

In recent years historians of the Middle East have been making a conscious effort to distance themselves from traditional modernizationist approaches to the area's history. Whereas in the past the revolution was seen as a purely political event, this new research narrates it as a social and cultural transformation of Iranian society that had gender, multiclass and multicultural dimensions. In his *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, he defined many of them

5 INTRODUCTION

Modernization theories belong to the world of behaviourism: Of the many springs from which behaviouralism flowed, three stand out in this context; the belief that the concepts in terms of which what is studied empirically should be organized must be derived from explicit theories about political behavior; the view that political behaviour is intimately related to social and economic behaviour; and the particular influence of Max Weber (the structuralist–functionalist approach). From literary criticism and postcolonial hermeneutics came the call to dismiss the more ideological assumptions of modernization theories as anachronistic and abusive, reflecting as they did, not reality, but only an interpretation of reality that some of the critics suspected was motivated by a neo–colonial wish to perpetuate the existing balance of power, knowledge and wealth. Most of these processes can be quantified by pointing to numbers of factories and hospitals, demographic growth in cities, declining numbers of religious institutions or of religious curricula in schools, new and more centralized administrative units, new representative bodies and new foreign organizations and agents (such as consulates and embassies) and so on. This created the overwhelming impression that modernization could be articulated and examined in a scientific way. Whereas Western scholars had pointed to the French Revolution and European political powers as the principal factors in the modernization of the Ottoman Empire, their Turkish counterparts now singled out Islamic tradition, Ottoman customs and local imperial experience as the decisive forces behind the Tanzimat, the great Ottoman reforms of the nineteenth century. In the 1970s scholars defined modernization as a fragmented and modular process that did not carry with it a particular logic, but, rather, could end up producing a technological, nationalistic and non–democratic society such as the People's Republic of China, an utterly perplexing case study such as Japan, and a blurred, ambiguous picture as in the Arab world. The process was seen as almost inevitable, but could be encouraged by Westernized educational systems, secularized political institutions and reformist policies aimed at capitalizing agrarian societies, settling nomads and centralizing loose communities. Political economists followed with an acute assessment of how the integration within European or Western economies actually marginalized the economy of the newly acquired markets and accorded it a subordinate role in the continent's economy. Historians were asked to make observations on different junctures in the process of change in society in general and to point up the differentiating paces of transformation: moving from the rapid but insignificant political pace on the surface to the very slow, almost non–existent but decisive, morphological, ecological and geo–cultural pace at layers further down. For the urban Muslim elite, how we define the beginning of modernism depends very much on how ready or willing its members were to extricate themselves from the *pax ottomana* in the Mashriq, and on their willingness to be co–opted by European colonialism in the Maghrib. True, in the case of the modernization theories, to a certain extent the methodological approach was claimed to be a result of the availability of sources and of a high regard for the written (political) document; but, even here, at the end of the day the choice was

ideological The principal quest of historians well into the 1960s was for the hour of birth of the 'modern Middle East'. It was, among others, the distinguished sociologist Talcott Parsons who helped to construct a modified, i.e., structural–functional, theory of modernization, meant to elucidate how the change from tradition to modernity should be read for non–Western societies. The first signs of a fundamental critique appeared in the 1970s when the inherent Eurocentricity of modernization theories, as well as their teleological and essentialist approach, prompted a reappraisal of 'modernization' as both a descriptive and an analytical tool. Similarly, in the rural areas, modern times signalled the disappearance of egalitarian modes of production and co–operative arable farming, to make room for cash crops and peasant tenancy. But other factors, too, were granted the power to give birth to something 'new': capitalism, militarism, industrialization, urbanization, demographic growth, etc., were all highlighted by mainstream historians of the Middle East as forces that facilitated the modernization – i.e., the progress and development – of the Middle East. Admittedly, the modernizationist approach presented a sophisticated perspective on historical change and transformation which allowed historians wary or even dismissive of theoretical tools a chance to produce competent microhistories. The as yet incomplete process of modernization in the Middle East began with the importing from Europe of novel military technologies by such reformist rulers as Muhammad Ali in Egypt and Salim III in the Ottoman Empire. Technology was followed by educational and agrarian reforms, designed by European advisers and to be underpinned by new legislation and administrative policies, thus putting in place the infrastructure for a modern Westernized state. Even local resistance to this European intervention (the rebellious child) fitted into the modernizationist paradigm: such resistance was always nationalist and nationalism was an integral part of Westernization. Non–Western societies were viewed as self–contained coherent units, with a cultural and ideological cohesiveness of their own, further divided up into functional units all meant to preserve the society within the world at large. It began with an Egyptian scholar, Samir Amin, who reviewed critically the economic integration of the Middle Eastern periphery to the world capitalist centre. Similarly, piety and dogmatism in religion were associated with a new developmental phase while the 'old' and 'traditional' practices of Islam before contact with the West were portrayed as so free in spirit that they bordered on the promiscuous. This revised position is summarized elegantly by Sami Zubaida: The alternative which I propose and demonstrate is quite different: I argue that the specific situations of various Middle Eastern societies and politics can be analysed in terms of general socio–economic processes. For city dwellers, modern times began with a fundamental deterioration caused by the destruction of traditional welfare systems and the absence of any replacements, coupled with the increase of immigrants coming from the hinterland unable to find suitable accommodation and jobs. Modernization can be traced through various phenomena: industrialization, urbanization, hygienization, secularization, centralization and politicization of societies. With the coming of nationalism to the region, two of the three stages modernity requires were completed–technology and economic transformation being the first, institutional and ideological imports being the second. Hourani and Sharabi diverged from mainstream modernizationist theories by attributing the dynamics of change in the Arab world not just to external but also to local elite forces. Viewed through the eyes of anthropological historians, change was a far from linear process and

