

ON THE NEED TO SHAPE THE ARAB EXILE BODY IN BERLIN



"Berlin is not just a city. It is a political laboratory that enforces a new type of beginning."

An essay on why the Arab intellectual community in Berlin needs to acquire a name, shape, and a mandate of sorts. This may include a school of thought, political philosophy or even an ideational movement – all cross-fertilised through a deeper engagement with the Arab world. This essay was originally published in the German [dis:orient](#) (formerly Alsharq), and has been translated into German and Arabic. All photographs were taken by the author.

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“We need to find ourselves, and each other, on the streets, from human to human crowd.”

“These streets lose themselves in infinity ... a countless human crowd moves in them, constantly new people with unknown aims that intersect like the linear maze of a pattern sheet.” – Siegfried Kracauer on Berlin, “Screams on the Street” (1930).

Dislocating the Arab future from the grip of the political bankruptcy and moral morass in the Arab world might appear remote and relegated to the domain of quixotic dreams. But does it need to be that way? As communities are unsettled, resistances triggered, a chorus of voices fired up, waves of bodies set in motion for justice, and a range of emotions roused even when they no longer have an appetite, can the continued onslaught on reality not also reinvigorate political thought?

The procession of dislocation that materialized in 2011 has been viciously derailed since. Now, to coherently embark upon a regenerated starting point in this long journey of political redemption, a “we” is required: This feeds from new political ideas, collective practices and compelling narratives that are currently re-constructed and brought to life in a distantly safe city.

Berlin is where the newly-arrived Arab suddenly (but not always) recognizes that the frightful habit of glancing over the shoulder – painfully inherited from back home – gradually recedes. All the while, a new dawn slowly sets in among the meeting of peers in this new city: As such, Berlin is not just a city. It is a political laboratory that enforces a new type of beginning, one that turns heads in the direction of matters greater than the individual; and it generates a realization that the grey blur that nauseatingly blankets the future can actually be broken up.

Following the 2011 Arab uprisings and its innumerable tragic outcomes, Berlin was strategically and politically ripe to emerge as an exile capital. For some time now, there has been a growing and conscious Arab intellectual community, the political dimensions of which to fully crystalize is what I wish to further explore.

When the storm of history breaks out a tectonic political crisis, from revolutions to wars to outright persecution, then a designated city will consequently serve as the gravitational center and refuge for intellectual exiles. This is, for example, what New York was for post-1930s Jewish intellectuals fleeing Europe, and what Paris became for Latin American intellectuals fleeing their country's dictatorships in the 1970s and 1980s.

Against those historical precedents, the Arab intellectual community in Berlin needs to understand itself better, moving away from an auto-pilot arrangement, and become actively engaged with political questions that face it. In effect, there is a dire necessity for this community to acquire a name, shape, form and a mandate of sorts. With a vigorous eye to a possible long-term outcome, this may include a school of thought, a political philosophy or even an ideational movement – all cross-fertilized through a deeper engagement with the Arab world.

This is certainly not about beckoning revolutions and uprisings, nor to relapse into the stale talk of institutional reforms. If anything, there needs to be a move away from these tired tropes of transformation – away from quantifiable power dynamics that do not address matters that go deeper, into the existential level that shores up the transnational Arab sphere. This is the very area where the stream of human life animates a language of awareness and the recurring initiative helps to expand the spaces of dignity for fellow beings. Yet, this area is currently ravaged in a torrent of moral misery and spiritual crisis.

FREEDOM AS WANDERER

So here we are: Between Berlin's spirited idiosyncrasies and an Arab community maturing away from "ordinary" diasporic pathways lies the foment of the politically possible.

"I was born in Tunisia, lived in Egypt, and gave my blood in Libya. I was beaten in Yemen, passing through Bahrain. I will grow up in the Arab World until I reach Palestine. My name is Freedom." This popular streak, and variations of it, could be heard throughout the Arab world in February 2011 when hope for revolution was at its peak after the fall of Tunisia's Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egypt's Hosni Mubarak. Within it, freedom is a wanderer that carries contagions as it roams across Arab borders.

Syria was not yet in the verse. The revolutionary moment there would launch in March 2011 and it would be the Syrians that would pay the highest price of an ephemeral euphoria that evaporated into the terrestrial orbit of actual change. In its stead, wandering freedom turned into a dystopian monster as hundreds of thousands became themselves forced wanderers. The Mediterranean Sea, long celebrated for its grace and splendour, became a morbid burial ground of people fleeing for safety.

Buttressed by the refugee waves, an intellectual flow of academics, writers, poets, playwrights, artists, and activists, among others, from across the Arab world gravitated towards Berlin as sanctuary and refuge. This took place against the backdrop of a long-established Turkish presence (initiated by the 1961 Guestworker Treaty) and Chancellor Angela Merkel's 2015 refugee intake that partly shaped the post-2011 Arab transition.

A unique Arab milieu began to take form as new geographic, social, and cultural conditions necessitated a reconstruction of visions and practices. The exile body built on the embers and mediated on the ashes of a devastated Arab public left burning in the inferno of counter-revolutions, crackdowns, wars, terrorism, coups, and regional restlessness. It was that public that authoritarian regimes had worked so hard to contain and that everyday people battled courageously to reclaim. Tunisia's Mohamed Bouazizi set himself ablaze at the close of 2010 and, ever since, opened possibilities for claims and struggles.



“The pre-2011 ghost still haunts the Arab community that settles in Berlin”

The newcomers to Berlin were thrown under the weight of newfound political obligations to their countries of origin. They did, after all, depart with a guilt-ridden sense of unfinished business. The Arab uprisings brought about a hiatus between the “no-longer” and the “not-yet.”¹ The individual transitioned from bondage to freedom that broke the chains of work and biological necessity. The result was an imagination unleashed to see humans thrive in freedom and exhibit their capacity to make a new beginning, only for the subsequent journey to be stomped upon by the weight of the jackboot and silenced by the thud of the judge's gavel hammer.

¹ Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973). 205.

Yet in this gap of historical time, individual greatness and the passion of public freedom blossomed while a new character formed through the tear gas, streets, protests, and coffeehouses. In a marvellous transformation, they could “no longer recognize their pre-2011 self.”² Hence, the arrival in Berlin not only came with an incomplete political consciousness, but an anxiety to resist a return to the “weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs,”³ as German-Jewish philosopher Hannah Arendt conveys it. This denotes a pre-political spectre that rips the individual from group agency, and obliterates their biography from history. That is to say, the pre-2011 ghost still haunts the Arab community that settles in Berlin and learns to move within the terrain of hospitality and enmity.⁴

On the one hand, this new community navigated between the support and collaboration of German institutions, civil society, universities, cultural spaces, left-wing politics, churches, mosques, the large Turkish community, and a fluctuating German sense of responsibility to the refugee crisis.

