



EAST-WEST, ROOTLESS IN RUINS: A CONVERSATION WITH YVES LEPESQUEUR

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Yves Lepesqueur has worked in Syria, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Iran. A columnist for L'Atelier du roman, he is the author of a monograph, Les anciennes fêtes de printemps à Homs [The Ancient Spring Festival at Homs]. He has just published, Pourquoi les Libanaises sont séduisantes [[Why Lebanese Women are Attractive: Twentieth Century Near Eastern History Very Briefly Explained to My Children](#)], a book in which he examines the history of the Middle East in the 20th century as well as his concerns about uprooting that is taking place in Europe. He is in conversation with Shathil Nawaf Taqa.

Shathil Nawaf Taqa (SNT): The Lebanese woman symbolizes in your eyes the essence of oriental civilization—a paradoxical mixture of sensuality and asceticism. This description is reminiscent of [Kuchuk Hanem](#), the inspiring alma mater of Flaubert, a novelist whom you also quote in your text. Wasn't the oriental woman, sensual and mysterious, an orientalist myth?

Yves Lepesqueur (YL): It is fashionable to put Orientalists on trial by reproaching them for going to the East with Western concerns. However, when we go towards something, it is always with our own concerns, our own needs and questionings. It is absurd to imagine the opposite. It is the same for Orientals who come to the West with their own preoccupations. Thus, when one speaks with certain "progressive" Arabs, one often has the impression that for them the history of Europe begins in the eighteenth century. They see European culture only in terms of the dissatisfaction that their own culture inspires. They do not do any better than the Orientalists, who, of course, went to the East carrying the doubts, admitted or not, that European civilization was beginning to inspire in them. How could it be otherwise? A look always comes from the one who looks—there is no objective look.



Yves Lepesqueur, Isfahan (D.R.).

The question of objectivity is therefore irrelevant. The question that arises is that of loyalty. Do we invent? Do we refuse to see? Or does what we claim to see really exist, even if we perceive it according to our own subjectivity? If one doubts that oriental sensuality really exists, let's go and see! By the way, it is curious that Arabs, progressive or Islamist, are today reluctant to recognize all that their civilization owes to the poetic or aesthetic elaborations of desire and sensuality. They are too eager to resemble serious American or Scandinavian puritans. This reluctance is an aspect of self-shame—which shows that my starting point is not so anecdotal.

The insight that put me on the track of this book was this—that the common representation of the so-called Westernization of the Middle East is radically false. It is not always the Western-looking people, especially the women, who are "Westernized"—the Islamists are much more so.

The "Lebanese women" [in my title](#) is a generic term that designates a certain way of being a woman, which can be found in the Maghreb, Syria, Egypt, etc., but which is particularly present in Lebanon. We

are told: "These young oriental women, who are not afraid to seduce, are westernized." I don't believe this at all.



Evgeny Grouzdev, *Portrait of a Lebanese Girl in White* (2015).

What struck me was that the Lebanese women I worked with every day were extremely archaic, in the sense that they had no idea of succeeding in social life by becoming an engineer, for example. In fact, they were more interested in being beautiful, having fun, finding a rich enough husband, having beautiful children and a beautiful house. This vision is neither modern nor feminist; it refers to a very traditional conception of the role of women (which does not shock me at all). There was no reason to suppose a contradiction between their rather free dress and these conceptions that their grandmothers already shared—their taste to seduce did not come from a "Western modernization" but from a perennality of the Eastern culture.

SNT: Is it not the dream of a Lamartine or a Hugo who come to seek in the East this ancient thing which had disappeared in the West?

YL: If they came to look for it there rather than in puritanical America, it is undoubtedly because it is there that they had some chance of finding it! What they may have discovered in the East is the richness of a perception of the world where one is sensitive to all the joys of this existence, which is expressed by a taste for beauty, perfumes, refined foods, beautiful and shimmering clothes—all that seduces the senses and delights the heart (even in the Koran, the sacrificial victim, to be accepted by God, must be "of a luminous yellow color that makes those who see it joyful." One reads this without stopping; in truth, one only thinks one is reading).

