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On tragic temporality: Abdallah Laroui’s reading of tradition

Nils Riecken

Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient, Berlin

Introduction

What I will discuss today is how the works of the contemporary Moroccan historian and intellectual Abdallah Laroui critically engage the concept of the normative Islamic tradition (*al-sunna*).¹ I read Laroui’s conceptualization of the Islamic tradition as a critical intervention into debates about the place of the Islamic tradition within the modern contemporary present *after* colonialism. Situating the Islamic tradition within the framework of his negative account of universal history,² that is, what I call a “situated universalist” perspective, Laroui manages to keep the universal and the horizon of the political fundamentally open.³ His conceptualization of the Islamic tradition reframes the Islamic tradition temporally in a way that unsettles the identification of Islamic history with Islamic time and the Islamic tradition. Key to Laroui’s critical undertaking regarding the Islamic tradition is the way he takes apart hegemonic alignments of historicity and temporality. By drawing attention to other historicities and temporalities and, thus, other temporal dynamics than hegemonic accounts of the *sunna* render visible—accounts by observers speaking from within and from without this tradition—Laroui’s conceptualization of the Islamic tradition refigures it as a problem of an epistemology of history, the politics of time,⁴ and the temporality of political action as a human experience with time.

Interestingly, (the Islamic) tradition *as a concept* has not been at the center of the

¹ For a brief overview of the history of the concept see Daniel Brown, *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). 6-20.

² See for the notion of a negative universal history Vázquez-Arroyo’s reading of Adorno’s negative dialectics: Antonio Y. Vázquez-Arroyo, "Universal history disavowed: on critical theory and postcolonialism," *Postcolonial Studies* 11, no. 4 (2008).

³ I understand the political as referring to the conflict over spatiotemporal groundings of communities through practices of narratively relating a past, a present, and a future.

⁴ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time. Modernity and Avant-garde* (London and New York: Verso, 1995).

scholarly and public reception of Laroui's works, even though he has, in fact, engaged with "tradition," the "*sunna*," and the "*turāth*"—a highly valorized term in contemporary Arab intellectual debates that is mostly translated as "Arab-Islamic heritage—as concepts throughout his writings.⁵ Possibly, his frequent depiction as a modernist and a Marxist turned liberal, as championing a secular, even anti-religious and "romantic" take on modernization that would leave "the past" and "tradition" behind has played an important role for this rendering of his position.⁶ If tradition figures in Laroui's reception, it has been mostly negative. Laroui has been viewed as arguing for abandoning the "*turāth*" in favor of French Enlightenment thought, Western modernity and liberalism.⁷ This reading of Laroui represents him as a progressivist pleading for the rationalization of society in the spirit of either the French Enlightenment, Marxism, or liberal modernization theory. Accordingly, some have

⁵ Laroui's early critique of sociological conceptualizations of "tradition" as a static remnant of the past in his book on Arab intellectuals and historical thought has not garnered much attention as far as I see. See Abdallah Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual: Traditionalism or Historicism?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). 43-44.. But see the brief mention in Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Occasional Papers, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Washington, DC (Washington, D.C: Center for Contemporary Arab Studies, Georgetown University, 1986). 21, note 28. However, Laroui's books 'Abdallāh Al-'Arwī, *Ṭaqāfatunā fī daw' al-tārīḥ [Our Culture in the Light of History]*, 6th ed. (Casablanca and Beirut: Al-markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-'arabī, 2002). 'Abdallāh Al-'Arwī, *Mafhūm al-tārīḥ. Al-ḡuz' al-auwwal. Al-alfāz wa-l-maqāhib [The Concept of History. Vol. 1: Expressions and Schools]*, 3rd ed. (Beirut and Casablanca: Al-markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-'arabī, 1997); 'Abdallāh Al-'Arwī, *Mafhūm al-tārīḥ. Al-ḡuz' al-tānī. Al-mafāhīm wa-l-uṣūl [The Concept of History. Vol. 2: Concepts and Epistemic Principles]*, 3rd ed. (Beirut and Casablanca: Al-markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-'arabī, 1997); 'Abdallāh Al-'Arwī, *Mafhūm al-'aql. Maqāla fī l-mufāraqāt [The Concept of Rationality. An Essay on Paradoxes]*, 3rd ed. (Beirut and Casablanca: Al-markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-'arabī, 2001); Abdallah Laroui, *Islam et histoire. Essai d'épistémologie* (Paris: Flammarion, 1999); 'Abdallāh Al-'Arwī, *Al-sunna wa-l-iṣlāḥ [Tradition and Reform]* (Beirut and Casablanca: Al-markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-'arabī, 2008). Abdallah Laroui, *Tradition et Réforme* (Casablanca: Centre Culturel Arabe, 2009). all address the Islamic tradition as a concept.

⁶ See Jaafar Aksikas, *Arab Modernities. Islamism, Nationalism, and Liberalism in the Post-Colonial Arab World* (New York [u.a.]: Lang, 2009). 47-57.. Aksikas ascribes a more complicated, dialectical form of thought to Laroui's early texts, but, to my mind problematically, sees a shift to a less dialectical form of thought in Laroui's later texts. Thus, in his view, Laroui's later writings problematically submit to liberalism and leave "the master's tools" untouched. *Ibid.*, 57-60. See further Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism. A Critique of Development Ideologies*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Muḥammad 'Ābid Al-Ġābirī, "Musāhama fī naqd al-aidiyūlūḡī [Contribution to the Critique of Ideology]," in *Autour de la pensée de Abdallah Laroui. Debating Laroui's Theory. Muḥāwarāt fikr 'Abdallāh Al-'Arwī*, ed. Bassam Kurdi (Casablanca and Beirut: Centre Culturel Arabe, 2000); Joseph Andoni Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2007). See for a critique of such an uncomplicated alignment of Laroui's position with (Western) narratives of progress Nils Riecken, "Relational Difference and the Grounds of Comparison: Abdallah Laroui's Critique of Centrism," *ReOrient* 2, no. 1 (2016): 15-17.

⁷ On this view in the context of Laroui's political engagement within the Moroccan leftist party USFP (Union socialiste des forces populaires) Mohamed Tozy, *Monarchie et islam politique au Maroc*, 3rd ed. (Paris: Les éditions Actuelles; Presses de Sciences Po, 2008). 145.

characterized him as a “secular and historicist cleric.”⁸

Such views align the form of the historical in Laroui’s texts with the form of the historical embodied in what Dipesh Chakrabarty calls “Europe,” a certain Eurocentric abstraction of “Western” modernity that has had, however, a global history. Laroui is then taken to be sharing the powerful modern, liberal secular view—and devaluation—of tradition as something static, medieval, a religious remnant, as superstition. As much as this secular, liberal, modern binary view of modernity and tradition has been the object of criticism, it continues to inform debates on the Islamic tradition in “modern” times.⁹ The tenacity of this view of tradition is an effect of distinctively modern practices of conceptualizing modern history and time. As is well known, the performative separation between past and present is a key element of modern historical discourse.¹⁰ This performative act locates in a sovereign gesture tradition in that past and the modern in that present. It decides who and what forms part of the present and who and what forms part of the past that is taken as definitively outdated. “Tradition” is, then, the religious, irrational, medieval, and definitively outdated past, the liberal modern figures as a key element in a—progressive, romantic—overcoming of that past—a dreaded past of the secular, liberal modern imagination that associates this past with violence in the past and in the future.¹¹ In contrast, the secular regime figures, then, as having brought about—at least in the “West”—the definitive domestication of that violence grounded in religion.¹²

Thus, by identifying Laroui’s historical vision with the grand narratives of Enlightenment, modernization, and secular progress, Laroui could be read as viewing

⁸ Ibid. However, Laroui has critically noted that liberalism carries religious traits with its history of anti-clericalism in the nineteenth century. Abdallah Laroui, *Islamisme, modernisme, libéralisme : esquisses critiques* (Casablanca: Centre Culturel Arabe, 2009). 116. The labeling of Laroui as a “laicist cleric” draws attention to the problem of normativity as a crucial problem in debates on tradition and the “secular,” and, thus, “Islamic pasts.”

⁹ Academic critique does not equal a change of institutionalized practices. This point is made in Stuart Hall, “When was ‘the Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in *The Post-Colonial Question. Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti (London; New York: Routledge, 1996).