On the other hand, the Arab community is menaced by local racism, a growing far-right movement in the form of the Alternative for Germany (AfD), Arab embassies, foreign security agencies and reactionary sections of the diaspora. Moreover, its members are thrown down and disoriented by the modern malaise of the “Inferno of the Same”. This is how Berlin-based South Korean philosopher Byung-Chul Han aptly describes a world of unceasing repetition of similar experiences masquerading as novelty and renewal.

Consequently, we are seeing love – with all its earmarks of commitment, intimacy, passion, and responsibility – struggle to swell through the ranks from relationships to community-building in a world of “endless freedom of choice, the overabundance of options, and the compulsion for perfection.”⁵

Not only is fragmentation fomented by the upheaval caused by exile and transition, the individual in general struggles to flesh out a position towards a world that has become increasingly noisy and blurred. A world that has scrambled the once-relatable relationship between time and space, now under the neoliberal storm is turning responsible citizens into hyper-individual self-seeking consumers, discharging a plastic one-size fits all repetition of behaviour that precludes deeper forms of unity and a communal spirit.

Nonetheless, even with the challenges it confronts, the Arab community is unfolding in the shadow of complex socio-political ecologies and wide-ranging entanglements that are arguably unprecedented in modern history. Hitherto, most forced Arab migrations have happened on a

² Amro Ali, "The Hidden Triumph of the Egyptian Revolution," *Open Democracy* (25 January 2016), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/north-africa-west-asia/amro-ali/hidden-triumph-of-egyptian-revolution>.

³ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977). 4.

⁴ “...the foreigner...has to ask for hospitality in a language which by definition is not his own, the one imposed on him by the master of the house, the host, the king, the lord, the authorities, the nation, the State, the father, etc...That is where the question of hospitality begins: must we ask the foreigner to understand us, to speak our language, in all the senses of this term, in all its possible extensions, before being able and so as to be able to welcome him into our country?” Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). 15.

⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *The Agony of Eros*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017). 1.

country by country and era by era basis, such as Libyans fleeing Gaddafi's regime in the 1970s, or the Lebanese fleeing the civil war in the 1980s. Moreover, transnational Arab relocation to the Gulf was primarily spurred on by economic factors, to say nothing of their residency that hinged on the shunning of any hint of politics. In contrast, we are currently witnessing the first ever simultaneous pan-Arab exodus consisting of overlapping legitimacies – beyond culture, religion, nationality and economics – born of the Arab Spring.

This new exile marvel is brewing in a cultural flux with questions that are only beginning to be raised. Exile is meant here, as Edward Said writes, as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home.”⁶ Additionally, exile transpires irrespective of one being banished from the homeland, living in legal limbo, studying at university, or even one who recently acquired German citizenship. We are talking about exile as a mental state,⁷ where even if you faced no political persecution if you chose to return to your country of origin, you would still feel alienated by a system that can no longer accommodate your innate or learned higher ideals.

For example, in late 2015, I attended the screening of a Syrian film in Kreuzberg titled *True Stories of Love, Life, Death and Sometimes Revolution*. During the question and answer session, a fellow country man in the audience asked the film's co-director, Nidal Hassan, “What can we Syrian artists even do now given that we are in exile?” Hassan replied entrancingly: “We were in exile even in Syria...we just have to continue to change the world through our practices.”

From another angle, Dina Wahba, Egyptian doctoral researcher at Berlin's Freie Universität, evocatively pens the exile consciousness: “I get out, look around, and realize how beautiful it is. I feel guilty that I'm here, while some of my friends are in dark cells. I also feel guilty that I'm here and not enjoying all this beauty. Crippling fear has crossed the Mediterranean and taken over my mind. Fear is a strange thing. I cannot go home, but neither can I make a home here.”⁸

As such, the sense of exile in Berlin is deepened by a wide-ranging emotional spectrum: From an all-consuming survivor's guilt vis-à-vis those that stayed behind down to a pleasant stroll through Tiergarten Park in which a nagging thought might arise that whispers, “if only back in Cairo we had such large free unmolested spaces to breathe in.”

CONVERGING POINTS INTO LINES OF MEANING

Arab Berlin, since 2011, has sprang a swathe of energetic pockets of creativity and thought. Yet, there is something missing in these hyper-present moments: the dynamic spaces from theatre to academia to civil society volunteering are fragmented and rarely talk to each other, not to mention the disconnect from the wider Arab community. You cannot help but sense that the creative and

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). 173.

⁷ As Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish [once put](https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/22/books/a-poet-s-palestine-as-a-metaphor.html) it: “Exile is more than a geographical concept. You can be an exile in your homeland, in your own house, in a room.” See Adam Shatz, “A Poet's Palestine as a Metaphor,” *New York Times* (22 December 2001), <https://www.nytimes.com/2001/12/22/books/a-poet-s-palestine-as-a-metaphor.html>.

⁸ Dina Wahba, “Diaspora Stories: Crippling Fear and Dreams of a Better Home,” *Mada Masr* (16 August 2018), <https://madamasr.com/en/2018/08/16/opinion/u/diaspora-stories-crippling-fear-and-dreams-of-a-better-home/>.

intellectual efforts are hurled into a void rather than being taken up by a greater political current that can extract these experiences and marshal them towards a pre-eminent narrative.

This problem, if we can call it that, is not unfamiliar to the city's inherent contradictions. Strangely enough, it still echoes Siegfried Kracauer's 1932 essay "Repetition". The cultural critic and film theorist wrote that Berlin "is present-day and, moreover, it makes it a point of honour of being absolutely present-day... His [the inhabitant's] existence is not like a line but a series of points... Many experience precisely this life from headline to headline as exciting; partly because they profit from the fact that their earlier existence vanishes in its moment of disappearing, partly because they believe they are living twice as much when they live purely in the present."⁹

The irony, therefore, is that the strength that makes up the Berlin tempest that unleashes the creative and intellectual Arab energies, also happens to be its dissolution as its intense present breaks with past and future. That is to say, the exile might pursue the present as a way to escape or numb the trauma or crippling melancholia haunting the past, and anxiety saturating the future. But this can often mean the self is reduced to individual interests with the exciting present acting no more than a euphoric smokescreen of collective advancement.



"How does one obstruct the trap that enmeshes the Arab Berliner?"

As the late sociologist David Frisby writes about Kracauer's idea, the crux is this: "This moment of presentness itself, however, never remains present. It is always on the point of vanishing. Hence the endless search for the ever-new and the permanent transformation of consciousness of time in metropolitan existence."¹⁰ This makes for the need to chase the next project or seek out the next

⁹ David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin*, Social and Political Theory (Cambridge: Polity, 1985). 142.

