

Arab Culture and Future Change

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The Arab world looks like a complicated puzzle that is hard to understand and harder to solve; yet no one seems to know with confidence how to solve this puzzle. Internal and external forces of change seem to have agreed to pull the region and its peoples in opposite directions, but the clash between these forces has led to increased political instability, economic decline, and moral and cultural decay. This paper intends to explain the Arab dilemma and identify the forces that are pulling the people and their states apart. The consequences of this situation are seen in the spread of poverty, widening of sociocultural divides, and deepening socioeconomic gaps. Therefore, the certain thing about the Arab future has become most uncertain.

One reason for this uncertainty is the multiplicity of foreign forces competing to dominate the region and direct change in their favor. However, the Arab masses and their supposedly leadership, who have more to gain from positive change and most to lose from a lack thereof, are doing very little to protect their interests or articulate visions for their nations' future. And while no Arab government has a strategy that defines its national interest, no Arab leader can protect his nation. The only interest that Arab leaders know with certainty and are working hard to protect is to remain in power and use the political and economic resources they have to suppress potential leaders and gain more wealth and power. And while Arab leaders have succeeded in suppressing free speech and hindering new thinking, they have failed to appease the radical religious forces or contain their influence.

But before trying to explain the obstacles hindering Arab renaissance, there is a need to look at the process of historical change that got us to where we are today. Understanding this process will help us realize what is wrong with the Arabs and why they have failed to catch up with the rest of the world. It will also help us to understand what it takes for nations to change and make material and cultural progress and transform their living condition and way of life.

Historical Context of Social Transformation

During its history, humanity has gone through four civilizational stages: the tribal, agricultural, industrial, and the knowledge civilizations. Although each civilization represented a paradigm shift in the humankind's history, every civilization evolved in response to a new mode of production that forced the old cultures, economic structures, and production relations to change profoundly. Historical records indicate that societies that refused to adopt the new mode of production were left behind to languish in relative poverty and backwardness.

Social transformation is a process of change that transforms all aspects of life in society. But for thousands of years, the pace of change was incremental; it caused no tangible change in the living conditions for many generations. However, "once tools were regularly made and used, they became a factor in human evolution, setting limits to behavior and opening new possibilities in the organic and behavioral spheres."¹ In the meantime, continued evolution of technology made social change not only possible but also inevitable and irreversible. "History, the truly relevant source of change, will not be reversed,"² wrote John Kenneth Galbraith.

Around the mid-15th century, China and some European societies entered a transition from the agricultural age to the industrial age. While European societies succeeded in moving from the agricultural to the industrial age in about 300 years, China failed to do the same. The reason behind the Europeans success and China's failure is the power of culture and its role in society. The prevalence of economic and social freedom in European cities paved the way for intellectual creativity, social mobility, religious reform, cultural transformation, and the industrial revolution. In contrast, none of those freedoms were available in China. The Chinese Emperor's association with the gods caused political power to be linked to religious power and popular culture. Given the importance of culture in shaping social relations and ways of thinking, China's ruler felt that his interest dictates that he preserves the popular culture, which empowered the traditional, religious, and political forces to protect the Confucian culture. The Emperor closed China's borders and continued to live in agriculture time, causing China to fail to enter the industrial age, despite its scientific and technological superiority over Europe at the time.

Besides, the Chinese society was under the control of a central authority that ruled with an iron fist, preventing the growth of liberal enclaves that could think differently or violate the center's orders. In contrast, Europe was then divided into small, mostly powerless states, which enabled several commercial cities to develop and become independent. Europe in those times had two systems, one feudal and the other civil. While the feudal system's activity was agricultural, the city-states system concentrated on commercial, financial, and craftsmanship activities that freed people to think and innovate. And when the Church tried to subject the rulers and merchants to its authority, conflict erupted between the Church and the kings, as well as between the Church and the city dwellers. But since the Church had no army to enforce its rules, new social and cultural currents opposed to the Church emerged to undermine its institutional power. As a result, new values, traditions, attitudes, and interests evolved slowly and paved the way for the financial and economic activities to expand and facilitate Europe's transformation from the agricultural to the industrial age.

