

# Philosophy in Transition— Philosophy of Transition

*by Sarhan Dhouib*

## **Abstract**

In his dual role as actor and observer, the author of this essay reflects from an autobiographical perspective on specific events, projects and issues in philosophy and philosophical practice in the wake of the upheavals in North Africa. In doing so, he asks whether philosophy in an authoritarian state can be understood as a form of resistance, and seeks to define the role that it should take in a post-dictatorial society. Can philosophy contribute to societal transformation, and what institutional transformations must it go through itself? The essay advocates the renewal of philosophy as a transcultural project.

## Academia in Transformation

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**Philosophy in Transition—Philosophy of Transition**

## About the Author



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## About the AGYA Working Group Transformation

Popular uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have had a deep impact not only on the societies in the respective countries, but also on academic disciplines and scientific relations between European and Arab countries. Many of the developments that have taken place in the region are not exceptional, but rather have reflected and accelerated broader global trends. Moreover, the importance of new media, new forms of social mobilization and new instruments of governance is being felt outside the MENA region. Taking a transcultural perspective, the Transformation Working Group of the Arab-German Young Academy of Sciences and Humanities (AGYA) aims to improve understanding of these trends. The working group debates how ideas, norms and concepts are diffused in a context of mutual exchange, and how scientific relations between Europe and the MENA region can be improved.

## Philosophy in Transition – Philosophy of Transition

For Fradj Belhajamor, my fellow student, who was persecuted during his studies and who, after many years in German exile as a philosophy teacher, returned to Tunis and died on his first day of instruction, on 28 October 2013.

The transformation of philosophy, as practiced or should be practiced in a situation of tumultuous change from dictatorship to a democratic society or post-dictatorship – as, for example, in Tunisia – occurs on multiple levels.

The liberation from authoritarian directives and fear-driven self-censorship offers the chance to introduce themes into the scholarly discussion, and therefore also into the field of philosophy, that reflect critically on contemporary society, social affairs and culture (Moser & Seidel 2016). These topics include the discussion of experiences with injustice, human rights violations and the limits of freedom of expression, for example, but also issues of transitional justice and the culture of remembrance. In post-dictatorial society, these issues prove to be particularly charged inasmuch as they can become an engine of social and political transformation (Dhouib 2012, 2014).

At the same time, the politico-societal protest movements of the “Arab Spring” are drawing the attention of European and North American philosophers, and offer the opportunity for reflections on critical analysis, justice, freedom and humanism – as prominently shown by Alain Badiou (2011), Seyla Benhabib (2011), Judith Butler (2015) and Slavoj Žižek (2012), for example. Particularly interesting for me personally, however, are the joint reflections by Arab and German philosophers made in the context of collaborative international projects and stimulated by the societal upheavals in various Arab states. I will address some of these below.

At another level, however, this transformation is also about developing a philosophy that can illuminate the change in contemporary philosophical models, and which guides intercultural and interdisciplinary exchange at the global level. Transcultural philosophizing in this way follows a universalistic approach, seeking strategies of universalization and interculturally recognized principles of validity. In this sense, this philosophizing is interested in an expansion of normative concepts, drawing from extra-European cultural spaces and their philosophic approaches. Moreover, the recognition of cultural diversity and a plurality of forms of knowledge is central to this philosophical perspective. The sensitivity to differences – whether this be within a culture or between cultures – leads to the demand that philosophers more strongly contextualize their guiding experiences and questions both temporally and spatially. A further consequence lies in the aspiration for increasing participation by philosophers with varied life backgrounds in this discourse. Transculturality thus does not emerge

from the primacy of one dominant discourse over the others, but is rather the result of patient and open communication as well as an always-critical engagement with one another (Dhouib & Dübgen 2016; Triki 2011).

However, the transformation of philosophy also consists in the critique and modification of a historically informed philosophical practice and its institutions. One aim of the academic transformation toward more democratic structures and more accessible education overall is to combat cultural and intellectual poverty. A decentralization of academic structures to promote education in disadvantaged regions, thus opening direct and affordable access to knowledge to the people who live there, is one means of realizing the right to education due to every human being (El Khouni 2016). The provision of support for the transformation of any scientific or scholarly practice, however, consists generally – and this applies worldwide – in the empowerment of young scholars as well as in intercultural and interdisciplinary dialogue.