But the more one loves this world, the more one is sensitive to its fragility—it will cease; all this is only a surface; it is necessary to turn towards what does not perish; towards the immaterial. These two aspects, sensuality and asceticism, weave together an infinitely moving vision of the world, because the beauty of the world is there; but at the same time, it can never be grasped; it flees towards a beyond. To love the world and not be satisfied with it—is this not the very principle of the human condition? This is why I wrote: "As long as we intend to remain human, the East remains our homeland."

SNT: You have made the genealogy of the two postcolonial ideological corpses of the Eastern world: nationalism and Islamism, which, according to you, are similar in that they seek to remedy the same problem—self-shame. The latter construct themselves in opposition to their recent past and put in place an identity-software that refuses the complexity of the Eastern identity. How can one access this complexity when one is inferiorized or under siege?

YL: To live complexity is not easy. That is why the anemic contemporary man cannot live it anymore!

By writing that the Orientals have renounced it, I am not giving myself the mission of telling them what to do or what not to do! I am simply trying to describe what has been. There was indeed a real shame of self, a rejection of the past, of heritage and tradition. There was a desire to be as strong as the West and a way of defining oneself in relation to the West; under its gaze in a way, in relation to this envied adversary. When I lived in Iran, I often thought that between the most conservative supporters of the Khomeinist regime and Iranians with a foot in California there was a common thread. They both asked themselves the same question when they woke up in the morning: "What about the West? Are we worth it? What are we worth against it? "

In such a mental climate, one no longer exists in relation to oneself, but in relation to another who is stronger and whose strength humiliates. This leads to a rejection of one's own culture, which is almost always disguised as an ostentatious exaltation of that culture, which one actually denies. This is the principle of nationalism—one refuses the culture as it is around us and transmitted by our parents. One refers to a kind of unchanging ante-historic—the Arabs of the Umayyad period, for the Islamists, the Muslims of the Prophet's time. Since we don't know what the Arabs of the time of the Prophet or the Umayyads were like, we project onto them everything that we ourselves are—so, "I am like them, a true Arab, a true Muslim."

The real heritage is what is transmitted from generation to generation; not what comes to us without intermediary from a generation of 1500 years ago. The heritage is everything that has been transmitted and transformed by all the generations that link and separate this distant past and our present. It is a living continuity, which, being living, is constantly transformed, but without rupture. We have access to it only through the last, and the last but one, generation that preceded us; those of our parents and grandparents.

The disguised modernisms—nationalism or Islamism (which is only a variety of nationalism), deny the fathers and forefathers we really knew, who seem too decadent, too underdeveloped, etc., and pretend to reconnect directly with an invented past, imagined according to the desires of the present; the first of which is the desire to be strong, to be a winner in this world.

In the meantime, we are ashamed of the country that our forefathers bequeathed to us, which translates in a very material way into the destruction of ancient cities, as Marwa Al-Sabouni showed in her very good book ([*The Battle for Home*](#))—Orientals have become incapable of loving their cities with their inextricable alleys; so much so that in the past, foreigners who photographed them were

suspected of doing so to make fun of them. The Orientals were no longer able to see the beauty of their living environment; they were ashamed of it. It was so unmodern! Nationalists, "secular" and Islamists, are equal in the vandalism and destruction of any beauty inherited from the past. It is a good starting point to understand that they are only the two heads of the same monster.

SNT: The history of modern Arab literature, as illustrated by the free verse poetry movement, shows a willingness to rediscover the literary heritage without devaluing the past; on the contrary. Wasn't the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser rich in culture?

YL: I'm quite nuanced about the [Nahda](#). Indeed, the Nahda (I use the word in a broad sense that allows me to include all the cultural movements up to the middle of the 20th century), even if it was already inspired by the desire to resemble Europe (to finally have trains, scientists, engineers, a literature of the self, to finally be "enlightened"), could also have had its fruitfulness. Indeed, it nourished a curiosity; it widened the intellectual horizons and thus gave rise to questionings which, in a certain way, brought back life and complexity—thus of "orientality."