¹⁰ See Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty. How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); Michel de Certeau, *L’écriture de l’histoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2002). Certeau’s point is not, however, that “the West” invented this distinction.

¹¹ See Ruth Mas, “On the Apocalyptic Tones of Islam in Secular Time,” in *Secularism and Religion-Making*, ed. Arvind Mandair and Markus Dressler (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹² Talal Asad has pointed out that secular regimes can be more justly said to be distributing violence differently rather than simply abolishing or diminishing. The latter view is merely the normative claim made on behalf secular regimes. See Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, ed. Mieke Bal and Hent de Vries, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2003). 100-124. See for a plea to focus analytically on historically situated claims and forms of

the *sunna* and the *turāth* as such a past—of the modern, of the narrative entity “Europe”—to be heroically overcome. Moreover, his historical thought could also be read as replicating the ways these grand narratives put on stage progressive history and time. In such readings, historicity in Laroui’s texts is taken to be voluntarily or involuntarily reproducing the authority of a definitive, Eurocentric way of relating a “Western” past, with a present and a future, both of which are read through that model of a “Western” past. Laroui’s view of tradition then appears as a form of extreme intellectual alienation—a topic that is certainly not absent from his own critical concerns with the figure of the Arab intellectual.¹³

What I suggest is that the conceptual labor that Laroui works perform create, in fact, a critical distance to such narratives and their view of “tradition” as a remnant of a devalued past that either has been or “still” has to be heroically overcome because it is “not yet” overcome.¹⁴ I will show that Laroui has felt pressed to engage the Islamic tradition in the context of his concern with political action and modernity as a conceptual formation within contemporary Arab thought. I will demonstrate that Laroui’s account of political action conceptually *requires* a concept of tradition as inhabiting the heterotemporal timespace of the present. Thus, he forcefully inserts the Islamic tradition—as a temporal formation and, to speak with Talal Asad “a discursive tradition”¹⁵—into the timespace of the present as the site of the struggle over the grounding of the political instead of deferring it into an ideal past or a somehow “enlightened” or “reformed” future. Such views tend to treat such absent times made present as the sites of a truer Islamic tradition.

I read Laroui as engaging with the *sunna* as a *concept* to get away from certain historically situated practices of understanding of this tradition in particular and tradition more generally. He is explicitly not aspiring to develop a “general” theory of tradition, but rather concerned with the problem of historicity and political action.¹⁶ This analytic focus determines his take on the *sunna*.

From this angle, I read Laroui’s conceptualization of the Islamic tradition—the particular mode he engages it as a historical concept, a historically situated abstraction—as unsettling several, loosely connected modes of drawing temporal and

claims-making: Frederick Cooper, “Modernity,” in *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History*, ed. Frederick Cooper (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

¹³ Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*: esp 155-159.

¹⁴ This narrative and, thus, temporal, logic with its political implication is a key concern in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference (Reissue, with a new preface by the author)* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ Talal Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*, Center for Contemporary Arab Studies (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1986). 14-17.

¹⁶ See Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 132, 147, note 110.

political distinctions. First, he calls into question the conceptual asymmetry of modernity—in liberal and Marxist narratives of modern progress—that conceptually separates modernity from “tradition.”¹⁷ That is, he questions the sovereign gesture of modern historical thought that I mentioned and that has nowadays often been criticized—a fact that does not mean that the practices reproducing this gesture have simply disappeared. Second, if “Islam” as a placeholder for the Islamic tradition has long played the role of “Europe’s” Other, Laroui directly opposes this form of othering and treats the Islamic tradition within his account of a negative universal history as a particular instantiation of a universal problematic of temporality and historicity instead. Third, he critically re-frames theo-logical renderings of the Islamic tradition that treat it as something extraneous to, not fully part of the political timespace of the present, either positively or negatively—namely what he addresses classical Orientalist (such as in Hamilton Gibb’s and Gustave von Grunebaum’s) understandings of Islam as well as Islamic theological understandings of Islam. He is thus critical of those perspectives that detach the Islamic tradition from the realm of political, or, in his diction, human action, through a certain form of representing history and time. I thus develop a reading of Laroui’s works that unpacks his critical intervention in the politics of time—or, rather, what I call the politics of historicity, i.e., the conflict between historically situated ways of relating pasts, presents, and futures to one another—around the concept of tradition.

I will now proceed in three steps: First, I will carve out—following, as said earlier, David Scott’s reading of Hayden White—how Laroui’s conceptualization of tradition is more attuned to a tragic temporality than those earlier mentioned romantic forms of narrativizing Laroui’s argument imply. Framing my reading of Laroui through Scott’s optic helps me to make clearer the conceptual and political stakes in Laroui’s engagement with tradition. Second, I will look closer at the way Laroui discusses the heterotemporality of the Islamic tradition. Two aspects will take center stage: first, the problem of translatability of the concept and, thus, the question of the place of the *sunna* as a historical formation within the historical inquiries within the humanities; second, the temporal dynamics of the *sunna* as analyzed by Laroui, that is, the way tradition constantly re-works temporal relations. Third, and in conclusion, I will show how this account of—the Islamic—tradition works as a critique of modes of observing¹⁸ Islamic pasts—and thus history—from a seemingly empty ground that allegedly has no ground, be it the modern secular critique or theo-logical certainty. This critique leads me to reconsider the problem of homogenous and heterogenous temporalities regarding

¹⁷ Laroui is, of course, not the only one to do so.

¹⁸ I use the term observation rather in Niklas Luhmann’s sense as indicating the drawing of a distinction. Niklas Luhmann, *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997). 44-78, for the theoretical background of this perspective, pp 16-43.

the divide of what is commonly called secular as opposed to the non-secular, the theo-logical. I argue that Laroui's take on tradition calls for rethinking the historical and conceptual site of homogenous, empty time as a characteristic of the secular modern—a figure of thought going back to Walter Benjamin's text on the concept of history which has been taken up since in various influential works such as Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture*, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe*.¹⁹ Put differently, Laroui's conceptualization of the temporal dynamics that constitute tradition renders problematic the notion of linear, homogenous, empty time as a proper and exclusive description of secular modern temporality.

The *sunna*/tradition within romantic and tragic temporality

To get at Laroui's re-conceptualization of the Islamic tradition it is necessary to look closer at how historicity and temporality figure in his works. To this end, I employ in this section David Scott's reading of Hayden White's analysis of modes of emplotment that Scott applies to his analysis of anticolonial forms of criticism within certain historical conjunctures.²⁰ Moreover, I use Scott's notion of a "problem space"—which I will explain further in a moment—to make sense of, on one hand, of the temporal and narrative dynamics that sustain views that align Laroui's view of the Islamic tradition with a secular liberal modern devaluation of tradition. On the other hand, framing my own reading of Laroui in these terms helps me to work out a different understanding of Laroui's stance and the form of that critical space, or, more precisely, timespace that he creates. Scott's optic allows me to work out how Laroui's historical thinking departs from the secular, liberal modern, Eurocentric understandings of history, time, and, thus, tradition.

Read through Scott's optic, the readings of Laroui that see in him a Eurocentric modernist perform a certain emplotment of Laroui's arguments. They narrativize these as romances. From this perspective, Laroui's modernism envisions a story of a heroic overcoming of the shackles of tradition. It appears then as if Laroui views the

¹⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2006); Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994); Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

²⁰ David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality* (Princeton, NJ, and Chichester, West Sussex: Princeton University Press, 1999); David Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity. The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2004); David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Duke University Press, 2014). For a shorter account see David Scott, "The Tragic Vision in Postcolonial Time," *PMLA* 129, no. 4 (2014).

straightforward adoption of Western liberalism and secularism as guaranteeing the redemptive overcoming of current problems and, thus, successful reforms in Morocco and the wider region. From this perspective, Laroui leaves no room for either “tradition” or “authenticity” (*aṣāla*) grounded in a regional or a religious tradition, as his critics would call for.

The romantic reading of Laroui’s works normalizes them by situating them in what Scott calls an anticolonial “problem-space,” that is, a particular “ensemble of questions and answers around which a horizon of identifiable stakes (conceptual as well as ideological-political stakes) hangs.²¹” It points us to “the particular questions that seem worth asking and the kinds of answers that seem worth having.” It is a “context of argument and, therefore, one of intervention.” Scott locates this *anticolonial* problem-space—from which he distinguishes the postcolonial and present one after postcolonialism—in a certain historical conjuncture, namely the moment of decolonization. He characterizes this conjuncture as putting emphasis on political, national action, the overcoming of foreign domination, as theorized by both Marxist and liberal authors.

