life.

The evidence emerging from Abdel Aziz Boumeshouli's qualitative study (2015), which attempted, using qualitative interviews with key emerging philosophers from different countries in the Arab world, points to a shift in Arab philosophical debate that has been vitalised by the event of 2010: the shift, put simply, is one from structure/authenticity to experience, pluralism and everyday life. Boumeshouli, an influential Moroccan philosopher and part of the transcendence⁷ movement in Morocco, delineates key emerging philosophical themes with which the new generation of Arab philosophers is currently preoccupied: the birth of the self, difference, the politics of the body, desire and everyday life. These themes, I will argue, are not just disparate preoccupations, but form a coherent ensemble of ideas that hold within them the seeds for new affective registers of critique and a theoretical promise that is more in synch with the ethical

demands that have been made by people across the Arab region. I also contend that, while these new themes point to a shift, at the level of theory, from historical Marxism (and Althusserian variants thereof) and an obsession with structure, they also point to a different relationship with the notion of temporality. In his book *the Individual, Being, God and the Right to the Body*, Abd Assamad Al-Ghabass (2006) dedicates a brief chapter, entitled: 'The Right to the Present', to the question of temporality, in which he observes: "Existence is a creativity in the moment and an innovation that is independent of the past" (2006: 15). The present (as a temporality) has, for Al-Ghabass, an ethical value around which a whole ethical system is organised, which he names 'the ethics of the present' (ibid). The most valuable thing in human existence, and for the human being, is his/her present, Al-Ghabass advances. Existence's independence is a result of escape/flight from the clutches of the past. Even the present, as a temporality, Al-Ghabass argues, has a right to its-being-in-the-present, outside any *a priori* temporal organisation or chronology (ibid). 'The body', contends Al-Ghabass, is not a mere ground or container for the present, because the present is itself the body. The Body, here, is not only 'a pure possibility for the unfolding of the present as temporality, but it is the operation of the present itself, for in the absence of the body, the present cannot exist (Al-Ghabass, 2006: 71). In *Desire and Pleasure* (2014), Al-Ghabass debunks previous analyses of history in Arab thought by placing the body and desire at the heart of historical analysis. Both history and the future (as a temporality) are motivated by events that the body creates through desire. Both the temporal and the corporeal are motivated by desire. 'Desire tears into history to create space for new ethical events, which then give history its liveliness and its sense of historicity' (ibid). This reading of history and temporality is symptomatic of a radical reflexivity that is shared by a new breed of Arab philosophers for whom the default position for doing philosophy brings into question the very nature of philosophical life itself. Philosophising about this nature puts the body and the present at the heart of the philosophical experience. "I deserve my body, I deserve my present, and that's non-negotiable" observed al-Ghabass (2013: 11). Boumeshouli contends, in the same vein, that 'the experience of the present as a temporality is not an abstract concept, but it is the embodiment of the life of the body in time and in its ethical relation to the other'. (2010: 36) In his attempt to bring the notion of the body back to metaphysics, Boumeshouli remarks, in his book *On the Body's Experience*:

In asking what is the body? I am not simply re-asking the Kantian question: What is Human? Which can generate other questions about pure reason such as: what can I know? What can I do? What can I hope for? Instead, in asking what is the body, we generate a different set of questions: What does my body desire? What is my body capable of establishing in its relation to the other in the world? And, what can my body hope for in the world? (2010: pp: 9-10)⁸

In asking What does my body desire, Boumeshouli launches a double type of critique of both the enlightenment and its philosophers (Descartes and Kant, to be specific), and of the Arab-Islamic philosophical repertoire, where the body remains estranged from its nature, is relegated to the profane, denied its independence and will.⁹ The body's estrangement from its natural essence, argues Boumeshouli, is not caused by nature, but by the culture that denies it its desires, feelings and pleasures (ibid).

Hassan Aouzal, also a Moroccan philosopher, attacks the Hegelian conception of history for its absolutism, which he compares to theological discourse in its discrediting of the ontological and lived experience. In an interview with Boumeshouli (2015), Aouzal remarked:

Human thought is the product of the body which feels and experiences both pain and pleasure and this is counter to all the utopias that have plagued human kind since Plato, Hegel, Kant, and even Lacan. If the philosophy of pleasure/enjoyment acknowledges the instinctual and physiological secretions, idealist philosophy wants us to believe, just like theology, that ideas come down to us in the form of inspiration" (2015: 246 Author's translation).