As Europe entered the industrial age in the 18th century, all traditions, customs, values, political systems, ways of thinking, and production relations were transformed profoundly and irreversibly. And with the maturing of the industrial revolution in the early 20th century, modern industrial society appeared, with its unique culture, way of life, and mode of production, all of which were very different from those of the agricultural society. Consequently, agricultural societies that refused to enter the industrial age became weaker and economically, culturally, scientifically, and technologically less developed, lacking the means to change and catch up with the industrialized countries.

Social Transformation

In older times, people lacked the means to control their physical environment or modify its behavior to meet their needs; the environment imposed its will on human life, causing the living conditions to stay static for generations. Tools that societies developed then were primitive and therefore could not have a noticeable impact on societal life. So the life of the hunter-gatherer and the tribal man remained the same for thousands of years; only war and mutual victimization were common occurrences. Nevertheless, almost all societies managed to transform themselves from associations of individuals tied together by instincts, need and fear, to small communities tied together by kinship, traditions, and religious beliefs, to nations tied together by history, politics, cultural traditions, laws, and interests. However, being a continuous process of change, social transformation caused change to become comprehensive and irreversible. "History, the truly relevant source of change, will not be reversed,"³ wrote John Kenneth Galbraith.

Nature and environmental fluctuations forced the tribal community to live on the hunting of animals and the grazing of livestock and fight other tribes to sustain itself and survive. As a result, the tribal man found himself, unconsciously, devoting his life to war and fighting because he saw in conquest, fencing, and plunder a source of pleasure and recreation. Some historians say that every encounter between two men or two groups of people, up to 7,500 years ago, meant war because people had no means to communicate with each other. Therefore, the tribal man "fought to live and lived to fight," causing the tribal man's life to begin and end with fighting. As a result, invasion, looting, and killing had become the essence of the tribal age culture.

During the agricultural age, farming of the land enabled man to acquire a limited capacity to influence his environment and make it more responsive to his needs, causing change to move slowly. As internal forces changed the environmental settings, new ideas, tools, and economic activities appeared and changed man's traditions, values, attitudes, and relationships. Meanwhile, external forces representing military conquests and trade led to cultural interaction among societies and instigated technological borrowing and commerce expansion. However, meaningful transformations

were not possible at the time because neither the internal nor the external forces were capable of conceiving a different future, let alone forcing it on societies whose cultures derive their essence from entrenched traditions and rigid belief systems.

About 10,000 years ago, the agricultural society emerged and changed the tribal way of life. Since the transition to agriculture was accompanied by the emergence of a new way of life, farming the land represented a new civilization having its unique society, culture, and economy that differed profoundly from those of the tribal age. Consequently, the agricultural man found himself, unconsciously, devoting much of his life to eating because he saw cultivating the land, taking care of crops, preparing food, and participating in group banquets a source of pleasure and recreation. Therefore, the agricultural man "eats to live and lives to eat," causing his life to start and end with food. Consequently, food feasts and the accompanying gatherings, stories, and rumors became the essence of the culture of the agricultural age.

The age of industry, which emerged some 250 years ago, came at the expense of the agricultural society and its way of life. Slowly, a new society, having its own culture and economy, emerged to dominate the old societies and transform their cultures. This society was qualitatively different from those of the agricultural and tribal ages. Though the factory system forced the industrial worker to work long hours for little money, the industrial man found himself devoting much of his life to work because he saw in having a job and working with others a source of pleasure and a means to acquire a social status. So the industrial man "works to live and lives to work," causing work to become the essence of the industrial age culture.