I will be more severe on the era of [Nasser](#), the one in which the "nationalists in shoes" replaced and swept away the literate nationalists. The ideology of Nasserism and its equivalents in neighboring countries is perfectly summed up by that moment in Youssef Chahine's film, [The Sparrow](#), when we see a crowd chanting, "One heart, one soul!" Unanimity is hardly conducive to the life of the spirit! And nothing is more contrary to the civilization of the Near East which, in its Jewish, Christian and Muslim variants, has always shown a true genius for quarrelling, for disagreement, to which it owes much of its wealth.

No doubt there were still great writers, musicians, film-makers, etc. in Nasser's time. But they were not born with that era; they had grown up in the previous period, when unanimity was not the norm. Culture is like agriculture—it is with a certain delay that we see what we have sown coming out of the ground. Look at France. It is now that we understand the effect of all the school reforms that have favored illiteracy—not at the time, fifty years ago, when this cycle of reform was initiated. To see the cultural effect of [Nasserism](#), one must look not at the Egypt of the fifties and sixties but at the Egypt of the eighties; the desert, or very close to it.

That there were, as you recall, some great names of Arab culture in the twentieth century, is not enough to prevent that century from being a century of cultural collapse in the Arab world. To a certain

extent, the same is true in Europe; whether this century had a [Péguy](#) or a Simone Weil does not prevent it from being the century of the collapse of European civilization. It is even for having seen and understood it first that certain authors are so precious to us.

In the East, it was worse; at least in some respects, because if popular culture and anthropological bases held up better than in Europe, on the other hand, intellectual production was not up to par. There is no Arab Simone Weil, no Péguy, no Bernanos, no Gunther Anders, no Michel Henry, and you can add the names you want.

Modernism, the fascination of the success of the other, has diverted Arab intellectuals from their own heritage. Or they have exalted it but without really feeding on it; simply wanting to make it an identity card that would allow them to enter the modern world with pride, like those scholars exalting the Arab science of the Middle Ages in which they see only an early approximation of what would later be modern Western science, whereas the speculative bases of this science were entirely different (which makes it not an outdated approximation but retains all its value, at least philosophically). Arab intellectuals have not been able to make use of the heritage to understand the present moment. Despite the many exceptions, the ignorance of Arabs, including educated ones, of the past cultural wealth of the Arab-Islamic world is astonishing. And those who claim to be the most religious are often the most ignorant.

You told me that Nasser had awakened the pride of peoples humiliated by Western domination. This is very true. I highlight in my book how much the interventions of the West had pushed the Middle East to despise itself, to deny itself. And no doubt Nasserism reawakened pride—Nasserism was an "Arab Pride," as Islamism is a "Muslim Pride."

But pride is not a response—it is a counterpart to humiliation, not a liberation from it. There is no ostentatious pride that is not nourished by resentment; that is to say, by a form of shame. This is why, as we see with feminist or homosexualist "prides," the more one says one is proud, the more one says one is a victim, which is quite curious. And this attitude is not limited to these very visible manifestations. It is because we feel that France is disintegrating, forgetting itself, letting itself be forgotten by the world, that our nationalists say they are "proud to be French." Our ancestors of the time of Saint Louis were not "proud to be French;" they were—and they hardly thought about it; but they were really. What matters is to be—not to proclaim a pride. The need to proclaim pride is in itself a very bad sign. When one seeks pride, one has a wound to heal; to seek pride is to continue to be obsessed by humiliation.

SNT: The Arab countries of the Gulf, on the periphery, experienced colonization from afar. They have been sheltered from post-colonial ideologies. But in the last ten years, consumerism has wreaked more havoc there than in the societies of the Near East that have lived through European colonization. They were less protected in the end.