The demand for a philosophy of the body, or a philosophy that demarcates the body, to be at the heart of history (See Aouzal, Binabd'al'ali, Boumeshouli, Ghabass and Katheer) was a demand that was re-energised by the revolutionary moment of 2010, when ethical demands for liberty (including the liberty of the body) were made through physical experience and in which the body and its presence, in different aesthetic forms, became the centre of a major historical event¹⁰.

Moving discussion from the notion of the body to the notion of the Subject (self), in his *The Ontology of The Subject (2014)*, Ahmad Barqawi, a Syrian philosopher, critiques Arab philosophy for its non-engagement with 'self' in Arab thought, and enunciates a

philosophical approach that presents 'self' as an agential entity that is assured of its existence, time and creativity outside essentialist ideologies of becoming.

"I liberate the subject from the captivity of metaphysics, as it was harshly treated when it was only viewed platonically or from the angle of identity. I revived and awakened it from its dark tomb, which was laid down by the history of philosophy, and tainted with structuralism"¹¹

Like many post-identitarian Arab philosophers, Barqawi holds Arab nationalist discourses of becoming responsible for the notorious absence of the Arab subject, a subject (self, essence) that, he urges, in his Nietzschean prophetic style, Arab philosophy must awaken from its long slumber.

The re-surfacing of the body, desire and the self as key philosophical themes for this collective is further anchored by a re-reading of the concept of the everyday. Slogans of the Arab uprisings that reverberated across squares from the Yemen to Casablanca, demanding to be heard and seen, were a testament to a mass movement that was not merely conscious of its reality, its destiny and its presence, but this consciousness took on different creative and strategic forms of communication that would have made Althusser (the Pope of structuralism) eat his own hat. I have elsewhere (Sabry 2010) made an epistemic connection between Arab philosophical debates on Modernity and interpretations of culture in the Arab cultural repertoire, showing how the dominant readings of the modernity/heritage debate have reflected this repertoire's dominant interpretation of culture. For example, Al-Jabri (heavily influenced by the French structuralism of the 1970s) divided language into two different categories: the 'conscious' and the 'unconscious' language. For Al-Jabri, colloquial languages were unconscious, and they were not worth studying or examining.¹² His distinction was driven by a clear teleological objective: that of Arab nationalism, which, for him, stood more of a chance as a project if all Arabs shared a common language. So, dominant interpretations of culture, like those of modernity, were, in the Arab repertoire, driven by ideology and a sense of history. It is not surprising, then, that the everyday was read and understood by the grand projects of Arab philosophy through the lenses of reification and false consciousness, in which lived experience was undermined as being unconscious and, therefore, as unable to give an account of itself.

It is important to add here, as I continue to grapple with the dialectical relationship between thought and event, that the 2010 moment not only succeeded in exposing the limits of structuralism's and historical materialism's explanatory power within the Arab philosophical debate, but also succeeded in revitalising an anti-essentialist position (See Sabry 2010) that remained obscure, at the margins of Arab philosophical thought, for more than a quarter of a century, moving it, its interlocutors and their reading of history, into a significant position in Arab philosophical debate. As the third-generation Moroccan philosopher, Driss Katheer, observed:

We cannot say that the generation of Mohamed Abed Al-Jaberi and that of Mohammad Arkoun is extinct and finished. This generation's work is still influential in the cultural and philosophical scene. What is clear, however, is that the problematics on which they founded their work, beginning with *Us and Heritage* [referring to Jaberi's project], the *Unthought in Arab-Islamic thought* [referring to Arkoun's project], and the radical break [referring to Laroui's project], etc., have exhausted their tasks and arrived at an intersection where philosophy is no longer linked to history, be it in researching heritage or researching history itself, or in researching the history of philosophy in a Hegelian sense. Our challenge today is to literally wade into the subject of everydayness in a direct fashion, without having to resort to Ibn Rushd or Al-Farabi... how can we think of **youth subcultures** [author's emphasis], illegal emigration (known as *burning*, in colloquial Arabic) and turn them (as well as other everyday themes) into philosophical objects of enquiry?' (Katheer in Boumeshouli 2015: 274)¹³.