The romantic reading of Laroui’s works, which is conceptually based on the identification of history and time, can be thus linked to the particular historical conjuncture in the late 1960s when Laroui’s intellectual project took off. In other words, my point is, then, not that aligning Laroui with Eurocentric modernism is simply a mistaken reading, but rather that it is symptomatic. Criticism in this period was dominated, as Scott explains, by romantic narratives of progress, secularization, and “the modernist Hegelian-Marxist version of this story of the march of historical time” as successive, progressive and revolutionary.²² It was based on, Scott continues, the belief in “a gradual evolution of successive forms of the present” that “gives way in an eschatological moment to a utopian future in which the alienated, reified time of capitalism is overcome, and socialist humanity finally coincides with the time of its historical destiny.²³”

Against this background, it is possible to make sense of the relative lack of engagement with Laroui’s conceptualization of tradition as an effect of the way history has been read in the debates he has been situated in. Those who view Laroui as a Marxist turned liberal, as a Westernizer, a “historicist” understood as implying a belief in deterministic laws whose application will lead to national progress, reproduce this romantic narrativization. As such, they ascribe to him an uncomplicated belief in the

²¹ All quotes in this paragraph Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity. The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*: 4. See also Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*: 8.

²² Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*: 5 for the quote, see further p. 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 6.

master narratives of progress and rationalism of the Enlightenment (but not in “Islam,” of course). The fact that Laroui has been repeatedly read as simply reproducing a romantic mode of criticism—and thus, critically, a legitimation of authoritarian state projects of Western-style modernization for the sake of progress—is to my mind linked to the power the romantic emplotment of criticism has been exerting also in his intellectual environment of Morocco, the wider Arabic-speaking region, and beyond. Therefore, it seems, tradition could not be really relevant for Laroui’s Marxist or his—supposedly later—liberal stance.

What is important though is that not only such secular, liberal or Marxist modern discursive practices have produced such readings of Laroui, but the theo-logical ones that he has been engaging throughout his writings as well. These theo-logical writings—Islamic philosophies of history, Muslim theological critiques of his work—tell stories about tradition that are inextricably linked with a romantic mode of emplotment, a story of heroic overcoming of what is perceived as a current crisis of Islam, the *umma* (the community of believers), and the present.

From both perspectives, however, tradition seems to be given: According to a secular, liberal modern view, modernity and, thus, the humanities figure as the definitive site of the modern, of the progressive overcoming the past, that has overcome tradition and, therefore, the religious, the irrational. Critique as the modern secular opposite of “tradition” can appear as the space of fully rational inquiry.²⁴ Similarly, from a theo-logical point of view the Islamic tradition appears as already perfected in the past to be made alive again. The slogan “Islam is the solution” is not just an ideological statement, but it responds to the question how change can be brought about, and in doing so it provides its story of human action—Muslims will effectively change the world through their recourse to their tradition as it is—a romantic emplotment.

It is true that Laroui has been concerned with political action and nationalist liberation from exterior domination, that is, concerns of what Scott calls the anticolonial problem space. In his first book *“L’idéologie arabe contemporaine”* (Contemporary Arab Ideology, 1967) Laroui wrote, referring to Lenin’s question “what can be done?”:

We were obsessed by the question of acting. More precisely, our society and our generation posed this question with such an urgency and insistence that we could not turn away from it. [...] Rereading this work I find that “what can be done?” implied: which logic? Why, in fact, accept a certain solution, refuse the other, or try to reach a compromise between the two? Our search was

²⁴ See Ruth Mas, “Why Critique?,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 24, no. 4-5 (2012): 396, 404.

at once pragmatic and methodological.²⁵

However, as I also want to show using Scott's optic, Laroui's work does not imagine history and time, that is, the link between past, present, and future, in a romantic way that envisions the complete overcoming of the forces associated with the (former) colonizer, namely the institutions and the conceptual apparatus of modernity. Laroui's sensibility is rather a tragic one. This is to say, first, that he takes apart the alignment of history with time characteristic not only of the anticolonial problem space, but also for modern political theories in generally, as Scott has pointed out.²⁶ It is this disentanglement of history and time, of historicity and temporality that is characteristic of what Scott calls a tragic sensibility of a problem space after postcolonialism for the present with its sense of an out-of-jointness of time and the loss of credibility of older master narratives of progress.²⁷ Second, the tragic form of Laroui's form of criticism consists in thinking *with*—out of the observation of being forced to do so—the conceptual apparatus modernity to develop a different form of modernity. This thinking *with* modernity is what Scott identifies as the central demand on criticism in the conjuncture after the demise of the meta-narratives of progress, after the end of the Bandung era.²⁸

Whereas, as explained earlier, anticolonial movements deployed romantic narratives of revolution, of heroically overturning colonialism, the current present, after the dismantling of master narratives such as that of progress, requires in Scott's view a different mode of criticism if it wants to be effective. What he suggests is that this is a *tragic* mode of thinking *with* modernity and the historical changes it has produced for the possibility of telling history, producing subjects, and envisioning the future, all of us being its "conscripts."²⁹ After the demise of older master narratives—narratives of the political—the present is no longer situated within a clearly conceived teleology towards

²⁵ Laroui, *Islamisme, modernisme, libéralisme*: 231. "Nous avons été obnubilés par la question du faire. Plus exactement elle était posée dans notre société et par notre génération avec une telle urgence et insistance que nous ne pouvions pas nous en détourner. [...] En relisant maintenant cette production, je constate que le 'Que faire?' impliquait: 'Quelle logique?' Pourquoi, en effet, accepter telle solution, refuser telle autre, tenter un compromis entre les deux? Notre quête était en même temps pragmatique et méthodologique." If not indicated otherwise, all translations from Laroui's French and Arabic texts are my own.

²⁶ Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*: 7.

²⁷ See especially Scott, *Conscripts of Modernity. The Tragedy of Colonial Enlightenment*. On the theme of out-of-jointness of time see also Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012); Aleida Assmann, *Ist die Zeit aus den Fugen? Aufstieg und Fall des Zeitregimes der Moderne* (München: Hanser, 2013).

²⁸ Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*: 221-224.

²⁹ Talal Asad, "Conscripts of Western Civilization," in *Dialectical Anthropology: Essays in Honor of Stanley Diamond*, ed. Christine Galley, *Civilization in Crisis* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1992).

a straightforwardly redemptive future.

A tragic mode of criticism takes this situation into account to rethink the grounding of political—and, thus, the relations between pasts, presents, and futures—itsself. What Scott suggests is, thus, critically engaging what I call the politics of historicity—something that I view as a key concern in Laroui’s conceptual labor on the concept of the *sunna* and his critical work on concepts in general. What is particularly instructive about Scott’s optic is how it links the question of the either romantic or tragic mode of emplotment of criticism with the question how such modes affects the way political action and its temporal coordinates are conceived. For instance, one could read both teleology and eschatology as romantic modes of telling history and temporally framing political action. What Jacques Derrida calls “messianicity without messianism” rather points to a tragic understanding of history and time in being acutely aware of the “out-of-jointness” of time, futures thus being irreducible to an ontology of time, a space of “open—but undecidable and heterogenous—possibilities”.³⁰

Laroui’s conceptualization of tradition precisely foregrounds and takes into account this “out-of-jointness” of time in refusing the framing of tradition within a liberal or theo-logical ontology of time and the present. In “*L’idéologie arabe contemporaine*” (1967) Laroui provides a vivid example of this sense of out-of-jointness. Laroui describes there the present of Morocco in relation to a notion of a future anterior (“*futur antérieur*”), that is, “a future outlined elsewhere and that we are not free to reject.”³¹ By thus pointing to the imperialist horizon of Arab contemporary thought as a determining factor, Laroui emphasized here that Arab intellectuals were the conscripts of modernity—something that can be valorized either positively or negatively. He describes Morocco’s present as a “relived past and an anticipated future”:³²

Our conscience in Morocco floats between the determinations of the past and the call of the future; it lives in particular temporal category that is that of a future anterior that fundamentally changes the meaning of the other divisions of time: neither our present, nor our futures are either real or lived as such. That is our essential historical characteristic. Where we are, no ideology has an autonomous historical coloring.³³

³⁰ I am paraphrasing here Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice*: 10. Scott refers here to the arguments about temporality advanced by Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben.