In the fast-evolving knowledge age, a new society with its distinct culture and economy has emerged. This society is qualitatively different from the tribal, agricultural, and industrial societies. For the knowledge man to get a good job and earn a good income, he has to continue learning in order not to lag behind his peers. As a result, the knowledge man found himself devoting much of his life to learning because he saw in learning and acquiring more knowledge a source of pleasure and hope. And to obtain a higher income and better social status, the knowledge man had to "learn to live and live to learn." Consequently, knowledge emerged as the essence of the new age culture, causing the new man's life to begin and end with learning.

But in concluding the process of explaining societal development over time, there is need to emphasize the following:

First, every stage of development represents a civilization in its own right that comes after passing through a difficult transition that creates extraordinary situations characterized by chaos,

confusion, and blurred vision. Societies and cultures in transition can be described as societies "wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born."⁴

Second, at the beginning of each transitional period the history of the former civilization and its logic and wisdom end, forcing the new civilization to write its own history, discover its logic, and learn about its wisdom.

Third, each transitional period, viewed from a long distance, represents a historical discontinuity, where history stops a little before it moves again, but with a new spirit and logic that produce new lessons and wisdom.

Fourth, each civilization produces its structurally different society, its qualitatively different culture, and its organizationally unique mode of production, making the break between the former and subsequent civilizations almost complete.

Fifth, as the contours of the new civilization take shape, the society, culture, and economy of the former civilization become dependent on the society, culture, and economy of the new civilization, which makes dependency an integral part of the historical process.

Sixth, because of the dependency of the former civilization on the new one, civilizations that are overtaken lose their ability to challenge the subsequent civilization. Besides, civilizational development makes communications between cultures produced by different civilizations difficult, allowing miscommunication to happen frequently.

Social Transformation in Earlier Times

During the hunter-gatherer age, a nomadic tribal society emerged and lived thousands of years without meaningful change. Members of that society organized themselves around customs, kinship, and blood relationships. While social customs had the force of the law, myth and magic created by religion played the role of science and technology. Since traditions and customs are forces of stability and continuity, and myth and magic are acts of deception and often sources of fear, neither force could instigate positive change. Consequently, no social transformation was possible, which forced history to move in place rather than in time.

Animal husbandry and plant cultivation were the most important technologies developed by humans about twelve thousand years ago; they enabled humanity to take a giant step toward civilization. The transition from the tribal to the agricultural age represented a revolution in the human condition. "Every great change in human history has come at a high price, and the greater the

change, usually the higher the price."⁵ Tribal societies that choose to change were able to make material and cultural progress; tribes that resisted change had to endure relative poverty for the sake of a nomadic life that provided them with freedom but with little else.

Religion appeared thousands of years after the development of agriculture and slowly transformed itself into a sacred institution with authority. At times, religion associated itself with the government; at other times, it controlled the government, but often it competed with the government for influence and people's allegiance. Since life under traditional agriculture is usually timeless and serene, it enabled faith and fate to prevail and perpetuate the forces of stability and continuity. Since this kind of life reflects tranquility and peace of mind, it breeds acceptance and stagnation, and limits man's curiosity and imagination. Generally speaking, agricultural societies prefer feeling to knowing because people want to feel secure. Farmers usually lack the desire to know more than needed to run their daily lives, particularly things that might disturb belief in faith. The prevalence of such feelings took about ten thousand years, numerous technological and scientific discoveries, and countless ideas and wars before life began to change and witness genuine transformation.

Around the end of the 14th century, commerce began to challenge both traditions and traditional authority in Italy and other Southern European countries. The expansion of trade caused economic and financial activities to expand and diversify, enabling cities and city-states to grow and prosper. As a result, a new social class of merchants emerged to manage trade and challenge the Church's economic and financial doctrine. Members of this class were city dwellers, some of whom were fugitives who ran away from the feudal system that enslaved them. Because of their experience with slavery, most city dwellers felt and acted as free people. If democracy is 'government of the people, by the people, for the people,' as U.S. President Abraham Lincoln said in 1863, the city-states were "government of the merchants by the merchants for the merchants."⁶

Trade, urbanization, and religious conflict were aspects of change and agents of social and economic transformation. As trade expanded, mercantilism appeared as an economic philosophy that called for enacting new laws to protect national industries and facilitate the exploitation of other nations' resources. Mercantilism provided the engine of colonialism and paved the way for the development of the economic process.