To go back to the original question posed by this work, which rehearses the ways in which event enters a dialectical relationship with thought (contemporary Arab thought), I showed how the 2010 moment played an important role in exposing the explanatory limits of western historical materialism as a framework of analysis (and a delayed one too) in responding to new realities. These limits, I argued, have been systematically pointed to, and critically so, by the North African philosophers of transcendence (of metaphysics, collective identity, authenticity, ideology) long before the 2010 moment. Abdelsalam Binabd'al'ali (1983, 1994, 2000, 2002) and Abdelakabir Khatibi (1980, 2009) had already enunciated the new and alternative plane (or epistemic flight) that would allow Arab philosophy to produce knowledge/philosophise outside the teleologies of becoming, more than a quarter of a century ago. So, a genealogy of post-structuralist North African thinkers, who lived through the 1968 student movement in France, which signalled the theoretical collapse of Althusserian Marxism (See

Anderson 1982), had already been formed, and its movement precedes 2010 as event. However, the arbitrariness of the historical moment that was experienced in France in 1968 and in the Arab world of the same year, could not have been more conspicuous¹⁴. The third generation of Arab philosophers (especially those from North Africa to whom I refer as the philosophers of transcendence) had to wait for a historical Braudelien moment, a kind of epistemic accelerator, without which thought remains disconnected from event, and therefore from the experience that gives it historicity.

Let us inject just a little poison into this 'transcendental' intellectual position, for it is, after all, its interlocutors who insist that no intellectual position should be above critique. The philosophy of 'transcendence', and the difference which claims to transcend the duality problematic between tradition and modernity, and other forms of metaphysics (brought about by different variants of Western Marxism and Cultural Salafism, as discourse) through the championing of alterity, individualism, the trans-temporal, and the trans-subjective, as aspects of a new Arab self may have to accept that what is being transcended here is not the duality (modernity/authenticity) *per se*, but how it was re-conceived and dealt with, at the level of theory, rather than at the level of lived culture. If anything, Cultural Salafism, a phenomenon on which I shall concentrate for the remainder of this work, is gaining ground, and its interlocutors have been by far the most successful in communicating their ideas and in infiltrating everyday cultural practices in the Arab region. While the 2010 event re-energised a third generation of Arab philosophers to take philosophy out of the confines of metaphysics, using self, the everyday and alterity as new sites of enquiry, they could not be further detached from the material, cultural realities of the ordinary Arab masses, for whom God, absolute truth, and the sacred are of paramount importance, and where the complex play between modernity and authenticity is part of a structure of feeling¹⁵. To situate philosophical life, and with it philosophical enquiry in the realm of the everyday, requires a systematic preoccupation with lived culture and the forms of symbolic signification that circulate within a society (Williams 1958).

Cultural Salafism¹⁶, which describes a fluid, intricate and exclusivist form of puritanism in Islam, is now channeled through a web of global digital media content. Its key intellectual premise, regardless of the differences in methodology, is that reform in religion and character necessitates a return to the values and cultural practices of the Prophet Mohammed's companions. Of late, Salafism has largely been used to depict

Jihadi groups within the context of the war on terrorism, and little attention has been given to the anthropological factors that underline Salafism as a socio-cultural phenomenon. If we are to take Driss Katheer's proposition and philosophize everyday cultures, then philosophical enquiry must couple its critique of major Salafist texts with an anthropological enquiry into manifestations of Salafism as an everyday practice.

Cultural Salafism, and its preachers, act by homogenising cultural and religious experience – their ultimate motif is masked by a pseudo-rationalism, the main aim of which is to de-metisise cultural experience and cultural time. A more puritan interpretation of Islam is now finding its way to a mass Arab audience thorough digital media and Salafist Imams who, in many cases, also act as community leaders. Religious media and their content anchor the role of the local imam, making him more potent. Cultural Salafism shuns centuries old Sufi Islamic practices as innovation. This type of puritanism may sound like an attempt to rationalize and purify religious discourse, removing it from its centuries' old hybridized, magico-mythical temporality, but it is also an attempt to formalize and standardize religious, cultural and temporal experience. I call this a pseudo-rational religious discourse, because it also seeps into other areas of cultural life, forbidding music, dance and the desegregation of men and women. What lies beneath this pseudo-religious rational discourse of 'puritan' Islam is a Cultural Salafist ideology that shuns difference, pluralism and individualism. Cultural Salafism is not the only problem facing the third generation of Arab philosophers today. Arab and Western states have been complicit in condoning Cultural Salafism as an ideology. In fact, Western states, including the US and the UK, have been making multi-billion-dollar business deals with the very Arab states that have openly been promoting their exclusivist ideology of Cultural Salafism across the Arab and Islamic world. If Western historical materialism (Marxist historicism, to be precise, and its revolutionary politics) was, for the second generation of Arab philosophers, the only viable strategy through which to escape from Cultural Salafism, what is the strategy that the duality transcendence philosophers offer by way of engaging with this problem?