³¹ Abdallah Laroui, *L’idéologie arabe contemporaine. Préface de Maxime Rodinson* (Paris: Maspero, 1982). 66. The French original reads: “Un avenir déjà esquissé ailleurs et que nous ne sommes pas libres de refuser.”

³² *Ibid.*, 65. The French original reads “un passé revéçu et un futur anticipé.”

³³ *Ibid.*, 66. The French original reads: “Notre conscience, au Maroc, flotte entre les déterminations du passé et l’appel de l’avenir; elle vit dans une catégorie temporelle particulière qui est celle du futur antérieur et qui change fondamentalement la signification des autres divisions du temps: ni notre présent,

It is with this sense of a rupture between past, present, and future that Laroui envisions not only ideologies, but also the Islamic tradition. The tragic sensibility of Laroui's criticism—that is, his dismantling of the identification of history with time and his thinking *both with* modernity and *with* (the Islamic) tradition, while simultaneously creating a critical distance to both without treating them as simply historically equally situated—is crucial to understand the stakes Laroui's of the temporal dynamics within the *sunna*.

The temporal dynamics of the *sunna* as a normative tradition

In the following, I want to substantiate my argument that Laroui, by articulating the *sunna* within tragic temporality, creates a shifted, a critical understanding of the *sunna* as a historical formation in and of time. If Laroui's form of conceptualizing the Islamic tradition thus constitutes a critical intervention,³⁴ it is so because it locates this tradition within another, a shifted historicity and of heterotemporality whose temporal coordinates are at odds with existing practices of conceptualizing and historicizing the *sunna*. In other words, Laroui offers a form of historicizing the *sunna* other than theo-logical and secular, liberal modern practices do. If Laroui's take on the *sunna* can be called secular, it is so in a specific sense that yet goes against the secular, liberal modern understanding of modern political action as something detached from (the Islamic) tradition altogether. If I say that Laroui thinks *with* the Islamic tradition, I do not mean that he invokes its theo-logical form which he also associates with the phenomenon called Islamism or "fundamentalism" ("*intégrisme*")³⁵ and its concept of the Islamic tradition. Laroui is, however, at pains to show that one cannot ignore, but rather must reckon *with* the temporal dynamics embodied in the theo-logical vision in the life of the *sunna*.

Laroui departs from those perspectives through his inquiry into the temporal dynamics of the *sunna*. By engaging the *sunna* as a particular—not as specific or unique—instantiation of a universal problem of historicity and temporality, Laroui opens it up to broader debates in the humanities on time, temporality, history, the event,

ni notre future ne sont réels et ne sont vécus comme tels. Et c'est là notre caractéristique historique essentielle. Aucune idéologie n'a chez nous une coloration historique autonome."

³⁴ The activity of conceptualizing can be itself regarded as a political activity: See Adi Ophir, "Concept II," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, no. 3.5. (n.d.), <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/concept-ii-adi-ophir/>. "Conceptual performances are political, however, before and without reaching that moment, and should be understood as a special kind of intellectual intervention."

³⁵ See Laroui, *Islamisme, modernisme, libéralisme*; Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 131.

knowledge, disciplinary specialization and synthesis, truth, theology, criticism, and politics. What is at issue here is, then, the *sunna* as a historical formation, its status within the modern present, the modern humanities, Islamic theology, and, thus, the at once epistemological and political problem of historical representation. Laroui's account of the *sunna* as a normative tradition foregrounds the historicity, the translatability, and the politicality of the concept, that is, "the question of the status of *conflict* within conceptual thinking," as Étienne Balibar proposes. He importantly adds that concepts are "one way or another, *concepts of the political*."³⁶ If the political is not a transhistorical category, but the historically situated form of grounding of—for lack of better words—the social, a society, or a community, all of which are problematic categories, then the question will be for me how Laroui's work on the concept of the Islamic tradition (*sunna*) challenges established conceptualizations of "tradition" both within Islamic theo-logical thought and Euro-American academia. For, "tradition" does, as I argue, crucial conceptual work in both settings for spelling out the form and content of "Islam" and "modernity" both of which we can read as historical forms of grounding the political, that is, for the "modern West" and the Islamic community of believers (*umma*).³⁷

Now, let me first look at the act of translation that Laroui's works perform to accomplish the critical shift in conceptualizing the *sunna*. In what ways does he render the *sunna* translatable as tradition? It is important to recognize that Laroui does not start from or aim at a general theory of tradition to speak about the *sunna*, but rather engages Muslim historiographical production as a historical site of the emergence and reproduction of the *sunna* to make more general, comparative observations about tradition as a concept.³⁸ When he establishes an equivalence between the terms *sunna* and—sometimes with a capital t in his French texts—"Tradition," he translates their difference through a third term, namely the problem of historicity and human action which does not offer a definitive account of time, history, and the figure of the human, but constantly keeps these open.³⁹

³⁶ Étienne Balibar, "Concept," *Political Concepts: A Critical Lexicon*, no. 4.1: The Balibar Edition, Vol. 1 (n.d.), <http://www.politicalconcepts.org/concept-etienne-balibar/>. [emphasis in the original]

³⁷ A recent example of how "tradition" is invoked conceptually in accounts of the modern is the "Dictionary of Untranslatables." There is no entry on "tradition," but the term "traditional" appears as a marker of the pre-modern. It thus can be said to be fulfilling the conceptual function of relationally grounding the modern. Barbara Cassin et al., *Dictionary of Untranslatables: a Philosophical Lexicon* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014).

³⁸ I will focus first on how he engages with the conceptuality of the *sunna* before pointing out some more general implications of Laroui's conceptualization of tradition in the conclusion.

³⁹ See on his earlier take on the terms *sunna*, *turāth*, and *tradition*: 'Abdallāh Al-'Arwī, *Al-'arab wa al-fikr al-tārīḥī [Arabs and Historical Thought]* (Casablanca and Beirut: Al-markaz al-ṭaqāfī al-'arabī, 1998). 19, n 13; Al-'Arwī, *Ṭaqāftunā fī ḍau' al-tarīḥ*: 191-192.

One key element of this mode of translating the *sunna* is Laroui's analysis of a duality, or, rather more precisely, of an antinomy that is for him constitutive not only of the *sunna* as a formation that uses and represents history and time, but of historical thought as such.⁴⁰ Taking a closer look at Laroui's analysis of this duality allows me to work out Laroui's account of heterotemporality within the *sunna*.⁴¹ In Laroui's analysis, this duality is constituted by two different epistemological practices or attitudes: One is that of the *ḥadīth*, the transmitted and canonized corpus of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. The other one is that of the *fiqh*, jurisprudence in Islamic history. Laroui reads epistemic attitude attached to *fiqh* as producing a temporality other than the *ḥadīth* as I will show in greater detail below. By looking at epistemic practices or attitudes Laroui opts for a mode of analysis that does not primarily look at the supposed historical intentions of the authors he discusses, but at discursive rules constituting limits of the sayable and, thus, the doable as well as notions of truth in the historical material he works with. In this way, Laroui's analysis pinpoints the temporal dynamics constituting the *sunna* as a process with its own normativity in time.⁴² His approach is

⁴⁰ This claim about universality rests upon his account of a negative universal history. It is therefore not to be read a positive definition of the universal. I have laid some crucial elements of Laroui's epistemology of history that sustains this view of the universal in Nils Riecken, "History, Time, and Temporality in a Global Frame: Abdallah Laroui's Historical Epistemology of History," *History and Theory* 54, no. 4 (Special Issue: History and Theory in a Global Frame) (2015).

⁴¹ I have discussed this duality before in Nils Riecken, "Periodization and the Political: Abdallah Laroui's Analysis of Temporalities in a Postcolonial Context," *ZMO Working Papers* 6(2012), <http://d-nb.info/1026472040/34>. Nils Riecken, "Frames of Time: Periodization and Universals in the Works of Abdallah Laroui," *Der Islam* 91, no. 1 (2014): 127-133; Riecken, "History, Time, and Temporality in a Global Frame," 20-24. However, my emphasis here is different in that I focus on his analysis of the temporal dynamics of the *sunna* itself.