¹⁰ Ibid. 141.

donor, which is not simply driven by excitement as much as it is foisted upon today's entrepreneur of the self. As they self-exploit in their respective enterprise, the individual is made into "master and slave in one."¹¹

Nonetheless, excitement is intimately tied to a never-ending present. Thus, the questions that arise: How does one interrupt this endless fluidity and "recycling" of presents? How can one address an animated present that seems somehow ruptured from building up on the past and navigating into the future? How does one obstruct the trap that enmeshes the Arab Berliner? How, that is, to alter the individual's scattered series of points that Kracauer alluded to and move towards a meaningful line that elevates the exile's relationship, not only to their life trajectory, but to an existential understanding in the body-politic that potentially pushes a narrative greater than the individual?

One way to understand this body-politic and appreciate Berlin's intervention in this novel community, as well as the attempts of its members to make meaning of their new-found roles and the political environment that shapes them, would be vis-à-vis other cities. This serves to examine the elephant in the room, however prudently: Why cannot other western cities with large Arab populations qualify as the intellectual exile hub?

THE BERLIN ANOMALY

Western cities like London, Paris and New York would have been the expected post-2011 intellectual hubs given the large number of Arabs present within them. Yet, they have arguably all fallen behind Berlin. This cannot simply be explained in terms of dynamic diversity and cultural production, which is certainly not lacking in either of these three cities. Rather, they all appear to have a relative absence of ingredients that lead to the blossoming of a full-fledged political exile community like we are witnessing in Berlin.

To start, there seems to be a common view among Arab and Muslim groups that London is dominated by the Muslim Brotherhood and Islamists, while Berlin offers more space for pluralism. But London's biggest hurdle, in fact, might be the high cost of living. To take a simple example: One has to think twice before buying an expensive London tube ticket. In contrast, Berlin's U-Bahn and S-Bahn are affordable, which alone speaks volumes for the necessity of mobility required in community building. The repercussions of Brexit also diminished the grand city of London in many eyes and worsened an already difficult visa entry.

Paris, while popular with Algerian, Tunisian, Moroccan, Lebanese, and Syrian intellectuals, is generally viewed as closed off and limited to the Francophone world. Also, the historical legacy of colonialism will generally taint any initiative coming out of London and Paris. While New York is clouded by US foreign policy and the current administration, the security mesh makes it burdensome to enter the country. Moreover, high living costs and distance from the Arab world also complicate its appeal.

¹¹ Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). 49. As Han notes, neoliberalism has transformed the oppressed worker into a free contractor, and class struggle has given way to internal struggle within one's inner being. This is set up so that anyone who fails to succeed has to feel shame and cannot blame anyone but themselves. Therefore, governments, institutions, society, and structural factors, are absolved of any responsibility.

To be sure, there are cultural trends that unfold across all these cities post-2011, which is why similar community formations should be encouraged. However, the cultural and political dynamics that materialise in Berlin, backed with intensity and creativity by wide-ranging institutional and grassroots support, summons Berlin and the Arab exile body to be assigned into a shared conversation.¹² If one listens closely, the hoofbeats of Arab history are reverberating out of Berlin more than any other western counterpart.

On this note, Istanbul is frequently touted as the Arab exile hub, and indeed it could easily rival Berlin had it not been for some conveniently overlooked factors. Arab activities are largely permitted if they correlate ideologically with, or not speak against, Erdogan's illiberal government. One might raise the question as to why would this be a problem if a gracious host is enabling an Arab community to thrive that would, in any case, only be concerned with external issues?

For a start, this selfish approach deflects from the grim reality that sees Turkish academics and journalists censored or imprisoned, a grave matter that should raise concern among Arab democratic aspirations. It is one thing, and understandable, to be grateful to a majestic Istanbul that gives one abode and freedom to flourish. But it is an unsettling hypocrisy to trumpet the city as a free intellectual hub while ignoring its own Turkish citizens who are attacked for voicing thoughts that deviate from the official line. Fundamental values that are compromised, particularly this drastically, are no longer values but more like hobbies. A draconian environment that divulges its effect on Turkish skin will inadvertently skew Arab intellectual development and ultimately make it difficult to garner a better representation of exile voices and thought processes.

In light of the brutal murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, one wonders if Turkey's entangled relationship in the region does not furnish Istanbul with sufficient geographical and mental distance to render it beyond scrutiny. Had this gruesome act taken place in the Saudi embassy in Berlin, the consequence, one could reasonably speculate, would have come at a higher price for the Saudi crown prince. The weight of Germany and the EU might have been enough to abort or postpone a planned assassination.

This is not to rule out the immense potential of Istanbul's Arab community. After all, Khashoggi himself saw the city as a "[base for a new Middle East](#)."¹³ It is just that the current political incarnation comes with many bouts of wariness that need to be better understood, discussed, and thought through carefully. Thus, if current developments hold, we can expect in the distant future two competing Arab schools of thinking to emerge out of Berlin and Istanbul.

¹² A number of institutions and initiatives have been central to the German-Arab cultural exchange and collaboration. Among them: Free University, Humboldt University, *Forum Transregionale Studien*, the Goethe Institute (and its support of institutions such as the Arab Image Foundation); German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and its support of Arab artists and intellectuals (e.g. Akram Zaatari, whose films often show in the short competition of the Berlin Film Festival); *Transmediale* (which formerly ran the Arab Shorts Program); the Barenboim-Said Academy which is not only a site for Arab arts, intellectual exchanges and conferences but, perhaps, the largest scholarship program for Arab musicians in the world. Overall, the spectrum is wide, from the various foundations of the political parties and the Foreign Office, to the neighborhood dynamics in Neukölln along Sonnenallee street.

¹³ Sarah El Deeb, "Saudi Writer Saw Turkey as Base for a New Middle East," *Associated Press News* (21 October 2018), <https://apnews.com/5643bc71beaf43249527f1e0d14dd67b>.

Yet, unlike Istanbul, London, Paris, and New York (vis-à-vis the US) which cannot claim historical “neutrality,” the function of Berlin works strangely well as it is linked to a peculiar backdrop: The contemporary Arab approach towards Germany is premised on the notion that it was never a colonizer or invader of Arab lands. The 1941-43 *Afrika Korps* is given little attention in Arab historiography (although this should not detract from the dark ties that some Arab elites pursued with Nazi Germany).

