

Mohammed Arkoun: An Intellectual in Revolt

Ursula Günther

Mohammed Arkoun was born on February 1, 1928, in Taurirt Mimun in Great Kabylia, Algeria. He passed away on September 14, 2010, in Paris, and was laid to rest three days later in Casablanca, Morocco. He studied Islamic literature at the University of Algiers (1950-1954). After leaving Algeria on the eve of the War of Independence, he continued to study Arabic and literature at the Sorbonne, where he graduated with an *agrégation* in 1956. It took another 12 years and getting through a number of conflicts before he established himself academically with his dissertation on Ibn Miskawayh in 1968. In 1971, he was brought to the University of Vincennes (Paris VIII) as a professor for the Islamic history of ideas, and he eventually went back to the Sorbonne as a professor. In



1980, he switched to the Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris III), becoming director of the department of Arabic and Islamic history of ideas, and editor of *Arabica*. The chairs he held indicate his major field of interest: a critical reading of Islamic thought and the consequences this has for new approaches to Islam, and simultaneously to the Qur'an. His approach challenged and still challenges orthodoxy for going beyond the borders established and defended by such—needless to emphasize that this includes orthodoxy produced by and within Islamic studies, as well. Since 1993 until his death, he was professor emeritus and visiting professor at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. Numerous decorations and awards honored his life's work.

The title for these reflections on Mohammed Arkoun appraising him as an intellectual refers to his own expression during one of our conversations. His conception of himself as an "intellectual in revolt" offers but a first approach to one of the key figures of contemporary Islamic thought. In addition to Arkoun's personal perception, or rather introspection, further aspects complement the presentation of this *chercheur-penseur*, or in the English rendering "reflective researcher"—another way he used to express his activities as both a scholar and an intellectual. Particular emphasis needs to be placed on the general intellectual and academic context for Arkoun's becoming an intellectual in revolt or reflective researcher, since subjective personal experience provided

the impulse that continued to guide his thought and criticism. He repeatedly stated that it was existential experience and not academic training that turned him into an intellectual (e.g. Arkoun, *L'Islam* 1). In addition to personal impressions and insights based on intensive exchanges over more than 20 years, the above-mentioned aspects will be analyzed against the background of some general ideas concerning intellectuals and their social roles.

Intellectual in Revolt and Reflective Researcher

Arkoun defined an intellectual as a person capable of questioning and criticizing the ideology within which he or she was educated and trained. Needless to say, such criticism only flourishes in a climate of free expression (Arkoun, *Pour une critique* 238). Apart from what political or societal context the intellectual is located in, his or her belonging to a scientific and/or intellectual community—including its stimulating and supportive power—is indispensable for the unfolding of a critical mind. There is no doubt about Arkoun's position within the international scientific and/or intellectual community, both in the West and East—bearing in mind the usual controversies—yet particular attention should be paid to one aspect

of the perception of intellectuals: the apparently explanatory designation Muslim for intellectuals and scholars due to their origin. Although it would be beyond the scope of this essay to elaborate in great detail on these controversies, some elements shall be pointed out in the form of questions in order to illustrate the dilemma about intellectuals that Arkoun often complained about: What is the rationale behind the designation “Muslim” for intellectuals who strive to retain the same free, independent, and critical position on themselves and their culture as their Christian or atheist colleagues? Why are Western experts referred to as Orientalists, Islam scholars, or Arabists, while their counterparts from the Middle East are classed respectively as modern, liberal, moderate, or Islamist Muslims? Despite prevalent criticism of Eurocentric positions, does hegemonic Western civilization continue to construct a hierarchical system of gradations within which not all intellectuals are held equally capable of critical distance and independent thought? However, this is just one side of the coin, as the other consists of Arkoun having been accused of Westernization and betrayal of his own cultural heritage by orthodox Muslims. The latter position has also been taken by some Western academics, who claim that Arkoun's

work with European philosophy resulted in a Western influence that makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to relate to the Muslim world. Being straightjacketed into religious affiliation and classed respectively either as modern, liberal, or moderate Muslim met with his vehement objection. This dilemma of an intellectual like Arkoun may be illustrated by some reactions to his positions or his person, such as: “How reassuring to hear/read a liberal Muslim,” or “Your discourse stands in contrast to Islam,” or “Your ideas are well known in the West, even trivial, but you probably need them more as Muslims do not have modernity” (Arkoun, *Penser l'Islam aujourd'hui* 2-3).