⁴² This insistence on the processuality of tradition links Laroui's take on the *sunna* with Talal Asad's approach to it in terms of a "discursive tradition" and his concern with temporality: "These discourses relate conceptually to a past (when the practice was instituted, and from which the knowledge of its point and proper performance has been transmitted) and a future (how the point of that practice can best be secured in the short or long term, or why it should be modified or abandoned), through a present (how it is linked to other practices, institutions, and social conditions). An Islamic discursive tradition is simply a tradition of Muslim discourse that addresses itself to conceptions of the Islamic past and future, with reference to a particular Islamic practice in the present." Asad, *The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam*: 14. It would be interesting to systematically explore the differences of Laroui's and Asad's conceptualizations of tradition. Important differences consist, first, in their different problem spaces. Whereas Asad emphasizes the value of the Islamic tradition as an ethical source for critically rethinking the present, Laroui is concerned with situating the *sunna* conceptually within the problem of political action to counter views of the tradition as purely theo-logical which then treat true politics as extraneous to "Islam" and locate it in modernity as the true of modern politics, that is, a profane activity. He is less concerned with ethics as a resource in his discussion of the *sunna* (which is not to say that he would consider this unimportant), but with how the *sunna* forms part of a universal problematic of human action to establish a place for thinking political action in his particular context of Morocco where certain understandings of the Islamic tradition dominate. Second, even though Laroui does emphasize conflict as being internal to tradition, he views tradition in his earlier writings as a response to foreign domination. Asad has distanced

not meant to produce an *exhaustive* account of the Islamic tradition, but rather to extract it from the constraints of a historicity within which what he addresses as theo-logical and classical Orientalist accounts have put the *sunna*. His aim is to restore the place of the *material event* and, thus, of politics within the *sunna* as a concept and its account of history and time.

To get a better sense of how Laroui deploys this distinction between the two logics of the *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* as a distinction of different modes of historicizing, of different ways of treating time and history, let me quote a longer passage from his book “*Islam et Histoire: essai d’épistémologie*” from published in French in 1999:

There are, thus, two attitudes to the *ḥadīth* and to the *sunna* that have been distinguishable from the beginning and that continue to co-exist. But the perception of their fundamental difference was clearer before rather than after the emergence of the juridical schools.

Let us remember the constant antipathy between two types of formation, between two logics; and because we give that last word a larger meaning, the opposition applies as well to authors of books of history. Those who think according to ethical vision of the *ḥadīth* would certainly not have the same conception of continuity, time, the event, finality, etc. as those who employ the rules of reasoning of the *fiqh*, even if they are not jurists by profession. Each group would have its own definition of the *qiyās*, of analogy, of exemplarity (*‘ibra*), and of experience (*tajriba*).

Tabarī, Ibn al-Athīr, Dhahabī, Ibn Kathīr, Ibn al-Jawzī, for example, obviously belong to the first group, Ya’youbī, Mas’ūdi, Maqdisī, Bīrūnī, Miskawayh, Ibn Khaldūn rather to the second. The one would naturally concentrate, more and more obviously, concentrate his efforts on the history of Islam; more precisely, he would try to delimit, in what he writes, the area where orthodox Islam dominates. In contrast, the other would progressively tend towards a cultural history in which that of the Muslims, or that of the Arabs, would assume a place side by side with other people (*ajnās*) or other generations (*ajyāl*). Without implying by the words more than they allow, we can oppose the scared history of the first ones to that second one, which is profane.⁴³

To start with, the way Laroui treats terminology here requires attention because it

himself from the view of tradition as “a defense, designed to confront a threatening world,” as he wrote regarding the work of Michael Gilson. Ibid., 21, note 27. Asad’s very brief, critical characterization of Laroui’s take on tradition in the same passage as “an old cloak for new aspirations and borrowed styles of behavior”—taken from Laroui’s “Crisis of the Arab intellectual: traditionalism or historicism?”—might be considered to not really doing justice to the way Laroui engages tradition as a concept even in that earlier book. The point there is that, on one hand, Laroui has been taking issue with policies in Morocco that have in his view used tradition—what he calls “traditionalization”—to confront current political challenges by “an activity directed toward the past.” Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*: 40.. It is important to link this view of state policies of traditionalization to his critique of “folklore” and claims to “authenticity” in the third part of his first book “*L’idéologie arabe contemporaine*.” On the other hand, Laroui’s later work in the 1990s and 2000s has engaged more directly the Islamic tradition as a temporal formation as such within which time is continually reworked.

touches upon the problem of translatability again. He opposes “sacred” to “profane” history. This opposition is rendered in other passages as “absolute” and “relative” as well as otherworldly (religious, prophetic, sacred) and worldly (mundane, profane, secular).⁴⁴ Laroui makes clear that for what he is after is less the words and their genealogies as such, but rather to contrast the temporal dynamic playing out in both epistemologies. Thus, the model of translation he follows here translates not exclusively between terms, but between situated discursive logics.⁴⁵ This is certainly not a final answer to all problems related to the history of these words, their conceptuality, their politicality (if one thinks of the problem of the emergence of the modern secular or political theology), but this is not Laroui’s concern here. His more limited goal lies in conceptualizing the temporal dynamics constituting the Islamic tradition that are not readily visible from within its own or the Orientalist gaze he critically engages.

Looking at the *sunna* from the perspective of his concern with political action, his point about the Islamic tradition is that it seeks to ensure certainty in a coherent, rational framework. If anything, Laroui emphasizes, the *sunna* is rational and coherent when considered in its domain.⁴⁶ He stresses, addressing the Islamic tradition in his present, that the philosophies, or, rather theologies of history built on this outlook which he encounters in Maghrebi and Mashreq publics are not wrong or incoherent. Their outlook is, however,

restrictive insofar as it gives a particular meaning to the terms *bad’* (origin), *khatm* (completion), *nihāya* (end), *dawla* (cycle), etc. Searching for the absolute, it devalues what is transitory and temporal, that is, historical. When one places oneself within this perspective, being a historian or not, one adopts *ipso facto* the presuppositions of the theologian or the theosopher.⁴⁷

The critical point of his discussion will be whether its form of rationality—with its temporality—is conducive to the temporality and rationality of political action.

Let me now look at how Laroui describes the coherence of the vision of the *ḥadīth* and the certainty entailed in it as a result of a complex re-working of time within the

⁴³ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 38-39.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 51. See for the distinction between the relative and the absolute *ibid.*, 66, 108, 112, 125. “On one hand, there is absolute truth, at one point revealed for all to man in history itself. Opposing to this view there is relative truth, progressively discovered by humans for humans; facing the history of Islam as such, servant of theology, there is the opposing view of the history of Muslims, if not of all the subjects of the caliph, that opens itself towards anthropology.” *Ibid.*, 125.

⁴⁵ This is not to say that he neglects the linguistic aspect of translation. In focusing on the meaning of the Arabic root ḥ-f-ḏ (preserve) he develops an argument about the conception of memory within the Islamic tradition. See Al-’Arwī, *Mafhūm al-tārīḥ. Vol 1*: 33-41.

⁴⁶ See Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 75. 132; Laroui, *Tradition et Réforme*: 109.

⁴⁷ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 112.

framework of the *ḥadīth*. Then I will show how the material event disrupts for Laroui the horizon of meaning established by the *ḥadīth* and how this operation is connected to the attitude of the *faqīh* as he delineates it.

Laroui's argument is that *ḥadīth* and *fiqh* represent not only two different modes of historical representation, but also of explanation. In a chapter of history and tradition, Laroui takes passages from the works of the Moroccan historian al-Nāṣirī (1834/5-1897) and Ibn Khaldūn as examples to look comparatively at their explanatory methods.