In other words, Germany was never a colonizer like France or Great Britain, nor does it have an aggressive foreign policy like the US, let alone evokes ambivalence like Turkey does. Arab positions are then deducted from this negative admiration that is rarely questioned in the popular Arab worldview. However, this obfuscates the stealth colonial endeavour that lacks theatrics. German companies like Siemens and ThyssenKrupp have long been implicated in the “colonial dynamics of economic subjugation” that deepens, for example, Egypt’s chronic underdevelopment, corruption, and even the skewed “technological conception of modernity,” as Omar Robert Hamilton argues.¹⁴ Yet, Germany walks away unscathed and gets praised as the country of organisation, discipline, efficiency, and Mercedes Benz.

The idea of Germany rarely arouses a divisiveness and antagonism that would aggravate Arab security officials or activists. The paradox of its power is that the savagery Germany committed in the first half of the twentieth century skirts around the Arab world. While German orientalism is not alien to Arab scholarship, this is not what is usually or immediately deplored in Arab scholarly circles and the Arab imaginary regarding Germany – to that country’s stroke of luck.¹⁵ Even strong German support for Israel does not elicit the same degree of Arab anger towards it as with the US and UK, partly because of the sound popular view that Germany is coerced by historical guilt. So, in a sense, Germany is conditionally, if not grudgingly, let off the hook.

¹⁴ Hamilton frames his argument through the work of political scientist Franz Neumann who interestingly wrote in 1944 that “foreign trade may be a means of enriching a higher and better-organised nation at the expense of the less industrialized. This is the essence of foreign trade even under conditions of free competition... We believe that on the world market, commodities are not exchanged at their value, but that, on the contrary, a more industrialized country exchanges less labor for more. Foreign trade, under conditions of free competition, is thus the means of transferring profits.” See Omar Robert Hamilton, “Industrial Colonialism: Egypt, Germany and the Maintenance of the Modern World,” *Mada Masr* (5 July 2018), <https://madamasr.com/en/2018/07/05/opinion/u/industrial-colonialism-egypt-germany-and-the-maintenance-of-the-modern-world/>.

¹⁵ Perhaps two historical anecdotes can capture the essence of the Arab imagination’s complex juxtapositioning that endorses Germany over other European powers. When Kaiser Wilhelm II visited Damascus in 1898, he approached the tomb of Saladin and stated: “Let me assure His Majesty the Sultan [Abdulhamid II] and the 300 millions of Muslims who, in whatever corner of the globe they may live, revere in him their khalif, that the German Emperor will ever be their friend.” The Kaiser laid a wreath with the words “A Knight without fear or blame who often had to teach his opponents the right way to practice chivalry.” The speech was soon translated into Arabic, to great fanfare. The Kaiser’s speech made Saladin a political symbol in the Arab world (up until then he was seen only as an important historical figure). The Egyptian poet Ahmad Shawqi even composed an ode to the Kaiser. The perceived contrast was not lost on the Arab world when French General Henri Gouraud, reportedly, at the end of World War One, kicked the tomb of Saladin and proclaimed: “Awake, Saladin. We have returned. My presence here consecrates victory of the Cross over the Crescent.” This insult later seared into the memory of the Syrian resistance against the French. See Doğan Gürpınar, *Ottoman/Turkish Visions of the Nation, 1860-1950* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). 87; Anthony Billingsley, *Political Succession in the Arab World: Constitutions, Family Loyalties, and Islam* (New York: Routledge, 2010). 214.

THE CITY ABOVE ALL

However, this endeavor is more about Berlin than Germany. A city not only telescopes political dynamics of community building, but it will always exist timelessly as “an important crystallization of human civilization and its discontents.”¹⁶ By coming to terms with Berlin as a political, social, and cultural laboratory, it will be possible to illuminate the current Arab community that is shaped by a historical pattern of sites of sanctuary and exile agency.

The German art critic Karl Scheffler perhaps immortalized the essence of the German capital in 1910 with the words, “*Berlin dazu verdammt: immerfort zu werden und niemals zu sein*” (Berlin is a city condemned forever to becoming and never to being).¹⁷ What Scheffler thought to be a disadvantage because of the city’s “lack of organically developed structure” turned out to have hidden advantages.¹⁸ As German writer Peter Schneider observes, the word *werden*, “becoming”, encapsulates notions such as on the “cusp of becoming”, “up-and-coming,” “new Berlin,” the impending effort to transform itself but not quite there yet.



“Berlin’s grotty pockets and incompleteness electrifies you with the truth about the world as it is.”

These themes of liminality strongly resonate with the self-perception of the growing Arab intellectual community’s idea of rebuilding, transforming and becoming. Berlin’s imperfection, sketchiness, and incompleteness, furnish a sense of freedom and growth which the compact beauty of London and Paris can never provide. If every space is “perfectly restored”, this then can lead to

¹⁶ Sharon M. Meagher, *Philosophy and the City: Classic to Contemporary Writings* (Albany: State University of New York, 2008). 4.

¹⁷ Peter Schneider, *Berlin Now: The City after the Wall*, trans. Sophie Schlondorff (New York: Macmillan, 2014). 7.

¹⁸ Ibid.

exclusion and a sense that all spaces are occupied.¹⁹ If Kracauer glorifies and mourns both the intense and disappearing “presentness” of Berlin, Scheffler inadvertently redeems it. He points to a realm of possibilities that presentness can eventually spill over into something by the simple fact that it is able to keep its thinking and creative residents within a sense of motion.

Compare this to other European cities (the cities of being?) where, for example, the element of surprise that traditionally accompanied travel is ironed out as tourism is homogenized, streamlined, securitized, and packaged into recognizable templates – English speaking locals, ease of WIFI access, *TripAdvisor*-determined accommodation. All this sees individual movements and curiosity follow predictable routes and rituals. Berlin is anything but immune to this, but the totalizing wave and façade is often punctured from the city’s anarchist protests to anti-establishment graffiti, and most importantly, a culture of political vibrancy and pluralism.

This phenomenon helps recalibrate the senses back to modern predicaments. Whereas Prague’s glistening Disneyfied streets and conventionally romantic spaces tells you reassuring lies about what the world wants to see, Berlin’s grotty pockets and incompleteness electrifies you with the truth about the world as it is. While the post-war Berlin story – that saw Cold War divisions, reconstruction, and reunification – is anything but straightforward, we can come, as a result of such past tensions, to appreciate the current political and intellectual landscape of Berlin in the way it accentuates the idea of human value.

The marriage between city and thought is critical in understanding the exiled Arab body politic undergoing a collective soul-searching struggle, beyond the initial wandering of freedom, which is evident in the intellectual and everyday subtext. There will need to be a deeper gaze into *maghfira* (forgiveness), *tasalah* (reconciliation), *inikas* (reflection) on past mistakes, as well as the notion that the nation-state that brought many ills to the Arab world no longer makes any sense. Therefore, the concept of the city will need to spearhead the decolonization of nation-state models and replace it with more humane ways of governance. As such, the Arab community’s exploration of forgiveness, reconciliation, and reflection comes with the aid of complementary themes embedded in Berlin’s code.