Between 1500 and 1650, Europe was a battleground for religious and political wars from which the royal dynasties, the nation-state, and the merchants emerged as winners and warriors. The winners subsequently developed new technologies and military industries and used them to wage wars and expand the territories they controlled within and outside Europe. "The West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by its superiority in applying organized

violence."⁷ That is how colonialism was able to control most of the world and establish foreign settlements in many parts of it at the expense of the native peoples.

The success of the Reformation movement in the 17th century was another manifestation of the social transformations that Europe experienced while transitioning from the agricultural to the industrial age. The Reformation's success ended conflict between the Church and the political, economic, and intellectual elites in favor of the latter; it transformed religion into a social institution with moral, but not political authority. Meanwhile, the nation-state's emergence and its ability to acquire near-absolute powers caused obedience to the Church to become obedience to the state.

The American and French revolutions, which occurred in the latter part of the 18th century, changed the political cultures in Europe and America; they limited the state's powers, and forced it to recognize its citizens' human rights, and gave people the right to elect their rulers. And as the ruler became accountable to the ruled, the foundations for modern democracy were established. Consequently, the people became the sole source of political legitimacy. However, two centuries later, democracy, just like all other social systems, reached its limits and began to experience the symptoms of old age, losing its vitality and ability to deliver on its promises.

Social Transformation in the Industrial Age

The industrial revolution transformed the totality of the human condition in Europe; it changed the culture and social and economic structures of society, forcing people to change their ways of thinking and organizing all life affairs. And as the industrial age advanced, power began to shift from the domain of traditional land aristocracy to the domain of capital. A class of business entrepreneurs slowly emerged to create wealth and gain power and use both to influence social change and politics in its favor. Being a keen observer of social change, President Lincoln said in 1856, "money power preys on the nation in times of peace and conspire against it in times of adversity".

However, due to the conservative nature of cultures in general, the change experienced by the economic aspects of life moved faster and penetrated deeper into society than cultural change. Change in the sociocultural arena has almost always come in response to changes in the economic and technological arenas. At times, the response was rather quick and positive, but at other times, it was reluctant and negative. Cultures with a religious core have almost always hindered the economic process efforts to transform society and penetrate deep under its skin.

One of the significant manifestations of change that characterized the industrial age is the gradual transformation of farming into an industry. Farmers that constituted about 50 percent of the

West's labor force around the end of the 19th century, constituted only 5 percent at the end of the 20th century. However, the transformation of agriculture into an industry forced it to become capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive, which made it dependent on science and technology, credit financing, and modern transportation systems. But as agriculture was shifting from being a way of life to being an industry, people perceived this shift as a threat to food security. But as farmworkers were abandoning their farms, agricultural machinery, chemical fertilizers, and new irrigation and farming systems raised productivity and improved the quality of products.

As manufacturing expanded, the industrial working class grew quickly; the unlimited pool of workers leaving farming and domestic service was instrumental in developing manufacturing. However, the growing labor pool enabled the capitalist class to exploit the struggling industrial workers, make large profits, and accumulate colossal wealth and power. But due to the appalling life and work conditions of the industrial working class, it became the focal point of the writings of Karl Marx and other social thinkers who devoted much of their time to identify and analyze the historical origins of this class and its rise in society. Marx predicted that the industrial working class would eventually revolt against its masters and take ownership of the means of production. But despite the miserable working and living conditions of this class, "for farmers and domestic servants, industrial work was an opportunity. It was, in fact, the first opportunity that social history has given them to better themselves substantially without having to emigrate."⁸ Eventually, the increased power of organized labor, public sympathy, intellectual support, and rising profits forced the capitalists to pay their workers more and improve their working and living conditions.