Assuming a dual role as actor as well as observer, I would like to describe and reflect from an autobiographical perspective on specific events and projects in the context of the transformation of philosophy and philosophical practice in North Africa. I am concerned with the following questions, to which even today I have found no final answers: Can philosophy in an authoritarian state be understood as a form of resistance? What role can it take in a post-dictatorial society, and how can it contribute to a societal transformation? What institutional change must it go through itself, and what are the strengths of a transcultural philosophizing?

## ► Where there is power, resistance rises—Tunisia before the revolution

When I came to Germany in 2013 to do a doctoral dissertation on Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, I had studies in Tunisia and France behind me, a path whose detours and difficulties were shaped by the power structures of the dictatorship under Tunisia's longtime ruler Ben Ali. To be sure, even under Ben Ali, the Tunisian educational system figured among the Arab world's best; the state's propaganda carried constant reminders of this assessment. The country possesses hardly any natural resources unlike other Arab countries. Oil flows from olive presses, not from oil derricks, and the education of its people is one of the country's most important resources – or so believed the country's independence-era founder, Habib Bourguiba (1903-2000), who created an institutional system based on that of France, which persisted structurally under his successor Ben Ali and remains in place today. One learns French as a second “mother tongue” in elementary school; at least in the 1980s, mathematics, natural sciences, physics and French literature in the original French were taught in college-preparatory school. As in France, in the last year before graduating with a university-qualifying degree, the subject of philosophy was also added. This accounted for a full eight hours per week if one had decided to pursue “Lettres” for one's degree, but was accorded four hours even in the case of a natural-science/mathematical or technical focus. When I came to Germany, the land of poets and philosophers, it surprised me that many first-year philosophy students had not yet had

any philosophy instruction. In Tunisia's college-preparatory schools, philosophy was taught across its entire global range, from the Greeks and classical Arab philosophy to the European Enlightenment thinkers and the post-moderns. Some of our teachers at the university promoted a philological approach, perhaps in order to impress us or make clear to us the great distance that we, mere students, had to traverse to attain. This meant that, at best, one should also read the works being studied in their original languages. It was thus clear to me at an early date that if I seriously intended to engage with modern European thought, I would someday have to learn German.

This structure of education in Tunisia had clear political dimensions. For example, under Ben Ali there was a university police, the so-called University Security (al-amn al-ğāmi'i), that observed and monitored intellectual activities at the university. Teachers and lecturers of all stripes were also spied on by colleagues and students; one thus had to pay careful attention to how criticism was formulated, to what subjects one taught in the classrooms, to how one responded to questions – to the real questions, the intelligent questions, but also to the questions that served as traps. For example, once I was sitting on campus with some fellow students during a break following a lecture on Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, continuing the debate we had begun in the class on the relationship between theory and practice. We were so engrossed in the discussion that we failed to notice the secret-service employees, ears cocked, reporting everything immediately to their boss. Promptly, only a few minutes later, we were summoned by University Security and asked how we had arrived at such ideas. We were released with a warning to avoid discussing such issues outside the seminar. We never learned what consequences this had for our professor.

One way of escaping the repressive system (and at the same time, a very good way of acquiring further training) was to continue studies overseas. France regularly provided highly sought-after scholarships for outstanding academic achievements; however, the Tunisian state was allowed to make the final selection of recipients, a process that typically took place on the basis of loyalty to the regime. Although I was head of my class in the philosophy department of the Faculté des Lettres et Sciences Humaines at the University of Sfax, I had to finance my DEA studies at the Université Paris 1 Sorbonne in France by giving additional private lessons. Because I was not allowed to leave Tunisia for several months without losing my job as a teacher in a college-preparatory school, I bounced for two years back and forth between my college-prep school in Djerba and my university studies in Paris, with my school director always breathing down my neck. Unlike France, Germany chose its fellowship recipients on its own, using clear criteria. The transparent procedures practiced by Germany – by the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Goethe Institute – changed my academic life. There being no DAAD office in Tunisia, I had to go to the German embassy to apply for a fellowship to pursue doctoral studies in Germany.