The concept of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* means working through and coping. Here, the past is incorporated into present experiences. It was once used in a positive way, describing that you had to deal with the past, but has become increasingly ambivalent. The term *bewältigen* means not only confronting the past, but also getting over it or getting done with it (it can also mean mastering a task or learning to do something for the first time). It has been overused but still serves as a beneficial term. Perhaps the strongest instantiation is *Aussöhnung*, which means reconciliation. Connected to Biblical motifs and rarely used in everyday conversation, it can be employed to describe coping with the past by reconciling opposites or parties that have hurt each other. Berlin, therefore, is that paradigmatic backdrop and soundboard to the slowly maturing elements running through the political Arab community.

¹⁹ Ibid. 8.

REASSEMBLING THE POLITICAL

Towards that end, Berlin will need to be actively thought of and treated as one critical hub and safe space to reconstruct alternative narratives and futures²⁰— a space that will require a physical presence and minimal reliance on the digital sphere of social media and communication technologies. A physical presence should be emphasised over any other collaboration, including the much-loved Skype conferencing. We have hopefully learned the lesson of 2011: The digital can only take us so far, and the communities existing in cyberspace will never be a match for the real world of organizing and politicking. Certainly, the digital will be complementary, but never its replacement.²¹ Han would argue, “it takes a soul, a common spirit, to fuse people into a crowd. The digital swarm lacks the soul or spirit of the masses. Individuals who come together as a swarm do not develop a we.”²²

To reemphasize, this is about Berlin. A gifted Syrian poet in Hamburg or a lustrous Moroccan film director in Munich are of little use unless they physically make the trip to the German capital, disclose their identities and make their presence felt. Better put, “meet, merge, emerge” as Australian author Stuart Braun pithily states in his aptly named book, *City of Exiles: Berlin from the outside in*.²³ No digital mechanism can ever be a viable substitute to the world of shadows. There needs to be a resistance to the levelling effect brought on by the digital topology that deceives with its pseudo-egalitarianism and smooth open spaces yet fragments responsibility. It does this by promoting arbitrariness and non-bindingness that undermine promises and trust that are required to bind the future.²⁴

This stands in contrast to the real world’s nooks, corners, crannies, and alleys that filter and impede the information pollution and the armies of trolls, and permit slowness, mediation, and trust processes back into the collective fold.²⁵ The orderly and measured disengagement from social media is one way to avoid the recurring problem of disintegration of one’s efforts, scattering of thoughts, and inability to hone in on matters down to their essence. Without going all out Luddite, it is to reign back the digital swarm that leads to the exile’s continued captivity between a sensationally feel-good-but-not-going-anywhere present and an open abyss that devours all efforts.

The political should thus not simply be understood as a destination where a Syrian has to wait for that momentous day to return to a post-Assad land (if the obvious needs reminding, even sinister dictators and their regimes cannot cheat mortality and the laws of history). Rather, it is to think and engage politically in the present and be tested within the society of Berlin.

For example, I remember a few years ago, a group of Syrians started a charity “giving back to Germany” which handed out food to the homeless. While charity is always to be commended,

²⁰ It was not a coincidence that Berlin-based *Forum Transregionale Studien* held a [conference](#) in 2018 titled “Imagining the Future: The Arab World in the Aftermath of Revolution.”

²¹ Coming from the Arab world where the physical public sphere is repressed, social media makes much sense. However, it is quite a sight to ponder when I look at my digitally-immersed (which I am not always innocent of either) Arab colleagues and the privacy-obsessed Germans.

²² Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*. 13.

²³ Stuart Braun, *City of Exiles: Berlin from the Outside In* (Noctua Press, 2015). 13.

²⁴ Han, *In the Swarm: Digital Prospects*. 52-53.

²⁵ Ibid. 45.

justice needs to be at the forefront of one's goals of becoming better acquainted with the political problem that not only leads to homelessness, but also to understand it in much more nuanced ways than what the political can popularly imply. To illustrate this, the German population is suffering from a [loneliness scourge](#).²⁶ The communal capital stored within many Arab spaces can be unloaded (through volunteering and specially-designed outreach programs) into these German voids. Loneliness, a growing phenomenon in this hyper-individualised world (and one that is making inroads into Arab cities), has political implications from the way people view minorities to voting patterns, and therefore it needs to be treated as a political problem. From this, a problem is recognised, engaged with, new lessons learned, adding further experiences and wisdom to the Arab body-politic repository.



“A conference in perpetual motion.”

There is something unsettling about attending a brilliant symposium on Middle East studies in Berlin, only to leave with the predictable knowledge that it will fall into a black hole. Even if publications and podcasts were produced, it reaches only a few, and certainly not the wider Arab civic body in question. A continual dialogue with the public needs to be fostered. Think of it as a conference in perpetual motion: To widen the net to young Arabs to engage in political thinking without the need to enrol them in formal structures of learning; to translate complex academic theories into digestible intellectual gems, which could be as simple as rewriting or summarizing conference notes to be pinned up on a board in an Arab café in Neukölln. The intellectual exile body will need to forge an intimate relation with café staff, barbers and other occupations critically-positioned within common social spaces. The “antiquated” flyer will hold more weight than a

²⁶ "Two Thirds of Germans Think the Country Has a Major Loneliness Problem," *The Local Germany* (23 March 2018), <https://www.thelocal.de/20180323/two-thirds-of-germans-think-the-country-has-a-major-loneliness-problem>.

Facebook post as the mere act of handing it to someone restores an invaluable human transaction that makes bonding and togetherness more realizable than what social media can offer.

It would be a delusion of utter proportions to think the mosque and church have no place in this endeavour. Any project to live out one's secular fantasies is doomed. There needs to be a move beyond the spaces of smoke-blowing chatter over Foucault versus Deleuze and the echo chamber it entails. This is not a matter of merely tolerating faith because it is deeply rooted in the Arab community. Rather, it implies coming to terms with the constructive role faith can play in an increasingly alienating environment and, therefore, that it needs to be better framed and understood rather than overlooked by intellectual currents.

Put differently, the frequent sound of church bells should not be read as annoying (as I often hear Germans and visitors complain), but an encouraging sign that the church, along with worker's unions, form a bulwark against neoliberal dehumanization. This is done by keeping shops closed on Sundays for leisure and holding the consumer-frenzy Black Friday and Boxing day type sales of New York and London at bay.

