

## Editorial note: Humanities in Times of Crisis

By Larbi Touaf.

In Graham Swift's 1983 novel *Waterland*, the narrator, Tom Crick, a history teacher and a man with historical consciousness, makes this statement as a response to one of his students who said that "History is about to end":

Do you know why I became a teacher, Price? Okay- because I had this thing about history. My pet hobby-horse. But do you know what prompted me to teach? It was when I was in Germany in 1946. All that rubble. Tons of it. You see, it didn't take much. Just a few flattened cities. No special lessons. No tours of the death-camps. Let's just say I made the discovery that this thing called civilisation, this thing we've been working at for three thousand years [...] is precious. An artifice --so easily knocked down-- but precious. (207)

To make his point clearer, the narrator warns us against taking for granted the idea that humanity is going forward towards the better, towards an inevitable "progress." To believe that would be to go blindly and unconsciously towards the perpetuation of the errors and massacres of the past because, he says, history repeats itself, or rather since man makes history as Hegel believed, he never learns from the past. History, according to this vision, is a series of repetitions and eternal recurrences, it is a narrative that revolves around itself: "How it repeats itself, how it goes back on itself, no matter how we try to straighten it out. How it twists, turns. How it goes in circles and brings us back to the same place." (123)

Far from being cynical, Tom Crick's statement is actually a warning against losing sight of why History is taught at schools: to know how we got here and learn to not repeat the errors of our forebears. If humanity achieved any progress so far, it is because some people worked hard for it, not because it's a law of nature, certainly not a law of human nature, if such a thing exists at all: "Do not fall into the illusion that history is a well disciplined and unflagging column marching unswervingly into the future." (117)

What prompted the narrator to deliver such a speech is the fact that faced with budget cuts, his school decided to remove History from the curriculum. Not only is it a discipline that can be dispensed with, but also it is something that no one really seems to care about that much anymore, therefore it can be abandoned. In this sense, Swift's visionary novel foreshadowed the state of humanities as we see it today, i.e. being marginalized in society and in education. Hollowed and reduced to practical technicalities, the time-honored disciplines are under the threat of extinction in our techno-scientific postmodern times, and with their disappearance the levees that stand up against human folly and cruelty will most certainly give in.

To put this in perspective it may be useful to do a little comparative work between today's dominant discourses of xenophobia, extremism, and populist rhetoric and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Indeed, a quick look at the early

decades of the last century will show that the tensions that lead to the first and the second World Wars and the innumerable massacres were fueled by toxic ideologies that vilified the other, the foreigner, the different, the one with a different faith, different skin color, different culture, different language ... etc. i.e. those who are not or cannot be assimilated. We all know the result, wars, massacres, totalitarian ideologies, authoritarian regimes, and extensive destruction.

Today, with the heightened tensions surrounding the issues of migration, unemployment, and insecurity, populist and hate-based ideologies whether they claim religious or ethnic groundings, work to polarize attitudes, turning communities and nations against one another. Our context is thus wrecked by the return of nationalistic, identity and religious discourses that rose to a largely unquestioned authority not so much in political spheres as in the daily lives of ordinary citizens who are constantly reminded that their troubles are to be blamed on the others. The voluntary or involuntary incorporation of such a discourse by individuals and groups reveals profound identity anxieties affecting societies (in the North as well as in the South) and those anxieties are intensified by the impact of globalized economy and culture. Concomitant with this is an exacerbated conservatism, xenophobic movements, and the risk of violent conflicts which nourish the radicalization of a part of the youth, as much in the South as in the North.

The primary concern of this issue of *Ikhtilaf* is to highlight the crucial role of Humanities in addressing the general confusion of the 21<sup>st</sup> century and its uncertainties as inherited from of the *fin de siècle* upheavals of the 1990's (the fall of the socialist/communist bloc, the first Gulf war, the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and the great divide it opened between the West and the Islamic world, the massacres in Rwanda, the quasi-failures of decolonization, the triumph of global capitalism and the widening gap between North and South ...). Today's challenges are many whether in the Global North or in Global the South: Democracy for which the West was and in some sense still continue to be an embodiment is showing signs of inherent and hitherto well-hidden incapacity to accommodate ethnic and cultural differences in western countries themselves. While in the Global South, the postcolonial and independent states registered massive failures in development, human or otherwise, producing nothing more than sophisticated systems of corruption. With the upsurge of terror and blind retaliation, the world has become troubled and insecure. Deeply frustrated peoples are resorting to political extremism to express their rejection of the new world *disorder*. Whether in the West or the Rest, scores of people are falling for populist propaganda and other discourses oversimplifying the world's complexity and promising easy solutions all focusing on blaming others (migrants, foreigners, infidels...etc.) Millions of people from the Global South are forced to flee war, and environmentally stricken zones, while rich countries of the North are barricading themselves by constructing real and symbolic walls. Even inside the rich countries barricades are set up between the

privileged minority and the other 99% who are suffering from poverty, unemployment and general lack of opportunity. On either side of these “walls” thrive a rhetoric of hate, fear and demonization of the other. Intellectuals, once the bearers of humanity’s conscience are replaced by “experts,” and critical thinking (emancipatory and transformative) is replaced with technical expertise. In this context of uncertainty, and with the dominant technicality and compartmentalization of knowledge production, the dominating discourses of techno-science, politics of fear, and politicized religion are only adding fuel to an already flammable situation.

While not covering every aspect of the problem, this issue of *Ikhtilaf* is a modest contribution to the ethical and critical debate in the humanities and social sciences championed by decolonial, postcolonial, and post-development studies. The hope is that we succeed in triggering interest in multidisciplinary critical practices that seek to renew critique and provide alternative and innovative analyses of the current crisis of xenophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and the general resurgence of political-religious extremism across the world.

Needless to say, in most universities of the world today, the Humanities are living on borrowed time as faculties are overwhelmed by the difficulties related to shrinking budgets and deteriorating work conditions. However, the possibilities for the renewal of faith in the humanities to generate critical thinking may come from a return to immediate social concerns and to foreground values of critical thinking, historical perspective and ethical judgement that are the core of our disciplines.

In fact, in the actual wave of nihilistic skepticism that touches everything from politics to science and that finds expression in social media under names such as “alternative facts” political incorrectness and that seek to normalize racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia through vines, memes and other social media related forms, the value of critical thinking is lost in the race to turn universities into business-oriented enterprises with no or little room for humanities. Already in 2009, The New York Times (24 February) deplored the state of the humanities in American universities where it was said that after the economic crisis of 2008 “the humanities are under greater pressure than ever to justify their existence to administrators, policy makers, students and parents [...]Some of the staunchest humanities advocates admit that they have failed to make their case effectively.” While this statement predicates the crisis in the humanities on the economic downturn and on the changing attitudes of families and decision-makers to liberal education, it remains certain that at least one of the aspects of that crisis is the decline of the humanities in a culture dominated by techno-scientism.

Now, ten years after that article, the situation is only getting worse, However, nurturing critical thinking, civic and historical knowledge and ethical reasoning is our best argument especially regarding the rise of populism, extremism, and terrorism. Thus, the relevance of the humanities lies in

regaining their place in promoting individual and communal development and participation in a free and participative democracy. While this is not the only way to address the multifaceted crisis, it may be worthwhile to consider ways in which academia can address the issue through opening to and engaging society, taking hold of public space and renewing the sense of the “commons” to create the conditions of peaceful intersubjective existence.