Those who went overseas were not completely free of the constant observation. The regime's ears were eavesdropping in Germany, too. Once, in October 2004 – this was during “campaign season” in Tunisia, and one of my former professors, Mohamed Ali Halouani, was running as an opposition candidate against Ben Ali – as I boarded a late-evening bus in Bremen, I was jostled apparently accidentally by a Tunisian. We quickly fell into conversation about the upcoming election, and our con-

versation, in which I hardly got a word in edgewise, ended with his harsh condemnation of academics with political ambitions; like Halouani, he said, they lacked any skills useful for governing. The Arab peoples, he concluded, had no need for a democracy of intellectuals, and needed to be governed with the stick (bil ‘aṣā). The overseas spying was one dimension of the secret service’s program of intimidation. Sometimes you knew whom you were speaking with, but sometimes not.

Fellowships that had not been approved by the regime were suspect. In the official political jargon, they were termed “illegal financing” from overseas, and this was often synonymous with treason. With this path abroad, many doors were opened, and many doors closed. The day that I left Tunisia – Friday, 10 January 2003 – was a genuinely sad day. I still occasionally think back to the December 2002 farewell from one of my college-preparatory classes at the Houmt Souk high school in Djerba. The weather on that day was as gray as that which welcomed me in Germany, with the gloom that often weighs on the souls of Mediterranean natives in Germany. Some students felt my departure to be a betrayal of them, although they had a very good teacher on the horizon who would prepare them further for graduation. One young female student, the best of them, was both sad and angry. If our teacher goes, who will stay with us? Leaving is not a solution, she said. But I simply wanted desperately to get my doctorate.

## ► Arriving means going beyond oneself

The move to Germany was a radical change of scene. When you work on German idealism as a Tunisian doctoral student, and dare to take the first steps into conferences and workshops, you very quickly find that not everyone is wholly receptive to your voice. To be sure, many Europeans work with considerable sense of mission on all other possible cultures and languages; but does a Tunisian, an Arab who works on Schelling, have anything to say?

Challenged in part by colleagues at the University of Bremen who invited me to lectures, I began only in Germany to engage systematically with modern and contemporary Arabian philosophy, in parallel with my work on Schelling. I have with great irritation noted the contention, which has been made to me ever since at conferences, but which also appears widely in the secondary literature, that there has been no philosophy in Arab countries since Averroes (Ibn Rushd), a figure well known even in Europe, but who has been dead since 1198. In Germany, as in other European and North American countries, the focus of interest is commonly on Islamist and fundamentalist authors such as Abul Ala al-Mawdudi (Pakistan) and Sayyid Qutb (Egypt). Texts by critical modern Arab philosophers such as Nassif Nassar (Lebanon), Georges Tarabichi (Syria), Fouad Zakariyya (Egypt), Fathi Triki (Tunisia) or Mohammad Mesbahi (Morocco) are rarely translated and are largely ignored. For my engagement with modern and contemporary Arab philosophy, the Institute for Philosophy at the University of Bremen was an island of attentiveness. A formative element of my scholarly training in Bremen (quite apart from the many conversations and discussions with colleagues) was my inclusion in various intercultural exchange projects, such as the interchange between the UNESCO chairs in philosophy in Bremen (Prof. Hans-Jörg Sandkühler) and Tunis (Prof. Fathi Triki), but also Latin American phi-

osopher Raúl Fornet-Betancourt's international network (Sandkühler & Triki 2002; Fornet-Betancourt 2007, 2011).

Intercultural philosophizing starts from a position that people's language, thought and even perceptions are culturally conditioned, and that values, concepts and norms cannot be considered independently of their concrete contexts, because they derive their meaning only from this context. At the same time, dialogue on these concepts, values and norms, along with the struggle for a common basis and the issue of their universalizability, remains a task for the field of philosophy (Sandkühler & Triki 2002). In our philosophical encounters, we questioned and vigorously discussed the conditions of philosophy of a chaired life, views of humanity and the world, forms of the interpenetration of power and knowledge, and questions of human dignity (see, for example, Poulain, Sandkühler & Triki 2009).

Engaging intellectually with contemporary Arab philosophy under the auspices and modes of inquiry of intercultural philosophy became for me an important task, through which I removed myself from the trap of identity-related discourses. An intercultural approach seems to me fruitful for the transformation of philosophy particularly in the Arab world. It is interesting that this access to my own philosophical tradition became accessible to me through Germany and Europe. One rediscovers oneself in the language and perspectives of others.