definitely not a harmonious one—Westernization sometimes strengthened traditional modes of behaviour and at others ruptured them. But I concede also that the historian, in every moment of his or her work, is a value-formed being, who cannot, when proposing problems or interrogating evidence, in fact operate in this value-free way.⁹ It was this kind of deconstruction that Edward Said skilfully employed in his all-out critique of the West's Orientalist project. It enabled him to expose the colonial agenda behind many Orientalist studies by Western experts decoding the East for the West, revealing how their work was an accumulation and analysis of information for the sake of control and domination. Seen from the perspective of the two main influences on historiography in recent years, cultural anthropology and literary criticism, the history of the Middle East could be written as much as a history of non-elite as of elite groups, a history of change but also of continuity, and of external but also internal dynamics of development. From agricultural producers they became, throughout the Middle East, either low-paid tenants, or unemployed, or underemployed immigrants in the shanty towns circling the major cities of the area. Whether the West was then accepted or rejected was of little theoretical relevance, as both reactions fitted within the concept of modernity: colonialism and nationalism are part and parcel of the modernization of a non-Western society. Spread throughout the world by the twin forces of Western colonialism and imperialism, it soon became global: the West had the magic wand (with Westernization came enlightenment and progress) whose touch enabled non-Western societies to leave the past behind them. Christians and Jews are regarded as more developed than Muslims, the town is described as more developed than the countryside, and within each category women as 'developing' rather than 'developed'—women's transition to the status of 'developed' being the ultimate proof of the process being completed. Relatively pluralist and democratic societies continued to be shaken by political and social upheavals, their economies fluctuating between growth and recession. The concept, and hence, the problem, of development is historically a very recent one, and it is worth remembering that it is not at all native to underdeveloped areas but is strictly a Western notion, one that looks out from the 'us' of modernity or industrialization or what have you, to the have-nots of that same what have you. A history of country A setting itself the goal of catching up with country or countries B is as old as the hills, and reached its most specific policy application in Japan in the second half of the nineteenth century: These doubts on the process of modernization were voiced in 1969; a few years later a more specific deconstruction produced an intensive search for a different understanding of the relationship between western and non-western societies. Instead, in the 'developing world' all the features of change appeared in a kaleidoscopic way, not in that structural chronological and causal manner historians had detected in European and North American development. This view owed much to the recognition of the disciplinary background of the historians as being important for the way they assessed modernization, with different historians determining progress and consequences according to their own fields of expertise. The road from there to criticizing the previous scholarship was short and it was around MERIP and ROMES that such criticism was voiced by Talal Asad, Roger Owen and others. It means that history for them can have a much more limited geographical scope than that of the group to which they are associated by such ideologies as nationalism or theories such as modernization and existence and spheres of identity, which are much wider than the ones into which they are cast by these very ideologies and theories. For

local elites, especially the rural ones, modern times begin with the advent of Ottoman centralization and the decline this brought to the power of the rural chieftains as tax collectors and semi-feudals. For non-Muslim elites in the Mashriq, it was the capitalization of urban life that marked a change, while the European occupation of the Maghrib was a formative moment for these elites. Only in the second decade of the twentieth century did workers begin to organize themselves in trade unions, introducing a new and different course of struggle based on class consciousness, which then again was totally destroyed once decolonization had ended and nationalism triumphed. For children, inclusion in the expanding educational system and exposure to a wider array of subjects depended, as in the past, on their parents' economic capabilities. Rather than attributing these dramatic eruptions in the twentieth century to 'politics' alone, the new non-elite and interdisciplinary research charts more carefully the motives, hopes and conduct of all the factors involved in such revolutionary moments. Significantly, this Eurocentric approach remained intact long after the decolonization of the Middle East because national, anti-colonial, historiographies found it useful to adhere to this narrative. Thus, for many, the departure point for 'modern ..'history' was decided by INTRODUCTION colonial intervention and subsequent national' awakening