YL: What protects against the present is the past, and what protects against consumerism is a culture that is not based on consumerism. Now, the Gulf countries have always been marginal in the oriental culture; the great centers were in Damascus, Cairo, Baghdad, Isfahan, etc. The Gulf countries had less of a past to protect them. The culture of the Gulf, steeped in Bedouin way of life, is a marginal culture, extremely friendly, which I was able to experience during my stay in Arabia, but it is not a learned culture. Cultures that do not have intellectuals to defend them are vulnerable cultures. And when they die, all that is left is what the present offers.

I would add that our way of entering the future is always influenced by the past, even if we have abandoned it. The culture of the Arabian Peninsula has valued cheerfulness more than thought. The people of the Gulf are very cheerful, with a very pleasant character. They like parties, music and a certain drunkenness, and the pleasures of life. We find something of this in an extremely naive way of welcoming everything that the world of consumption offers, without asking questions.

You speak of a certain resentment towards Lebanon and the Lebanese, which can be explained in part by the fact that this country assumes itself, does not deny itself, and finally is the only one to accept this orientality of contradiction. But Lebanon is also a project maintained by a colonial power whose cultural expression was manifested by the establishment of the American University of Lebanon which was initially a missionary institute. Were Orientals not outraged by what was the most perfect cultural expression of foreign interference on their soil? That was the justification given.

In reality, Lebanon is not the only Middle Eastern state that was "the project of a colonial power." And Saudi Arabia?! And Jordan? Finally, the only Middle Eastern state that was not to any degree, even indirectly, the fruit of a colonial project, is the Ottoman Empire (for which Gobineau had so much sympathy), which the Turkish and Arab nationalists, enemy brothers in the imitation of the West, worked together to destroy. One can also, further on, add the old Iranian state, and perhaps, at a pinch, Yemen and the Sultanate of Oman, which are all the same somewhat marginal countries.

Why then would an Arab intellectual immediately think of applying this supposedly infamous

qualification, "project maintained by a colonial power" to Lebanon rather than to Arabia or Kuwait? This reproach was only a presentable pretext. As for the American University of Beirut, whatever the intentions of its founders, it was a breeding ground for left-wing nationalists.

And if we talk about cultural interference, what was studied in the national universities of other Arab countries? The same as at the American University of Beirut, only worse. Without admitting it, people were happy that Lebanon was suffering. The Orientals consider, not without reason, that the Lebanese are arrogant and so were happy that this country was taking a beating; there was a kind of dull satisfaction. But there was a deeper reason for this Schadenfreude. People were angry at Lebanon for not having believed in this rationalist and efficient nationalism. On the contrary, it remained a completely elusive country.

What was it about Lebanon that shocked a Baathist Syrian or a Nasserite Egyptian? It was the fact that this country did not decide to be serious in the Arab revolution. Lebanon refused to enter the world of seriousness; it remained carefree, incoherent, ineffective, joyful, incredibly confused—all the bad things were said about it, but people took refuge in Beirut because there, in this carefree confusion, they could breathe. But one could not conceive this clearly; there was a cognitive dissonance, as the cooks say, between the pleasure that Arab intellectuals took in staying in Lebanon and the evil that they thought they were obliged to think of.

SNT: But what about the political domination that the Orientals suffered?

YL: Political domination is an insufficient explanation. It is said that from Cleopatra (and even Alexander, because the Lagids were of Greek origin) until Nasser, Egypt was never ruled by Egyptians. Was this enough for the Egyptian culture to disappear? It is also said that since the Mongols, and even since the Arab invasion, until the Pahlavi of sinister memory, Iran has always been ruled by foreign dynasties—but this vast period covers the most beautiful centuries of Persian civilization.

Foreign domination is only truly destructive, if one is convinced that the foreigner is not only militarily stronger, but that he is better than we are. This is the real humiliation that leads to resentment and denial—believing that we deserved to lose because the enemy was better than us. From then on, one will be obsessed by the ambition to become stronger than the one who is stronger than oneself, by having to be like him, by adopting his science, his technique, his rationality, etc. It is then that the foreigner really dominates, because he has entered into people's heads.