Conclusion

To end where I started, and here I mean Alain Badiou's quote, my grappling with the

relationship between event and theory must be situated within a conscious and intentional *telos*: to disturb the Arab states' monopoly over possibility and to transgress the Arab academe's stabilization of semantics. Acknowledging the existence of *event* as a continuous process and rehearsing how it has reenergized what has hitherto been a marginal, if not invisible, voice within Arab philosophical discourse, is a way of speaking truth to power. Counter-revolutionary movements across the Arab world have ceaselessly tried to prove that the event of 2010 and the human sacrifices that preceded it since de-colonization, had come to nothing but destruction and anarchy. I tried to show the opposite: that the ethical demands made by people in North Africa and across the Middle East have opened new possibilities at the level of thought and theory that were unthinkable before. Third generation Arab philosophers' audacious preoccupation with the everyday, the body and the emancipation of the senses as the new drivers of history, as opposed to teleological discourses of becoming, has been justified both empirically and theoretically by people's movements. So, a theoretical possibility has opened through which *event* lives beyond temporal precincts. However, for the new drivers of history to cohere into new registers of critique, and for such registers to be faithful to Arab publics and to the politics of the everyday, Arab philosophy must enter a serious and systematic conversation with other disciplines in the humanities, including anthropology, sociology, political economy and cultural studies.

Notes

¹ I use the term "*Event*" in its philosophical sense to signal a rupture in thought; and a threat to the stabilisation of semantic possibilities. I also use it in a relational way, in the context of this article, to accentuate the complex connection between event (in our case the Uprisings that started in the Arab region in Tunisia in December 2010) and the emergence of an audacious intellectual subject in Arab philosophy. *Event*, in this case, to borrow Alain Badiou's language, is part of a "truth procedure"; 'something that brings to light a possibility that was invisible or even unthinkable' (Badiou, Alain 2013: 9-10). I do not subscribe to the view or opinion that the uprisings in the Arab region constitute a definitive, total or even a singular *event*, but that they are largely plural and trans-temporal events, that begun straight after decolonisation, and which fomented into a climax during the Tunisian revolution in 2010. I also maintain, in agreement with Badiou (2013), that *ethics* come to the fore most pronouncedly when we acknowledge *event's* existence as a possibility for change.

My usage of the term '*Event*', which translates into the Arabic word *al-Hadath*, is also inspired by the work of the Moroccan philosopher, Abdal-Salam Binabd'al'ali (1983, 1994, 2000, 2002) who insists that one of the main deficits of contemporary Arab philosophy lies in its disconnection from *Event*.

² By the third generation, I am referring here to both a chronological and an epistemic break. An extremely brief taxonomy is necessary at this point: First generation - late 19th century – mid twentieth century - was preoccupied with religious and cultural reform, e.g., Muhammad Abdu, Jamal Din Al-Afghani and Taha Hussein. Second Generation – late twentieth century – grand historical projects - e.g., Mohamed Abed al-Jaberi, Mohamed Arkoun, Abdallah Laroui. Third Generation: Early twenty-first century – shift from structure to experience – e.g., Abdelakabir Khatibi, Abdelsalam Binabd'al'ali, Abdul-Aziz Boumeshouli, and Al-Ghabass.

³ (Rancière in Bowman and Stamp, 2011: 248).

⁴ Based on a random sample of about 160 books focusing on anthropology in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, produced in Arabic between 2000 and 2016 between 2000 and 2005: only Morocco had 6% of books on Political Anthropology among its overall production, besides social, cultural and religious anthropology; whereas Tunisia and Algeria's most productive fields were social and cultural anthropology. The same holds true for the period 2006-2010, but there was an increased number of Political Anthropology books, with about 11.5% among the total production being recorded. From 2011-2016, the production in Political Anthropology decreased to around 7% in Morocco, but reached 14.2% in Tunisia (overall production), where it had been near to zero in the previous two periods. (Ait Mansour: 2017).