Several times, I brought the results of this UNESCO collaboration from Germany to Tunisia in the form of publication copies for my Tunisian colleagues. The customs officials asked me once, "What are these gray booklets?" "The main thing is, they're not yellow booklets," I answered. The color yellow was used for religiously conservative books. "Nothing about human rights, is there?" he pressed further. "No, no, only about classical German philosophy. Kant and Hegel," I answered. The admiration that even this high-school graduate apparently showed for German philosophy protected me from a deeper look into the volumes' contents. I was allowed to pass.

### ► „First comes Christmas, then comes New Years, and then the revolution.”

The days of the early protests in the Arab countries in late 2010 were like a countdown whose results no one could predict. Many Tunisians sat feverishly in front of their computers and mobile phones and followed the news both day and night. This exceptional state was perhaps comparable to the German late-summer and autumn days of 1989. At this time, I was working on an essay about the transculturality of human rights, which I wanted to submit to a Goethe Institute competition. Engaging critically with the two Maghreb philosophers Mohamed Abed al-Jabri and Fathi Triki, I was examining the intercultural transfer of human rights and the potential of their transculturality with regard to articulating the conditions for their universalization (Dhouib 2013).



In Germany, there was hardly any reporting on the protests at this point. As I spoke with a friend about the events in Tunisia, and wondered out loud that the European media was reporting so little on these hot days in December, he answered with a self-mocking tone: “First comes Christmas, then comes New Years, and then we’ll be able to talk about the revolution.”

Three days before the transfer of power in Tunisia in January 2011, on a Monday, I flew from Frankfurt through Paris to Rabat for a research project focusing on school textbooks. As I transferred at Paris’ Charles de Gaulle airport, I glanced at the headlines, and still remember that at this point in France, the question being discussed was how Ben Ali could be militarily supported. A little later, as sympathies in Europe turned toward the Tunisian revolutionaries, then-French President Nicolas Sarkozy performed a 180-degree political about-face, with friends and allies becoming enemies. On my way back, the *Libération* newspaper was carrying a cover photo showing a young Tunisian woman holding up a poster reading Ben Ali dégage – Ben Ali resign! (*Libération* 2011).

In Rabat, on 14 January, I met with a Moroccan colleague, an instructor and human-rights activist, at a cafe in front of the Moroccan parliament building, in order to discuss the portrayal of human rights in Moroccan school textbooks and the role of civil society in supporting implementation of a human-rights culture. After we parted, my colleague went to the train station and there heard the most recent news. He immediately called me and congratulated me on a great event in my country: “Ben Ali harab!” – Ben Ali has fled. In a state of great joy and great confusion, I hunted for more information, for more people to talk to. I sent a few text messages to friends in Tunisia. In a small magazine kiosk on Avenue Mohamed V, I found a miniature black-and-white television. I am Tunisian, I told the magazine seller, and asked whether I could watch the news with him. He looked at me and said, “How great that a poet can change the destiny of a people!” That was a “yes”. Every Arab understands the allusion to the text of the Tunisian national anthem that was contained in this reply: “When the people will to live / Destiny must surely respond.” In the weeks of the Arab uprising, this verse from the poem *The Will To Live* by Tunisian poet Abou El Kacem Chebbi (1909-1934) developed into a formula of liberation, and was repeated in slogans such as “The people’s will ” (aš-ša‘b yurīd) on demonstrators’ signs in Tunis, Cairo, Tripoli and Damascus. At the first German-Arab conference that I organized immediately after the revolution, philosopher Mohammed Ali Halouani took this verse as an opportunity for a reflection on freedom and the positive associations in the Arab context with the idea of a national people (Halouani 2012). This drew critical comments in a reply from the German perspective, as the concept of a national people is not entirely unproblematic in the German context (Schmidt 2012).

As the German media were finally filled with news about the Arab revolutions, the DAAD advertised a number of exchange programs that were tailored to the Arab Spring states and were intended to support the process of scholarly transformation. With a few Arab DAAD fellows, primarily Egyptians, we participated in the Bonn discussion on the future design of DAAD funding for academic transformation in Egypt and Tunisia. A few of our suggestions were adopted and incorporated into the DAAD transformation program. In the context of this program, I was able to initiate and carry out two large exchange projects: initially, a series of four German-Arab conferences that took place in Tunis and

Kassel between 2011 and 2014, and which addressed the issues of human rights, democracy, tolerance and justice.