In the opposite case (if the occupied are convinced of their superiority and the occupiers are impressed), the outcome is quite different. It happened, as with the Mongols in Iran. They were the strongest and they massacred like nobody else. But the Iranians remained convinced of the superiority of the Persian culture. The Mongols became convinced of it too and became Iranians like the others and even excellent propagators of the Persian culture, as far as India.

Certainly, material defeat contributes to self-deprecation; but it is not entirely sufficient to explain it. Western intrusions, however detestable, are not enough to explain the Orientals' rejection of their own heritage. It is undoubtedly because this heritage was too difficult to bear. We come back to the starting point—complexity is heavy; it takes a lot of energy to remain human.

SNT: Concerning the Islamists, you recall that their ideology, contrary to their discourse, is not totally incompatible with Western modernity. They aspire to rationality, efficiency and reform of their religious corpus. How is it that they inspire so much rejection today?

YL: All serious researchers who have been interested in Islamism have come to the following conclusion: Islamism is the modernism of Islam. Adrien Candiard says it very well in an [easy-to-read book](#). The lack of curiosity of Europeans, who love to have an opinion on what they do not know, is the only reason why we still hear such crazy things as the claim that Islamism is an irreducibly archaic Islam.

But there is no compatibility between this modernism and ours, that of LGBTism++. We have here two modernisms which are opposed to each other. It is a variant of the "modern against modern," well seen by Muray. It is not the opposition of two civilizations—it is the opposition of two variants of modernism.

What has happened here and there, in reality, is that we have lost the spiritual sense. In Europe, the loss of spirituality has led to a dissolution of forms, first religious, then social; the most elementary forms of civilization, the first of which is the distinction between the sexes, tend to dissolve.

On the other hand, in the Muslim world, the loss of spirituality has led not to a dissolution of forms but to their devitalization. Empty forms have been maintained and have become the object of idolatrous worship. Both civilizations died, but their corpses did not have the same fate. The corpse of the West has decomposed, while the corpse of the Muslim world has mummified. One has the impression of an

immense distance. But in the background, there is always the loss of the spiritual and the yearning for a world where there are no more humans, because the human is never simple, rational and content to be so; he is always tormented by absence, by what cannot be attained. Even Adam found that even in paradise something was missing.

SNT: The veil is today one of the most discussed subjects in the West. You speak several times of "the veil of the Islamists," while regretting that the latter have turned their back on their traditional cultural and religious heritage. How do you distinguish the traditional veil from the Islamist veil worn by Muslim women?

YL: I quite agree with [Michel Henry](#) when he says that there can be no human sciences. Science implies a distance between the subject and the object; and that subjectivity does not intervene in the appreciation of the object. However, to understand a human phenomenon can only be done with one's own human subjectivity. One will never be able to define objective criteria to establish categories that objectively separate the Islamic veil from the traditional veil. The only way is intuition. If I can perfectly distinguish between an Islamist and a traditional man or woman, even if they dress in more or less the same way, it is because I am human and I intuitively feel what humans are.

SNT: Isn't this an arbitrary method?

YL: Assumed subjectivity is not necessarily arbitrary. To deny on principle that a subjective intuition has a heuristic value would mean that humans have no possibility of perceiving humans. In fact, I know very well how to distinguish between the Islamist who basically believes that he has taken out an all-risk insurance policy to go to paradise, and a woman who wears the veil out of devotion, out of attachment to a certain conception of modesty, but who does not see herself as chosen or better than the others. On the contrary, the Islamist will consider the others as potentially damned, whereas the traditional Muslim does not judge.

Moreover, in Islamism there is a desire for ostentation. It is a "Muslim Pride," where one displays the signs that give one an identity; and thanks to this, one thinks of finding one's place in the world of consumption. Indeed, we never consume anything other than signs that give us confidence, that "pose" in our eyes and in the eyes of others, whether it is a luxury watch or a scarf, or an ostentatious devotion, or a bikini if we feel confident about our figure. All these strategies are valid. What matters is to be proud of oneself. That is Islamism. Traditional Islam is not there to assert a pride, but is lived in humility.