For Sociology studies, based on a random sample of books, numbering more than 700 from the three countries, the following was discovered: Between 2000 and 2005, Political Sociology production in Morocco reached 19.4% among the overall production, 18.1% in Tunisia, and 10.6% in Algeria. Between 2006 and 2010, the Political Sociology production decreased in both Morocco and Tunisia, to reach 14.4% in the former, and 17.8% in the latter. However, between 2011 and 2016, the production of Political Sociology exploded in Tunisia to reach about 39% among the overall production, slightly increased in Morocco compared to the former period, with 16.5% among the overall production of Sociology, whereas in Algeria it also significantly increased, to reach 26% among the overall production in Algeria (Ait Mansour 2017).

⁵ The interviews, conducted by the Moroccan philosopher Abdelaziz Boumeshouli, and other related studies were part of a two-year research project funded by the Arab Council for the Social Sciences (2013-2015), which included 8 Arab scholars, each engaging with a specific area of research on Media, Time and Culture in different Arab and North African countries. The team of researchers included: Ramy Aly, Abdul-Aziz Boumeshouli, Loyal Ftouni, Joe Khalil, Amina El-Mekaoui, Helena Nassif, Tarik Sabry and Helga Tawil-Souri. The project, which I led, was interdisciplinary, as it involved an anthropologist, a linguist, a philosopher, as well as media and cultural studies scholars.

⁶ See also Boumeshouli, Abdul-Aziz (2006).

⁷ The transcendence movement interlocutors call their philosophy that of *tajawuz*, or *transcendence*, a philosophy that promises to surpass the duality problematic between modernity and tradition/authenticity, that rejects ideological discourses of identity, and that situates heritage, and even modernity, within a position of *différance*, where both tradition and philosophy become objects of critique and subversion. The advocates of this position (including Abdel Aziz Boumeshouli, Abdelsamad Al-Ghabass, Aouzal, Driss Katheer), inspired by the work of Abdelakabir Khatibi and Abdelsalam Ben Abdela'li, have been emboldened by the Tunisian revolution of 2010 and are mostly active campaigners against cultural Salafism in Morocco. They champion alterity, pluralism, fragmentation, non-linearity, and the constant questioning of essentialized Arab discourses around *becoming*.⁷ Khatibi, a major advocate of pluralism and plural identities, finds the 'savage difference' vis-à-vis the West and what he calls 'blind identity', naïve, patriotic, ideological, and leading to nothing other than a theoretical impasse.

⁸ Author's Translation.

⁹ Interview with Tarik Sabry (in Boumeshouli, *Philosophy and the Arab Movement* 2015, pp: 275-289)

¹⁰ See Marwan M Kraidy's book *The Naked Blogger of Cairo: Creative Insurgency in the Arab World* (2016) Harvard University Press, in which shows that the essential medium of political expression in the Arab uprisings was not social media but something more fundamental: the human body.

¹¹ In Boumeshouli, 2017, unpublished article.

¹² Interview with Tarik Sabry, Casablanca, 23rd July 2001.

¹³ Author's translation

¹⁴ In 1967, Arabs lost their military war against Israel in what was called the 6-day war. This event went on to become the defining moment for a whole generation of Arab intellectuals. So, while post-structuralism became triumphant in 1968, after the student and workers' movement, thus signalling the collapse of historical materialism as a theoretical framework, the opposite, for obvious and well documented ideological reasons, was only just beginning to take hold in the Arab region, as historical materialism was shaping a whole intellectual generation.

¹⁵ I use the term 'structure of feeling' in a different context to that in which Raymond Williams has used it in *The Long Revolution* (1961, pp: 64-65): a context in which the structure of feeling is not merely the result of the dynamics inherent in one culture, one 'general organization', the 'culture of a community' or the 'culture of a period'. Rather, I use it in the context in which the 'structure of feeling' is the product of a dialectical interaction between different 'general organizations' and cultural temporalities.

¹⁶ There are literally dozens of books and theses on Salafism, its history and ideology.

My concern here is not with revisiting this literature, but with pointing to its anthropological deficit.

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Biography

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