Yet, just when it seemed that this social class was on its way to gaining control of society, its fortunes began to decline rapidly. The industrial economy began to shift from manufacturing to services, some of which were knowledge-based, requiring special training and skills. Gradually, a new economy emerged, creating new jobs requiring more schooling and training and changed attitudes which the industrial worker did not have and could not afford. Consequently, the size, power, and social status of the industrial working class began to decline, causing the size of the middle class to retreat and its influence to wane. Since the association of wealth with power and knowledge today is strong and getting stronger, the possibility that the industrial working class will ever recapture its past glory has vanished.

I believe that Marxism and the socialist system it built before 1990 may have been the last serious attempt launched by politics to control economics. "The collapse of the Soviet Union and China's rise and shift to capitalism put an end to Marxism. And with the failure of socialism, economics won its last battle against politics. Nevertheless, economics has not won the war against

the vanquished and impoverished peoples of the world. Therefore, the struggle for freedom and justice will continue and make conflict a never-ending human tragedy.⁹

By the end of the 19th century, the capitalist system had transformed all aspects of life in industrial society, which enabled it to project itself as a prophet of hope and progress. In the 20th century, which witnessed the most significant scientific and technological revolutions of all times, sociocultural and socioeconomic change became a dynamic, continuous process. However, the Third World's social transformation failed to make tangible progress; it remained grounded in pre-industrial times. Nonetheless, almost every Third World nation had come into contact with the West and its industrial civilization and colonialist enterprise. Due to this two-faced experience, most countries reacted in two contradictory ways to western civilization. First, they began to adopt nationalism, build nation-states, and develop capitalist economies while resisting foreign domination. Second, they began to revive old cultural traditions and languages to protect themselves from western cultures, which they perceived as a serious threat to their survival and cultural heritage. And as they developed nationalism into a state ideology, religion was being revived and emphasized as the core of culture.

The adoption of nationalism and the revival of religion helped strengthen political unity and foster social cohesiveness but gave enough power to the sociocultural and political processes to dominate society and influence change. Thus, a state identity built around nationalism and a national culture built around religion did not naturally evolve in the Third World to face internal challenges; they came in response to external challenges and changed circumstances. "Social identity becomes most important the moment it seems threatened; conspicuous forms of boundary maintenance become important when boundaries are under pressure."¹⁰

Social Transformation in the Knowledge Age

Around the middle of the 1990s, the West's most advanced industrial societies entered a new transitional period leading to the knowledge age. It is an age where scientific and technological knowledge is increasingly becoming the most valuable individual and national assets. Since the emerging knowledge economy is more dependent on information and communications than on any factor of production, the new jobs that it creates are knowledge-based; "they require a good deal of formal education and the ability to acquire and apply theoretical and analytical knowledge. They require a different approach to work and a different mind-set. Above all, they require a habit of continuous learning."¹¹ Therefore, knowledge workers need to learn how to learn, develop an interest in learning, and update their knowledge continuously. As a result, education, including technical training, has become an industry in and of itself, encouraging profit-making enterprises to enter the field and cause education standards to decline.

The emerging knowledge economy creates sufficient jobs for the educated and the unskilled workers, but little for other workers. And due to its transitional nature, the knowledge revolution is causing job insecurity to increase. Therefore, to acquire a decent position in the knowledge economy, the blue-collar worker will have to learn new skills, adopt new attitudes, and accept job uncertainty, which means he has to change his culture because the industrial society culture is not compatible with the knowledge age. Since the knowledge requirements are expensive to obtain, and the cultural adjustments are difficult to make, large numbers of the lower and middle classes are losing their jobs and status in the new society. The knowledge age is also the age of the highly skilled and specialized worker who can find a good job anywhere in the world. Sophisticated computer networks have enabled knowledge workers to work out of their homes and small offices scattered around the world without losing connection with each other. However, differentiated skills and specializations, and scattered locations make it impossible for members of the knowledge workforce to develop class-consciousness and create labor unions.