No doubt, Muslim society was a society where self-satisfaction of being a good Muslim always existed, among some. But these were very vigorously condemned by words attributed to the prophet, which shows the antiquity of this attitude, but also that as long as this civilization was alive, one knew to guard against it.

SNT: It seemed to me that you were very severe on the supposed uprooting that affects Western civilization. However, the observer of European cultural life notices that people continue to go to the theater, literary prizes are still followed and celebrated almost everywhere in France, for example, and the museums in Paris are not empty. Why should we summarize all this interest in culture to the consumer mind of the ordinary man? Isn't it the proof that this spirit of resistance that Bernanos called for is still present among the French?

YL: No doubt, since you and I are here to discuss, as we are doing, there are still beautiful interstices in the modern world. There are indeed people who still read Bernanos or Péguy. But that doesn't change the picture of contemporary France. Our culture is collapsing; our very language, which our supposed elites are ashamed to speak, is disintegrating. Our little world of passionate and critical readers is a reservation of Indians. It is the last square that resists by retreating, while silliness and ignorance spread everywhere. Maybe it's better in France than in other Western countries? There are no Philitts everywhere; it is a meager consolation. People like to talk about the misfortune of the Arab-Muslim world. Certainly, the Muslim world is doing very badly; but the other worlds are also doing very badly. The East is doing rather less badly than the West—the epidemic of wokism and that of LGBTism encounter solid immune defenses in the East.

SNT: You maintain that Islamism is to Islam what Puritan Protestantism is to Christianity. These consumerist deformations converge in what they offer to modern man—the immediate satisfaction of his desires. The delinquents who make the news are fed by both Islamism and consumerism. Do you make a difference between the newcomer rooted in his culture of origin and the young person from two or three generations ago?

YL: There is a difference between the immigrants, because of the conditions in which the immigration took place. The Iranian community, of Muslim culture, is well integrated in France and escapes Islamism as much as delinquency because there was a transmission—in this educated middle-class immigration, the children may have wanted to resemble their parents. When you are the son of a North African worker, humiliated by assembly line work, and an illiterate mother, you don't want to resemble

your parents, although there is still affection. Thus, there is more uprooting in some communities than in others.

Many young people were born here but do not have access to the France of the past, nor do they have access to the culture of their parents because it remained on the other side of the sea, and because their parents belonged to a milieu too poor and humiliated to be able to transmit it. So, they have no access to any heritage; they are the purest products of globalization, not of Arab or Muslim culture, or of this or that African culture.

For the newcomers, it is not always very different. It takes optimism to say that they are "rooted in their culture of origin." When an African arrives in Europe, he comes from a big city, not from an immemorial village. He has already been uprooted from his culture for a long time; he has lived in an African metropolis where sometimes the daily lingua franca is not even an African language; he has never practiced one of the properly African religions; he does not know any of their myths. He has known nothing of the extremely complex social structure of the villages of yesteryear; he has been cut off from it for several generations. He is already uprooted long before landing in Europe.

Mutatis mutandis, these observations apply to immigrants of various origins, most often very removed, several generations before their birth, from what gave strength and finesse to their so-called culture of origin. This is also why they dream of the West. They are uprooted before they arrive.

The problem is not that they belong to another culture incompatible with that of Europe—it is that they no longer belong to any culture, except in a state of ruin; and that European culture is also in ruins. Two cultures eventually integrate each other, even if we do not believe that it is quick and easy. But we do not integrate an uprooting to an uprooting. Seriously, what do you want immigrants to integrate into? To the Paris of the silly bobos, to the school of the "ABC of equality?" If we want young foreigners to want to be French, we have to show them Romanesque churches, not sing them nonsense about "the values of the Republic."

[This interview comes through the kind courtesy of [Philitt](#).]

Featured: Walter Charles Horsley, "Women and an Old Man in the Harem;" painted in 1883.