On a similar wave length, no Ramadan ever passes without the cynics moaning how the holy month slows down Muslim efficiency in the workforce. Apart from this generalization, we need to ask, is slowness a bad thing in this overheated world? In a system obsessed with sucking every last ounce of productivity from the workforce and running them down into complacent cogs in the hyper-capitalist machine, then along comes Ramadan throwing in a wrench and declaring: no, it is better to reach the outer limits of your humanness by reorienting attention back to the family, community, charity, sacrifice, and empathy with the poor and hungry, as all this has more depth and meaning than a cold abstract GDP. By carefully rethinking such facets and others through, we can gradually rehumanize the political.

It must be remembered that whether one identifies as intellectual, activist, dissident, artist, filmmaker, and so on, one has chosen to operate more vividly within, what Czech thinker Václav Havel describes as, the "independent life of society."²⁷ This implies any expression that ranges from self-reflection about the world to setting up a civic organization with the aim of materializing the "truth" or living within the truth. Havel's line of thinking was nurtured under authoritarian rule in 1970s communist Czechoslovakia, however it has some resonance to Arab Berlin, and certainly much more resonance in the current state of the Arab world in which it is a struggle to live creatively and with thought.

²⁷ Václav Havel and Paul R. Wilson, *Open Letters: Selected Writings, 1965-1990* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). 177.



“Merge the stream of evolving Arab politics with German progressive politics.”

The Arab barber and Arab author in Berlin may have developed from the same background that brought them various shades of pain, except the latter is disproportionately more noticeable, given a special title, and a de facto voice to speak for others. The barber’s expression of truth is demoted as it is seen to fall below the boundaries of societal “respectability” and creative norms. The practice of faith might not only be his attainment of truth, but his coping mechanism. However, attaining truth can materialize in numerous other ways: If a Syrian barber is tending to a Palestinian customer, they might get into a conversation of a common struggle, evoking sympathy, empathy, and kinship. He might not let the patron pay if he sensed financial hardship. He could decide to put up a picture of Aleppo before the war as a reminder of what was lost but will someday be regained, even with its rubble. What looks like the everyday mundane is, in actuality, the desire to incrementally expand the spaces of dignity wherever one traverses.

The Arab author is simply one manifestation of the same political spectrum that produced that barber. The author just happens to be one of the most visible, most political, most clearly articulated expression of Arab grievances. Yet the author should not forget that he or she developed, consciously or not, from the same background and reservoir as the rest of society and the upheavals of the Arab Spring. This is where they draw their strength and legitimacy from; and this society has a very large reservoir of pain, unhappiness, confusion, and uncertainty. But when the intellectuals and activists not only recognize the futility of separation from that background, but also return to and engage with it, not as shewerma-buying customers but as citizens-in-exile in an ever-expanding conversation with moral obligations, the securing of a steadfast future is aided.

Arab Berlin would need to build a reciprocal relationship with Arab cities, beyond the institutional level. Currently, the two candidates most receptive to new ideas are Tunis and Beirut.

These would form the intellectual bridgehead cities to the Arab world. It should not be presumed, however, that Tunis and Beirut will be painless to engage with simply based on the appearance of liberty. The Lebanese capital is extremely volatile and is prone to be the wildcard of Arab cities. Tunisian gains of greater freedoms are betrayed by a brain-drain and inertia in Tunis as a result of endemic corruption and the inability to push deeper reforms. Nevertheless, there is a reservoir of latent possibilities in this novel relationship with these two cities that needs to be explored.

This arrangement is needed, or is perhaps a first step, until Cairo, the only Arab city that can move ideas by its sheer weight, is someday restored back onto the path of political maturity and intellectual openness. Perhaps this approach is also a modest attempt to address a deeper problem: One of the causes of the tragic downward spiral in the region was the historical shifting of the ideological Arab gravity centres to Riyadh, hauled away from Cairo, Damascus, and Baghdad. It is not that these three cities lost their cultural capital as much as their clout was reined in by the reckless vision of Gulf oil money. The ageless beauty and humility of Gulf Arab culture – one that was at the forefront of environmental care – was ripped apart as it descended upon an accelerated hyper-modernity devoid of politics, and the region keeps on paying the price in countless catastrophic ways because of the Gulf's ineptitude and irresponsible adventures.

This whole endeavor is under no illusion with regards to the obstacles faced. The cynics will assert the specter of the far-right and xenophobia will hamper the efforts of the Arab exile body. Perhaps, but rather than being spectators on the sidelines, the idea is to merge the stream of evolving Arab politics with German progressive politics, as well as to actively hold a mirror up to official German hypocrisy that preaches a human rights discourse yet sells deadly weapons to dictatorships (Egypt being the top [importer](#) of German armaments).²⁸ Moreover, the world's problems are interconnected more deeply than we could ever imagine and addressing this needs to be realized on a city, as opposed to national, level which is within human grasp.

The other evident challenge is the visa regime. To avoid being consumed by the consular labyrinth, a focus should not be placed on importing more intellectuals into Berlin, but rather, to make do with who is available, who is able to move there, and who is able to visit or pass through. More crucial even is to gradually raise a generation that thinks in new political ways. In this, the greatest challenge I believe will be the absence of a global momentum – that only shows up in rare cycles – to galvanize the community. Momentum versus little of it is the difference between a packed public lecture with audiences sprawled across the stairs and floor, sacrificing thirst and inconvenience, to feel part of something big, as opposed to a dozen regular attendees subjected to the speaker's voice echoing in the room. The painfully long intervals between momentums will need to be filled with thinking, reading, writing, and gatherings, geared towards slowly building up the community. Because when the momentum arrives unannounced, there will be no time to finish reading a book or stay seated to the end of a theatre play.

The manipulation of identity will be another obstacle thrown by the Arab skeptics, particularly in official capacities, as well as their supporters, who might insinuate that something coming out of a western city is not as authentic as an Arab or Muslim one – despite the political currency

²⁸ Sofian Philip Naceur, "Q&A with German MP Stefan Liebich: Revealing German Arms Exports to Egypt," *Mada Masr* (16 November 2017), <https://madamasr.com/en/2017/11/16/feature/politics/qa-with-german-mp-stefan-liebich-revealing-german-arms-exports-to-egypt/>.

emerging from an Arab body. Remember, we are dealing with Arab regimes that decry western human rights as not applicable to them all the while, for some “inexplicable” reason, granting exceptions for Western arms, neoliberalism, consumerism, torture methods, higher degrees and so forth.²⁹ The same regimes that sing tone-deaf nationalist rhetoric and loyalty to the homeland, and yet it is not unusual to see a growing number of the elite’s children studying, working, and living in places like London and Rome with no intention of returning home.