Specialization creates a need to develop new, more complex systems to coordinate and integrate the functions of the ever-growing numbers of organizations and institutions. This makes teamwork, work ethics, and flexible work hours essential to performing many tasks and creating knowledge and wealth. It also makes both success and failure functions of knowledge and attitudes while making knowledge and changed attitudes preconditions for individual and societal success. Peter Drucker argued years ago that "With knowledge being universally accessible, there will be no excuses for nonperformance. There will be no poor countries. There will only be ignorant countries."¹²

Knowledge workers in the new age are capitalists; they possess valuable social capital consisting primarily of specialized skills to invest in several ways and many places. Since knowledge frees people from need, knowledge workers have become less dependent on the state and their families, sharing little collective memories with others, and committed to no particular nation. Their primary goal is to succeed, make the best use of the knowledge they have, and get as much money as possible for it. As a result, they have become modern nomads wandering from one place to another, from one organization to another, and from one country to another to advance technically and succeed materially. They are driven by self-interest and a competitive marketplace that forces them to become rootless and sometimes ruthless.

Today, all societies are experiencing fundamental change and genuine transformations. But due to its nature and extent, this change affects different peoples differently, causing the social links in every society to fracture. Consequently, all societies are losing their traditional organizing principles and fast becoming colorful collections of groups of people clustered around ethnicity, culture, religion,

interests, and nationality that compete more and cooperate less, causing the concept of society to lose much of its traditional meaning. Likewise, the common good as a national goal has become more abstract than real. As a result, assimilating several groups in one society has become a challenge beyond reach; it makes attempts to integration cultural minorities politically and economically a mission impossible.

Residential segregation and social discrimination in America, which came under attack in the 1960s, have added economic discrimination and intellectual segregation lately. However, in an age where wealth and knowledge are intertwined, and knowledge is the primary tool for advancement and integration, economic discrimination and intellectual segregation deny most minorities the use of the only social tool that counts. While getting quality education has become beyond the poor's reach and even the middle class, intellectual segregation is denying minorities the opportunity to have an authentic leadership they can understand and trust. Minorities with no trusted leadership are easy to exploit and keep submissive. Excluding minority intellectuals from the public life rob America of a substantial portion of its human capital. The typical American intellectual is more likely to look at an intellectual belonging to a minority and whisper to himself: "you may belong to us, but you do not belong with us."¹³

Since my motto is, "Knowledge not shared is Knowledge wasted, and the more we share, the more we gain people of knowledge" I ask all readers to recommend every article and book they like because it will help inform others. We all share the responsibility to make our world more hospitable to peace, social justice, and freedom; a lofty goal we cannot reach without spreading knowledge and awareness in every corner of our mother earth.

Prof. Rabie is a distinguished professor of International Political Economy; he attended 5 universities and taught at 10 others on four continents. He has published 58 books, about 200 scholarly papers, and over 2000 newspaper articles. Books are 16 in English, one in Albanian, and 41 in Arabic. English Books include *Saving Capitalism and Democracy*; *Global Economic and Cultural Transformation*; *A Theory of Sustainable Sociocultural and Economic Development*; *The Global Debt Crisis and its Socioeconomic Implications*. (Palgrave Macmillan 2013-2017) One of the English books, "History of Racism", was translated and published in six other languages: German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Polish. Arabic Books include 3 poetry collections, 2 novels, and a story; the rest is mostly academic books and collections of ideas and reflections. Prof. Rabie is president of the Arab Thought Council in Washington, DC, a member of the Arab Thought Forum, and a fellow of the Alexander Von Humboldt Foundation since 1992. Grants and scholarships financed his education

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Links to Google Scholar and ResearchGate.

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