

EuroArab Forum

PROMOTING INNOVATIVE AND INVENTIVE IDEAS

An open letter by Hela Khamarou: A critical reflection
on Ali Khedher's presentation

“Mixing European and Arab identities - In the quest
for a mixed Mediterranean identity?”

The topic of this session presented by Ali Khedher aimed at giving a different perspective on the role of identity in our society. This discussion was challenging as Khedher brought to the public a new and unconventional approach to the term of “identity”. Discussing the role of “identities” in our world is far from being a small enterprise, and most probably the methodology adopted to conduct this conference wasn't appropriate to such a vast subject. A roundtable involving a more Anglo-Saxon approach with an exchange amongst the audience could have been useful.

Khedher's provoking presentation was an excellent idea but not enough time was left to discuss. Being the director of the Arab Cultural Centre of Brussels as well as a visiting professor at the College of Europe in Bruges, Khedher started his presentation by a linguistic analysis of the origins of the word Arabi (Arab).

This introduction on the etymology of Arabic words was too long and left some of the audience a bit sceptical on the real theme of this session: Were we really going to talk about a “Euro-Mediterranean Identity”?

Defending his position as a non-believer, refusing to take into consideration the Bible, the Torah nor the Koran (being “unscientific writings”), it felt as if he was selling himself as a “good Arab”, a moderate one. This feeling was even more increased by his constant reliance on what he called “scientific”. As such, nothing can be taken into consideration unless being “proved scientifically”.

He also based his definition of the word “identity” as a post-Marxist theory of divisions of classes. According to him, identity can only be defined through economy. It's within economic divisions between the lower classes (labour) and the upper classes that identity is born. Locating the starting point of identity with the French Revolution, Khedher rejects any cultural or societal root to the word. This time ellipsis also arouses a strong problem of misinformation and misguidance of the audience.

Finally, Khedher concluded that one should not rely upon identity, as identities don't exist, and rather consider being citizen of the world. Somehow far from the theme which was supposed to be discussed, this offensive presentation left no one insensitive.

In my opinion, Khedher's talk went in the wrong direction from the very beginning because of inaccuracy in the definition of identity. His reluctance to acknowledge foundations of identity in culture, society, self-identification, language, citizenship (and many other factors) led him to present a narrow vision of the concept. The issue here is precisely the vagueness of the term, and not his concrete definition. As much as one can take into consideration the theories of “economic identities” born from unequal social classes creating a domination/submission dichotomy, one should as well consider other “ingredients” which make the concept of identity such a thrilling and complex one.

Unfortunately, while basing his presentation on identity (and not regarding the dilemmas and realities of a Euro-Mediterranean identity), Khedher didn't benefit from the writings of academics who have spent their lives considering the notion itself. As such, the vacuum of this presentation could have been filled by the considerations of the work of Rogers Brubaker. And dealing more precisely with the topic of Arab mixed identities, academics and novelists such as Edward Said or Amin Maalouf could have been an excellent introduction to the start of a thrilling discussion with people sharing their own experience, thus witnessing the group as a whole trying to define the concept of identity.

Interesting reading to go on with the topic:

- Rogers Brubaker, Beyond Identities, article available online <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/brubaker/>
- Amin Maalouf, Les identités meurtrières, 1998
- Edward Said, The Paradox of Identity, 1999
- Edward Said, Out of Place, 1999