The identity neurosis underpins the same mentality that accepts being vomited upon by Gulf capital that turns the thriving Arab cultural realm into vast wastelands simply because, as one of the superficial subtexts hold, the finance is coming from a Muslim country, and therefore something must be going right. As if the insertion of an air-conditioned sleek mosque in a mega mall rights the wrongs of the eviction of local communities, destruction of age-old mosques, and state appropriation of their lands under the flimsiest of pretexts to build that mall. Progress does not come off the back of cement trucks. The shredding of a political value system in the Arab world is why Arab Berlin exists in the first place. In any case, the bridgehead cities partially address this identity concern by repelling the superficial charges that will potentially unfold in the future.

WHAT IS THE CONTEMPORARY ZEITGEIST? WHAT IS OUR RUH AL-ASR?

We live in an era that is mostly nameless, faceless, and spiritless – compounded by the very neoliberal forces that strip people stark naked before the monster of mutant capitalism. This monster knows no vision, no direction, no narrative, no meaning, no choreography, and no conclusion.³⁰ It only knows addition and acceleration that operates through consumer desires, emotional manipulation, and false promises that repeatedly drag humans away from the realm of authenticity.

This beast of anti-politics has, not surprisingly, been eagerly adopted by liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. Undoubtedly, much worse for the latter as the deliberate weakening of political pluralism, civil society, institutions, and freedom of speech, incapacitates the ability to hold back the deluge of socio-economic dehumanization. This is a crisis without the shrill dramatics of a crisis because it is quiet, smooth, seamless, and well internalized. But as with any crisis, only by naming it and giving it shape can we attempt to limit the formless threats that have yet to come. By determining something as a crisis, Jacques Derrida would argue, “one tames it,

²⁹ Given Egypt epitomizes this duality, I recommend reading Mohamed Naeem’s translated [essay](#): “Ever since its inception, the idea of Egyptian modernity was imagined as a choice between authenticity and modernity. In the popular consciousness, modernity had to be scrutinized by a lens of virtue and propriety. In short, we must take from the advanced West what suits us and abandon the rest — ‘we’ referring to the dominant classes, their interest and lifestyles. So things like ballet, malls and American consumption patterns are marks of advancement, but democracy and gender equality are alien concepts that undermine the identity and particularity of the nation.” See Mohamed Naeem, “Mother of the World, against the World and Outside of It,” *Mada Masr* (9 June 2016), <https://madamasr.com/en/2016/06/09/opinion/u/mother-of-the-world-against-the-world-and-outside-of-it/>.

³⁰ Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015). 30-31.

domesticates it, neutralizes it...One appropriates the Thing, the unthinkable becomes the unknown to be known, one begins to give it form, one begins to inform, master, calculate, program.”³¹



A city that feeds on its nerves?

Perhaps one way to approach this is to return to an obscure article written in 1870 by Syrian intellectual Salim al-Bustani in the *al-Jinan* journal. Titled “*Ruh al-Asr*” (Spirit of the Age), it was most likely formulated as a response to the well-known German equivalent, *Zeitgeist*. *Ruh al-Asr* was a literary and philosophical theme that was constituted by a “metaphysical force in terms of its moral imperatives of liberty, freedom, equality, and justice.”³²

Like many of his Arab contemporaries, al-Bustani was clearly seduced by the “liberality” and “human progress” blowing from West, yet he implored his readers to defend local traditions and values as encroaching abstract principles would not make a tenable replacement. Specifically, he disdained Arabs selecting European customs for no other reason but simply because they are European³³ (a phenomenon that still protrudes its long arm into the post-colonial era). He grew concerned at the West’s peripheral extremes of nihilist and anarchist violence, a precursor to the modern Islamist variant, that would violate the moderation and disruption of the momentum of *Ruh al-Asr*. As illustrated through the role of heroines in al-Bustani’s stories, the momentum of

³¹ Jacques Derrida and Elizabeth Rottenberg, *Negotiations: Interventions and Interviews, 1971-2001* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002). 71.

³² Matti Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction* (Washington DC: Three Continents Press, 1983). 170.

³³ *Ibid.* 167.

Ruh al-Asr largely centered on intelligence, common sense, and decency, with the aim of helping and lifting the individual through reading and learning, and refining society away from corruption.³⁴ Ruh al-Asr, hence, is a phrase we might need to revive and imbibe with new meaning.

This endeavour to breathe new life into Ruh al-Asr could have been better facilitated had Germany, or Berlin specifically, still had a strong altruistic *Zeitgeist* – a term which has regrettably been reduced, in a best-case scenario, to fashion trends and fads, and, worst-case, the purview of the far-right. I say this because a compelling *Zeitgeist* could ideally provide a backdrop and soundboard to its Arabic counterpart.

Zeitgeist, since the early nineteenth century's era of romanticism, has often guided some sort of enlightening or dark spirit in the German public sphere. With Berlin at the epicenter of the Cold War, Germans could identify themselves, or sympathize, with ideological markers – Marxist, anti-Soviet, pro-US – that may have clarified where they stood regarding political matters. A *Zeitgeist* came in various incarnations. For example, in the 1970s, the left-wing Red Army Faction (Baader Meinhof) terrorist group could, despite the violence they inflicted, draw sympathy from large sections of West German society, particularly the intellectual and student scene. But *Zeitgeist* could also propel the same strata of Germans into supporting peaceful measures like the anti-nuclear protests and environmentalism of the 1980s.

While viewing a 1970s documentary on Berlin long ago, the English commentator's closing words etched into my mind: "This is West Berlin. A city that feeds on its nerves, a town that has learned to live in isolation, to flourish under tension. In spite of Detente, still a frontier post, living in some sense from day to day. Truly a phenomenon of our times and a lesson for our generation." That Berlin no longer exists. The welcome removal of the existential threat (however euphoric) has diluted collective forms of political spirits. A one-off massive demonstration against neo-Nazis is not a sustained political spirit as much as it is a political culture reactive against Nazi encroachment. The latter, however, should not be trivialized, as such a massive protest and discourse still puts Berlin ahead of the western pack who still struggle to build up a meaningful response to the wave of xenophobia and an angry far-right.

In a reunited Germany and in a new unipolar world where the ascendancy of the US cemented free market economics upon the debris of communism, a desperate RAF – the German century's last controversial, political-turned-criminal child, disfigured by the *Zeitgeist* – issued a "discussion paper" in 1992 titled "We Must Search for Something New."³⁵ But it was too late, utopia had sailed away; not only for the RAF, but it seems for other German political currents, too, in tune with the rest of post-cold war Europe, if not the world. In turn, what would be considered "big" and "new" became the monopoly of technology and markets.

Big ideas have generally receded since the reunification of Germany, a matter that can be glimpsed in the current clinical management style of Merkel. This shows how far the country has come since, for example, the dynamic leadership of Willy Brandt (West German chancellor, 1969-1974).