His point is that the method of the *ḥadīth* establishes certainty through a narrative sequence, a "rhetorical operation"⁴⁸ in which at "each moment the relation between antecedent and consequent is evident no matter what the achieved result is."⁴⁹ Here, there is no apparent gap between the antecedent and the consequent. The intelligibility of this form invokes the recognition of an evidentness—a form that is quite familiar to the everyday experience of humans in general, Laroui suggests. The efficient cause is not part of the narrative here, it is lost from sight, as Laroui observes.⁵⁰

Laroui contrasts this outlook with an example from Ibn Khaldun's *Muqaddima*. He shows that Ibn Khaldun's method does not take recourse to an *'illa* (which can be rendered as "reason" within the analogical reasoning of the *ḥadīth*) as Nāṣirī does, but to *ḥaraka* (movement), which implies a different mode of explanation.⁵¹ Whereas al-Nāṣirī's form of explanation does not require a third term, Ibn Khaldun's analogy draws—through its recourse to *ḥaraka* (movement)—on such a third term that points beyond the framework of the *ḥadīth*—namely observable laws.⁵² Laroui makes this point regarding a passage in which Ibn Khaldun talks about Beduins having to follow their camels searching for pastures, which leads to their isolation and thus the preservation of their "pure" lineage.⁵³ Whereas Ibn Khaldun's narrative, in Laroui's analysis, explains through the recourse to general laws that refer to what humans observe as recurring, *material* phenomena, al-Nāṣirī's narrative explains through *textual*

⁴⁸ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 48.

⁵⁰ I am paraphrasing here *ibid.*, 48-49.

⁵¹ Ibid., 59. Fazlur Rahman defines *'illa* in this context: "The term *qiyas*, according to Muslim jurists, means analogical reasoning, i.e. concluding from a given principle embodied in a precedent that a new case falls under this principle or is similar to this precedent on the strength of a common essential feature called the 'reason' (*'illa*). Later on in Muslim philosophy the same term was employed to mean a syllogism or syllogistic reasoning." Fazlur Rahman, *Islam. With a New Foreword by John E. Woods*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002). 71.

⁵² Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 37. "Whereas the *ḥadīth* pushes towards imitation, towards comparison of term to term, without taking into account the always changing exterior conditions, *fiqh* (jurisprudence), the *maliki* one in particular, requires a middle term, a *wāsita*, because it seeks above all practicality, the applicability of a sentence (*hukm*)."

⁵³ Ibid., 57-60.

sequence.⁵⁴ What is significant here is how Laroui situates Ibn Khaldun's will to observe in this particular way—which he associates with the logic of *fiqh*—inside the Islamic tradition instead of treating this authors, as it is often done, as peripheral to this tradition, as part of a “Western” pre-history of sociology. Moreover, Laroui observes that, being representative of the logic of the *fiqh*, Ibn Khaldun from a naturalist perspective “limits as much as possible the zone of what is miraculous,” that is, the temporality of the *ḥadīth* is restricted “to that which does not exactly need to be linked an exterior natural force.”⁵⁵

Now, an easy reading of Laroui's argument would take it as representing a typical secular view that opposes the mundane world as the “real” world to a transcendent realm of the “miraculous” that is less real. However, I want to offer a more complex reading and demonstrate that Laroui's secular stance departs from such a readily available understanding of the secular. For Laroui, the “secular” is not something ready to hand, but the result of actively taking up an epistemic attitude, something that he detects among Muslim historiographers engaging with the *sunna*. This take on the secular runs against reified understandings of the secular as a “copyright” of the West that is simply absent from Islamic history.⁵⁶ This epistemic attitude is not something that can be definitively acquired, but always remains a potentiality to be taken up or put aside. My point is not that Laroui's take on the secular provides a “more authentically Islamic” take on either the *sunna* or the secular or positions the *sunna* as such as an “authentic” reservoir for critique the modern liberal secular.

In contrast to such approaches, Laroui is rather concerned with epistemic limits. He foregrounds the limitedness (*maḥdūdiyya*) of *both* the profane and the sacred view of history, while also investigating their dialectical relationship. To illustrate this point let me, first, further explain Laroui's analysis of the temporal logic constituting the temporal framework of the *ḥadīth*.

Laroui importantly raises the question what ensures the historical status of the *ḥadīth* as opposed to the mythical or legendary?⁵⁷ To understand this point one has to recall that history as an auxiliary science in the Islamic tradition is conceived of as *tārīkh* or *ta'rikh* (history) “which is established, controlled knowledge of past or present facts.”⁵⁸ However, as Laroui stresses, within the framework of the *ḥadīth*, history is yet

⁵⁴ Ibid., 58-59.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 60.

⁵⁶ Of course, one can distinguish a pre-modern secular and the specific form the secular takes under modern conditions. See Ruth Mas, “Follow the Politics,” *Bulletin for the Study of Religion* 43, no. 4 (2014): 11.

⁵⁷ This is also the key question, albeit from a different angle, in Jacques Rancière, *Les noms de l'histoire. Essai de poétique du savoir* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1992).

⁵⁸ Laroui, *The Crisis of the Arab Intellectual*: 15.

“at once present and absent, used and refused, invoked and revoked. One feels the need for it to validate a testimony, to guarantee continuity, to affirm a characteristic of Islam; hence the conjunction with the *khavar*”⁵⁹ (account, information). Thus, his point is not that “history” is simply absent from the Islamic tradition, but that the *sunna* is constituted within what he describes as a duality or antinomy that theo-logical and classical Orientalist views of the *sunna* have, however, negated. So, when Laroui does set apart “history” from “tradition”,⁶⁰ the point is not that the *sunna* does not produce “history” which is, as he points out time and again, a coherent rendering of the “Islamic past.” But Laroui himself strategically privileges—as I will explain further below—the understanding of history he associates with the *faqīh* which points beyond the framework and the history of the *sunna*, namely the problem of human action in human history.

Laroui’s argument is that the *hadīth* ensures its historical character, as a controlled form of knowledge entailing certainty, through converting the *khavar* into a *hadīth*. Whereas the first is indicative, the second is normative, Laroui points out with recourse to Ibn Khaldūn. The *hadīth*, Laroui explains, is a *khavar* of a particular sort, one that has its proof in itself.⁶¹ This self-referentiality is secured through its placing in the *sunna* as a normative order. Laroui develops this point regarding the Prophetic biography (*sīra*) which became a model for all fields of inquiry beyond the *sīra*.⁶²

A first identification, of the past with the present, gives rise to the impression of evidentness. Then a second identification—of the present with the past—takes places, as the *sunna* (the Path) wants. This second identification evokes certainty. It is this circularity that Ibn Khaldun calls *inshā’*, institution. The *sunna* is a command, an order that institutes meaning and therefore does not need to be corroborated by an exterior proof—in contrast to the *khavar*, which is indicative, descriptive, and has only a definitive meaning that can convey conviction if it corresponds (*bi ‘l-mutābaqa*) to an exterior object.⁶³

The *hadīth* is for those who recite it in a group and thus represents it is a particular *khavar* in the sense that it has its proof in itself. Not having any rifts, it does not need any *ta’līl* (justification), even though it might need *tashīh* (verification). No *hadīth* is automatically sound, but when it is [...] it then has then its grounding in itself.

[...]

But even if it is true, that the *hadīth* has an imperative aspect that makes it independent from all

⁵⁹ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 75.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 51, 55, 61-63.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

external corroboration as opposed to the *khbar*, which is indicative and must therefore reflect in one way or the other the exterior world, one would have to conclude immediately that that which is valid for one is not necessarily valid for the other; hence, the result is that, to give an account of the past, one must distinguish between two methods of exposition and analysis. However, the majority did not accept that point of view because that would have implied limiting the domain of the *sunna*.⁶⁴

The *sīra*, which was to be emulated and in which certainty and evidentness are indissolubly linked to one another, as Laroui observes,⁶⁵ became not only the model of historiography, but also the point zero around which Muslim historiography became subsequently centered.⁶⁶ Pre-Islamic history becomes, then, precisely a form of pre-history, a teleology.⁶⁷ History after this point zero becomes, on the level of narrative, a post-history.⁶⁸

In his reading the *sunna* takes a founding event as its narrative center which leads to, one might say, a form of centrism that induces what Laroui calls “anachronism,” a form of presentism because of the privileging of a narrative framework that ensures the reproduction of meaning. Laroui argues that the *hadīth* pushes towards imitation, that is, identification, as pointed out in the quote above.⁶⁹ It focuses on the history of the mission (*da‘wa*), of the idea, and meaning.⁷⁰ For Laroui, the *huffāz*, those who have memorized the Qur’ān, literally who “preserve”, stand paradigmatically for this concept of history in which “the perfect concordance of form and content, past and present, knowledge and experience, understanding and certainty”⁷¹ is guaranteed:

Tradition, as we have emphasized, is a construction, it is also based on a detailed and authenticated narrative of an event that is turned into the end and the origin of all others. To identify with it [tradition], after having established it, is to jump into the past and to dissolve oneself in it. There is, then, an analogy (*qiyās*) of the present with the past that allows the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 50. See also *ibid.*, 48.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 53-55. Laroui makes this point through a comparative reading of the works of al-Dinawārī and al-Mas‘ūdī.