Arkoun's self-concept as an intellectual in revolt seems persuasive, even more if one takes into consideration the context of his childhood, youth, and his student days in Algeria under French colonial rule with its particularly derogatory perception and treatment of the so-called indigenous population.¹ Let alone the rather complicated and complex love/hate relationship between France and Algeria, which left an indelible mark on the young scholar leaving for France on the eve of the independence war. “Intellectual in revolt” alludes on the one hand to Albert Camus' philosophical essay, “The Rebel. An Essay on Man in Revolt,” as well as to Arkoun's

utmost concern on how to rethink Islam in the contemporary world, and simultaneously provides a counterpoint to predominant interpretations of both the Muslim world and the non-Muslim West. Camus' answer to the question "What is a rebel?" was a philosophical one: "A man who says no, but whose refusal does not imply a renunciation. He is also a man who says yes, from the moment he makes his first gesture of rebellion" (Camus 19). Arkoun's intellectual revolt was also a philosophical one because he always stressed the importance of criticism in the sense of a philosophical category. His revolt consists of not accepting intellectual or epistemological boundaries and processes of marginalization produced by these dogmatic closures. The *chercheur-penseur* or reflective researcher, a term he first used in 1997 for himself and fellow researchers (Arkoun, *L'Islam XIX*), clearly indicates an inherent characteristic of crossing intellectual and academic boundaries. By combining critical theology with the watchful stance of the secular philosopher, a reflective researcher provides an important contribution to the deconstruction of mechanisms through which meaning and sense are constructed, yet he or she goes beyond this by deconstructing the mechanisms of managing meaning, which the guardians of orthodoxy elevate

as sacred and transcendent in order to protect them from subversive scholarship. Arkoun used the term *remembrement* (in the sense of a reintegration of that which has been excluded) to describe the philosophical and academic achievement of reflective researchers (Arkoun, "Du dialogue inter-religieux").

Intellectuals and Their Social Roles

The humanist Arkoun was not at all a prisoner of the ivory tower as a number of other scholars are, on the contrary his public presence—also internationally—was quite impressive. His influence on public and academic discourses—not only regarding France, his country of residence—was based on numerous forms of engagement: he was a passionate speaker, political consultant (e.g. he was member of the Stasi commission concerned with the *laïcité* principle and the question of the veil), member of the board of governors of the Institute of Ismaili Studies, and a visiting professor at numerous universities and institutes. His work earned him numerous awards and honors. His writings and interviews revealed a fine nose for academic, political, and social tendencies. His sharp-witted intellect, his crossing borders—to wit, not only intellectually but also with regard to cultures, languages, traditions, and other systems

of reference—are partly components of his Mediterranean Maghreb heritage, and partly components of personal processes, and equipped him to adopt early on a point of view lacking certainty, even if this entailed the end of clearly defined and unified truths. Today, his post-modern perspective has gained wide acceptance—although his rather unconventional approach was not always welcome then. Arkoun had to cope with the paradox of being perceived as awkward *and* avant-garde. However, numerous intellectuals seem to share the same lot.

Concluding Remarks

Mohammed Arkoun was a challenging intellectual and scholar who insisted his entire intellectual life on rethinking Islam as a cultural and religious system. Since he never accepted the concept of an ultimate truth, he pleaded for a radical change of perspective in order to prepare the ground for an exhaustive and inclusive vision of Islam, which no longer excludes what has been banished to the realm of the unthought and unthinkable—categories he introduced into Islamic studies. In other words, he was committed to (re-)establishing a plurality of meaning in Islam.² He considered himself part of all that is capable of conquering new intellectual fields.

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These reflections on Mohammed Arkoun—an intellectual in revolt—shall end with the last section of my obituary for him: “May his idea that thoughts develop a life of their own prove right, continuing to take effect beyond the walls of cognitive demarcations and dominant ideologies.”

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Notes

¹ For further biographical details see Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein moderner Kritiker* 23 ff.

² For an in-depth analysis of this and further concepts, see Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Ein moderner Kritiker* and Günther, *Mohammed Arkoun: Towards a radical rethinking*.

³ This is—according to the preface—more than “the forth revised and modified edition of the third edition (1998) of *Ouvertures sur l'Islam*,” which had the new title *L'Islam: Approche critique*.

⁴ Second edition of *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.

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