³⁴ Ibid. 177-178.

³⁵ Jeremy Peter Varon, *Bringing the War Home: The Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction, and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). 306.

In fairness, leaders generally respond to the international environment of their times and frame their actions accordingly. But they do set the tone for public thinking.

Ask a German with non-immigrant roots in Berlin as to what inspires or moves Germans today, and you will be surprised not at the answer, but how long it takes to get an answer. As if the question is something that has not crossed their minds before. Understandably, the hesitancy seems to be governed by historical wariness of Germans being inspired in murky directions. But it is also because many will sincerely confess that individual self-interest has assumed the helm. When a worthy response does come out, it is usually akin to battling climate change or helping refugees. Consequently, the inability to mould a coherent and compellingly humane narrative has partly thrown Zeitgeist to the mercy of a resurgent far-right.

At times you do see flickers of a beautiful human spirit. In the summer of 2015, there was an upsurge against the increasing dehumanization of refugees and many Germans came on board to support the mass refugee intake; also revealing a transitory leadership quality in Merkel who proclaimed “*Wir schaffen das*” (we’ll get it done). Yet, this revived altruistic Zeitgeist barely lasted six months, it was ripped apart in the early hours of the new year 2016 in Cologne by drunk refugees who reportedly attacked German women. This, however, raises the hindsight point: there is something very problematic about a Zeitgeist and ideals that welcomes the refugee only to easily dismantle the whole endeavor upon being tested by one, albeit serious, incident.

Even if Arabs were to somehow reanimate Ruh al-Asr, they will still feel intellectually orphaned in a Europe that has lost its political imagination. Nevertheless, rather than being spectators, the Arab exile body needs to envision itself collectively engaged with the forces that are holding back the far-right tide. Together, they aid in reviving, however modestly, the better nature of the German imagination, contribute to battling the global depletion of political thought, and push out parallel democratic narratives against the germination of Arab authoritarian ones.

But before all this, it needs to be ultimately asked: What is our Ruh al-Asr? There is no easy response. In the revolutionary honeymoon days of 2011 and 2012, this could have effortlessly been answered heterogeneously, but today, it is wanting. It certainly is not to accept the continued drive towards entrenched repression in the Arab world. To engage with the question, it would need to go deeper, way beyond discussions of solutions to the Palestinian problem or Egyptian authoritarianism.

It needs thinking at the existential level of our moral quagmire. Not only are our publics duped into cheering massacres or muted over the killing of a journalist in a consulate. The normalization of their lives toward biological and work processes also robs them of any higher attainment of the common good. We thus need to go back to basics and redefine every single word that permeate the lives among us: citizen, city, state, Arab, Muslim, Christian, Jew, Sunni, Shiite, exile, justice, happiness, education, Inshallah, and so on. To also ask, why do they matter? Questions need to be raised on the region’s Christian, Nubian, Berber, Amazigh, and other non-Arab and non-Muslim minorities, and how they can be raised to a dignified equality.³⁶ It will require the ability to shed light on the refugee not simply or only as an object of sympathy, reform, or potential terror, but to

³⁶ It is not lost on me that an Arab exile body is already inherent with tensions that dislodges voices who do not easily subscribe to the Arab label.

elevate him or her as an intellectual producer. To understand what constitutes the better parts of our *Ruh al-Asr* is to delineate a new way of framing the world. To fight the freak reality of *maskh* (shapelessness) and be salvaged from the terror of the same.

Rather than a prescription for an Arab utopian future, it is better to consider present realities to build a new manual of thought, drawn from the lived veracities of the Arab world along with the experience of displacement, migration, movement, exile, alienation and settlement in Berlin into the narrative. But it adds one key question – where to next? It is to compose a new story in a relatively secure space by building up partially, for example, on Arendt’s methodological assumption: “That thought itself arises out of incidents of living experience and must remain bound to them as the only guideposts by which to take its bearings.”³⁷ In other words, whatever framework of thought develops should be an ongoing endeavour made responsive to our assessment and reconstruction as we confront shifting circumstances while voyaging across the treacherous terrain of memory, history, political imaginaries, narratives, and counter-narratives.



“The grey blur that nauseatingly blankets the future can actually be broken up.”

Facing similar transcendental questions of his time, al-Bustani struggled to make sense of the Arab future in the shadow of colonialism. From his 1875 short story, *Bint al-Asr*, “Daughter of the Age”, he invokes the spectre of uncertainty following the influx of European influences: “These things are taking place at a time whose meaning, like the uncertain light of dawn, is yet unclear. Therefore, the minds of many people, too, are not clear. Even strangers (Europeans) are in the

³⁷ Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought*. 14.

dark, like the natives. This state of affairs shows that the country is suffering under the burden of a cultural situation whose values are in an uncertain state of transition.”³⁸

Al-Bustani faced a different moment of truth in which he wondered and wandered, as to what will eventually come out of this confusion for his fellow Arabs. Nowadays, we face that confusion again, just as we have faced it numerous times since al-Bustani’s day. For God knows what tomorrow brings, but the journey will draw from and humanize the symbolic capital that was born in 2011, as well as to reinvigorate it in novel ways that opens up new pathways. The galvanizing moments of 2011 was when desire and the imagination were given free reign until they were torpedoed by blood, remorse, despair, and exhaustion. More than ever, what is needed is to judiciously rekindle desire and imagination but, this time, to reign it in with knowledge and discipline.

We need to produce new personalities and thinkers who will further aid in tapping into the curiosity, relentlessness, inventiveness, and ingenuity of a heartbroken community; to adopt emerging texts as guides, imbibe philosophical thinking into the heart of upcoming ventures, and to produce books worthy of inheritance to the generations yet to arrive; and we need to encourage not only the learning of the German language and refining our approach to the Arabic language, but to be constantly conscious that political thinking is inescapably structured by the words we use and evade, and therefore a revitalized vocabulary is needed to question and discuss the taxonomies of power. But above all, we need to come to terms with our mortality that humbles us into the awareness that our milestones are heirlooms of past struggles, and the fruits of our efforts might only sprout beyond our lifetime. One is not expected to do everything, but nor should one relinquish their responsibility to do something worthwhile for others.

By breaking through Kracauer’s words of anonymity and aimlessness at the opening of this essay, we need to find ourselves, and each other, on the streets, from human to human crowd to an animated body-politic, becoming that new people on the Berlin scene with names, aims, and voices, that intersect with what is just and good. The surge of different rhythms harmoniously complementing the other will reveal larger than life meanings, sounding off a special melody that will be worth listening to.

³⁸ Moosa, *The Origins of Modern Arabic Fiction*. 166.

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