⁶⁷ This narrative logic can also be observed beyond the domain of the *sunna*, for example, regarding “Europe” as such a narrative, temporal framework for telling history. This is crucial point in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*.

⁶⁸ See Laroui, *Tradition et Réforme*: 124-125.

⁶⁹ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 36, 51.

⁷⁰ It is not by coincidence that English title Karl Löwith’s study of the theological assumptions of the philosophy of history is titled “Meaning in History.” However, Laroui’s focus on bringing out the said antinomy characterizing the Islamic tradition might not do full justice to the degree of conflict and the “authority to explore” (Shahab Ahmed) within the history of the Islamic tradition. See Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2015).

⁷¹ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 62.

immediate understanding by creating certainty. All interior change is excluded, whereas the changes that one does not fail to observe outside are deemed illusory. Anachronism thus takes hold, the perpetual present, post-history. Nothing prevents the professional historian from making this jump; it is a first form of historicism, one that is the easiest to criticize.⁷²

Laroui can qualify the synthesis of meaning established by *sunna* as an “anachronism” because of his understanding of the concept of history as antinomic, as containing both the logics of *hadīth* and the *fiqh*.⁷³ This antinomy is at the heart of Laroui’s conceptualization of historicism.⁷⁴ Historicism is meant here as referring to the human activity of re-figuring temporal relations. It is important to note that human activity is thus located at the core of the articulation of the *sunna*. Before I explain this point further I need to make clear that Laroui’s point about anachronism here is precisely not that Islam has fallen out of time—as the secular, liberal modern imagination of Islam tends to posit—or that the perspective attached to *fiqh* provides a *direct* access to a truer, readily available account of what is presently “real.” Such a claim about the outlook established by *fiqh*, as Laroui reads it, would simply mirror the notion of theo-logical certainty.

Instead, Laroui reads the temporal dynamic of the *hadīth* as an instantiation of the aforementioned antinomy which implies a constant tension between the logic of the *hadīth* and that of *fiqh*. To explain this point, let me quote again a passage in which Laroui defines the *hadīth* in relation to time:

The *hadīth* is a corpus of enunciations which are marks (*āthār*), signifying scars, of what remains as essential in the course of time. It is also a technique of validation and transmission (*riwāya*) of what is “spoken” from one generation to the other. It is finally a means of instituting a community (*jamā’a*), a living tradition, which is a means of vanquishing time, that is, forgetting (*nisyān*) and death (*mawt*); this is what the radical antinomic of *hifz* [to preserve] indicates, preserve in one’s heart. The *hāfiz* is that one who maintains alive the *hadīth* by devoting it his own.

The essential element is thus the axiomatic relationship between the atemporal group of the *jamā’a* and the maintenance of the *hadīth*, its life across generations. It is in the light of this aim that the rules of validation of the *riwāya*, the conditions of the veracity of witnesses (*ta’dīl*) and its opposite (*jarh*) have to be assessed. In this perspective a *hāfiz* is always the contemporary of all others, whatever may be the distance, spatial or temporal, that separates them, because he

⁷² Ibid., 109. See on Laroui’s concept of historicism Riecken, “Relational Difference and the Grounds of Comparison: Abdallah Laroui’s Critique of Centrism,” 14-21. See also Alain Roussillon, “L’histoire au défi de l’historicisme,” in *Autour de la pensée de Abdallah Laroui. Debating Laroui’s Theory. Muḥāwarāt fikr ‘Abdallāh Al-‘Arwī*, ed. Bassam El-Kurdi (Casablanca and Beirut: Centre Culturel Arabe, 2000).

⁷³ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 134.

⁷⁴ See *ibid.*, 148-149, note 123. “Historicism is at once progressive and conservative. If it seeks to justify reform, it fixes itself upon an example and thus closes history. This is what the *hāfiz* does.”

occupies a distinctive place within a *silsila*, a continuous chain (*bilā inqitā'*) of transmission.⁷⁵

What is important here that Laroui links the *ḥadīth* to the question of the political as a grounding of the political (“instituting a community,”), the “vanquishing of time” as a goal of the *ḥadīth*, and the function of the *ḥāfiẓ* to guarantee this vanquishing of time through the establishing “contemporariness” with all others across historical differences.⁷⁶ What is important to note is that Laroui does not assign this temporal dynamic exclusively to the *sunna*. The professional historian can perform just this very move as well, as the quote above illustrates.

In my reading, Laroui’s major point is that the *sunna* as a tradition cannot “forget” the event, even if theo-logical, traditionist as well as secular liberal modern views of the Islamic tradition rest upon this assumption. They share a denial of what Laroui calls the antinomy of constituting and constituted tradition.⁷⁷ Framing the *sunna* only as constituted tradition and disregarding the its historical constitution leads to a certain account of its temporality, namely precisely that of tradition as a constituted one. The temporality of the moment—the event—of its constitution is thus lost from sight.

The event is something material in Laroui’s argument, something that—potentially, if acknowledged from the perspective of *fiqh*—disrupts the horizon of meaning established by tradition as a normative order. For, the material event points beyond the scope of the historical vision of the *sunna*. While trying to ensure the dissemination of its message and guaranteeing its coherence, the *sunna* works towards effacing the event and the potential rupture of its horizon of meaning, Laroui maintains.⁷⁸ For, as he argues, its continuing re-working of temporal relations creates each time a more purified form.⁷⁹ The *sunna* does register this re-working of time. “The Islamic tradition is not naive, it has not constructed itself before, but after critique,”⁸⁰ as Laroui puts it. Moreover, the *sunna* does register change, but from within its own framework.

However, in his reading, the Islamic tradition, while maintaining its own coherence anchored in the text, detaches itself at some point from “the history of facts that continues.” In other words, even if “the conscious aim is to establish a history based on an absolute truth, as is the case with the traditionists, this work itself implies a choice (*ra’y, ijtihād*), at least to leave completely society and history.”⁸¹ Laroui’s larger point here is that beyond the limited scope of the history as represented by the *sunna* history

⁷⁵ Ibid., 71-72.

⁷⁶ See also for this argument *ibid.*, 38.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁷⁸ See Laroui, *Tradition et Réforme*: 124-127, 133; Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 13, 75-76.

⁷⁹ See Laroui, *Tradition et Réforme*: 124.

⁸⁰ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 84

⁸¹ Ibid., 107.

as a succession of events is *always* wider than any synthesis of it.⁸² His “history of facts” refers here not to a positivist ground taken as “truer” than the ground established by the *sunna*, but to the level of the material event as a potential rupture of meaning. The *ḥadīth*, Laroui argues, calls the identification with what is said (*khābar*, *ḥadīth*) and not with the fact which is “unique”⁸³ and has faded forever. It calls for an identification with language, a “theo-logy,” rather than a “theo-praxis,” the reactualization of a past experience, as Laroui puts it.

In contrast, the epistemic attitude of the *faqīh*, of the magistrate, the person concerned with political action, who represents for Laroui the second form of historicism, is not *exclusively* concerned with the preservation of meaning. Laroui is bent on situating this epistemic attitude *within* the history of the *sunna*. He links this attitude to the logic of the material event as a potential break of a given horizon of meaning and, thus, the moment of the constitution of the *sunna* as well. In bringing out this antinomy, Laroui reads, to speak with Jacques Rancière, the principle of “dissensus” into the normative vision of history established by the *sunna*.⁸⁴

Let me explain this final point. Regarding the principle of personal opinion (*raʿy*) Laroui points out that it is conceptually and historically prior to the *ḥadīth*⁸⁵, even if historically its domain became restricted—a result that is historically contingent:

It is in the domain of law that the *qiyās* [analogical thinking], or *raʿy* (jurisprudential originality), is anterior to the atemporal application of the relevant text. This fact, a primordial one, indicates the meaning of real historical evolution. The succession of juridical schools goes from Abū Hanīfa to Ibn Hanbal; it denotes a progressive narrowing of the domain of the *raʿy* and the concomitant enlargement of the domain of the *ḥadīth*. What seems to us, on the level of the result, like an evolution is in reality an involution that has touched all domains, and, thus, historical writing as well.⁸⁶

Laroui then goes on to link both epistemic attitudes and concepts of history with the problem of the state. He spells out this relationship in terms of their differing views of temporality and the principal goals he ascribes to them. In the case of the *ḥadīth* this is the preservation of the normative tradition. In the case of *fiqh* it is the concern with politics as the domain of a vision of history that is open towards the future because it reckons with the event as a potential break:

⁸² See e.g. Al-ʿArwī, *Ṭaqāftunā fī dawʿ al-tarīḥ*: 184.

⁸³ See for the whole passage Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 130.

⁸⁴ Jacques Rancière, *La mésentente: politique et philosophie*, vol. 54 (JSTOR, 1995).

⁸⁵ Laroui, 1999 #207@3753 }

⁸⁶ Laroui, *Islam et histoire*: 37-38.

We have seen that the first one [the *muḥaddith*, NR], too, takes into account the conditions of the epoch, but this happens in order to escape it, to not fall under the law of the moment. Nothing of that sort imposes itself on the second, because the pursued goal (*gharad*) is not that of the protectors of the Tradition; it is no so much the longevity of the State of Islam (*dawlat al-islām*), but rather that of the State of Muslims (*dawlat al-muslimīn*) that is of importance above all, it is not so much the Islamic brotherhood but rather civil peace that has to be safeguarded.

History according to the *hāfiz* is thus based on itself. Being circular, it reproduces itself without interruption. In contrast, history according to the *faqīh* changes incessantly; that is what indicates the root *dāla* that has produced the word *dawla*, State, political authority, dynasty. That history, as the *faqīh*'s conceive of it, can be cyclical in the eyes of some, but that aspect, real or seemingly apparent, has anyhow nothing to do with circularity, the perfect character of history among the *hāfiz*. It is open because its method is never totally adequate to it, transcended [*dépassée*] as it is any moment by the event.⁸⁷

In Laroui's account, the *faqīh*'s concern with the "state of Muslims" situates itself within a different temporality as opposed to the concern with the "State of Islam" as the locus of the revealed truth contained in the *sunna*. Laroui departs here interestingly from the typical secular view that assigns cyclical time to religion and linear time to secular modernity and secular politics. The way he connects the emphasis on the openness of history with the epistemic attitude of the *faqīh* brings out the logic of the event as a rupture and, thus, dissensus, the conflict over one and the same word such as "*sunna*," "*qiyās*." From the perspective of *fiqh*, the event signals the lack of concordance between established method—also being a synthesis in and of time—and object of study (the past, the present, a text). The temporality sustaining this method is thus never complete. In contrast, the *sunna* crucially emphasizes, as Laroui points out, the principle of concordance, of harmony (*muṭābaqa*).⁸⁸

To conclude, let me come back to the problem of how Laroui's conceptualization of the Islamic tradition has wider relevance for debates on tradition as a concept and for how the modern secular present is construed within empty, homogenous time.

Conclusion

Starting from the observation that the concept of the Islamic tradition has not garnered much attention in Laroui's reception, I have read this relative neglect as

⁸⁷ Ibid., 81-82.

⁸⁸ Laroui, *Tradition et Réforme*: 111. "One of the most favored arguments of the Tradition is *mutabaqa* (concordance): what is said, here and now, is fundamentally identical with what has been said each time, before and otherwise. This is the first and last truth."

symptomatic of a certain historical conjuncture that was dominated by romantic meta-narratives of progress which in turn shaped the way Laroui's works were read. Against these views that read Laroui's concern with tradition within romantic temporality, I have sought to work out another reading that foregrounds the tragic temporality in Laroui's account of the Islamic tradition. I have then shown how Laroui unpacks the concept of the "Islamic tradition" to reveal within it an antinomy of the historical vision of the *ḥadīth* and the *fiqh*—an antinomy he links to the concept of history as such.

What I want to emphasize in conclusion is that Laroui himself does not situate the location of his critique in an allegedly secular, empty, homogenous timespace *after* tradition—that is, the allegedly groundless ground of the modern secular and its understanding of critique, not perturbed by tradition, memory, history, and power relations. Taking into account the antinomy he works out, the present is, then, always caught up by both the event—understood as a break—*and* the moment of the re-emergence of tradition, the re-working of temporal relations towards a coherence organized around a historical and narrative center. The always historically situated creation of coherence is in this case not a moment of an outdated or already accomplished past. For him, tradition continuously re-emerges not only in what he addresses as "religion" (a problematic term that needs to be defined, as he acknowledges), but equally in politics and science.⁸⁹ The present is, then, a "complex space,"⁹⁰ or rather a complex *timespace* governed by an antinomy that takes different shapes according to particular historical situations.

I have shown that tradition is therefore conceptually always part of the timespace, or, the chronotope of the present as an ever-emerging, normative mode of re-working time, beginnings, ends, narrative frames, the probable into what is certain, etc. It is neither something that is heroically overcome, nor is it something that provides a definitive answer to political problems in the present through providing an eschatological horizon. The *tragic* temporality in which Laroui situates his discussion of tradition foregrounds that tradition is a continuous, active, recursive, unfinished, and political process of canonization within time that works on time. Laroui's tragic sensibility in his discussion of the Islamic tradition—embodied in his delinking of time and history, his emphasis on its "involution" as a response to European colonization, his sense of living after existential catastrophe—thus effectively undoes the sovereign gesture that relegates tradition to a devalued time-space, treats it as timeless, and establishes the modern as a location beyond the temporality of tradition.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 136. See also the Arabic original Al-'Arwī, *Al-sunna wa-l-iṣlāḥ*: 210.

⁹⁰ Asad, *Formations of the Secular*: 179.

What follows is that for Laroui the moment of conceiving of political action—any project of reform—cannot be neatly separated from the moment of the emergence of tradition. So, the present is neither an empty, homogenous timespace or chronotope of “free choice” as a liberal, secular narrative would have it, nor is it definitively bound by the theo-logical form of relating past, present, and future by the normative Islamic tradition (*sunna*).

Based on these observations my final point is that Laroui’s distinction between profane and sacred, absolute and relative time cannot be completely mapped onto secular liberal version of this code. Nor can it be simply aligned onto the theo-logical understandings of this separation. On one hand, it renders problematic, or, more precisely, relativizes the prevalent distinction between the constant, the unchanging (*thābit*) versus the changing (*mutaghayyir*) inside the normative Islamic tradition as a site of enunciation.⁹¹ On the other hand, it resists the form according to which the *sunna*—to speak again with Luhmann— observes, as Laroui argues. It does not follow the alternative of either faith or unbelief.⁹² Against the way the *sunna* seeks to establish a distinction between “the law of God” and that of humans, Laroui foregrounds what I would call immanence. There is, he argues, only the law of humans.⁹³ Immanence is the material site of the now where these observations about immanence/transcendence, the absolute and the relative, etc. can be made.⁹⁴ This is to say that in Laroui’s argument all observations, all distinctions—such as between the history of the *ḥadīth* and the history of the *fiqh*—only emanate from a plane of human observers in time who experience and work with and on time. This account of immanence challenges claims that confine this zone of immanence to the historical emergence of the “modern West.”

To conclude, my claim was not that Laroui provides us with a general theory of the Islamic tradition, or with an answer “what Islam is.”⁹⁵ My point was rather that Laroui’s analysis of the temporal dynamics constituting the *sunna*—the antinomy of the concept of history as they play out in this particular tradition—complicate our understanding of this tradition within the modern secular present as a site of the politics of historicity.

⁹¹ See e.g. Tariq Ramadan, *Radical Reform: Islamic Ethics and Liberation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). 17-22.

⁹² Laroui, *Tradition et Réforme*: 136.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

⁹⁴ This point touches upon the wider debates on modern secularism. To discuss this point goes beyond the scope of this paper.

⁹⁵ See Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic*. The book focuses, ultimately, on the meaning of Islam in history and the processes of meaning-making within this tradition.

Nils Riecken
Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient

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