Beginning in 2013, a research project followed on the issues of responsibility, justice and the culture of remembrance; this was led by me until 2015, and primarily involved young Arab and German academics. The interdisciplinary and intercultural engagement with the working through (*Aufarbeitung*) of injustice under authoritarian states, as well as with the forms of speech and modes of silence under the dictatorship, became important themes of academic reflection within our exchange project (Dhouib 2017). Without a detached analysis of the linguistic norms that shaped discourses under the dictatorship, without a subtle decoding of the “public silence” (Meskini 2012), and without an examination of the subversive and counter-discourses, it becomes difficult to speak about democratization or to dream of a “humanistic democracy” (Said 2004; Turki 2016).

### ► The relevance of a dual critique

A first conference took place in October 2011 in the Centre d’Art Vivant Zoubeir Turki, located in the Park Belvédère in Tunis. This was the first philosophical conference in Tunisia following the revolution. The Centre d’Art Vivant is for the generation of older Tunisian philosophy professors an important site, rich in memories; here met the Club Taher Haddad, in which even Michel Foucault offered some of his Tunisian lectures, and here stood also a library that was an important point of contact for many Tunisian intellectuals, but which had been closed during the Ben Ali era. The Centre d’Art Vivant is a site of resistance for the younger generation too. Here was where the art of the revolution was exhibited, with young artists who were not only responding to the uprising, but who with their graffiti, posters and actions were themselves a part of the movement, a largely peaceful, angrily witty, creatively critical movement. We met surrounded by the art, a visual confrontation of philosophy with non-philosophy that continued with the graffiti on the way back to the hotel, and further on our way to the presentations. In addition to German colleagues, Algerian, Egyptian, Lebanese, Moroccan and Tunisian lecturers participated in the first meeting, some of whom also attended the following conferences (Dhouib 2012a). The fear instilled under authoritarian states cannot be shaken off from one day to the next. This fear was not entirely gone; it expressed itself in hesitant answers, in cautious reticences, in the circumlocutions that required interpretation or the meaningful silence that was not difficult to interpret. Yet beside, between and above this fear, one could also sense the excitement, the joy in our own loud voices, the enthusiasm in the discussions. To what degree do cultural identities and the cultural pluralism often associated with them stand in opposition to the transculturality of human rights? What are possible strategies for legitimizing human rights? How will the Arab and Islamic declarations of human rights, which were ratified by authoritarian states, be reflected in a post-dictatorial phase? Are human rights (including the United Nations’ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights) based on a particular view of human beings? A transcultural perspective on human rights is emerging – this became clear in the first conference’s discussion on the issue of culture, identity and human rights in a transcultural perspective – initially through what

Abdelkébir Khatibi (1938-2009) termed a “dual critique” (Khatibi 1983): the critique of the dogmatic tendencies in the Arab-Islamic cultural area, but also of the hegemonic structures of the “Western” states. For example, the self-criticism emerges from the Arab perspective in the engagement with the Declaration on Human Rights in Islam (1990) and the Arab Charter of Human Rights (2004), in which the tension between universality and particularity in the Islamic context, and between the recognition of cultural rights and the failures to institutionalize these rights, is examined (Serbagi 2012). However, it appears also from a “Western” perspective if it reflects on the political “betrayal” of the idea of the universality of human rights. Bremen philosopher Georg Mohr, for example, argues for a “properly understood universality” – that is, for a “non-colonial universality”, in which a legitimation of hegemonic power politics becomes impossible (Mohr 2012).

In order to inspire the speakers from diverse cultures and disciplines to fruitful and constructive discussion, and call into question the rigid dividing lines between the “Arab world” and the “West” with regard to the universality of human rights, each presentation was followed by a short response in which the Arab and German participants could offer reciprocal comments on one another’s contributions. The response was one element of a dialogic structure of collaboration, and additionally served to reveal another view on the issue being addressed. This dialogic structure is also intended to contribute to breaking down academic hierarchies in Germany and especially in Arab universities, and has established itself as a model for all subsequent conferences and for the publication of the presentations. Along this path of collaborative philosophizing, one challenge was the communication in different languages, and the continual efforts to calibrate the translation of thought and the thinking in translation.

### ► What’s the Arabic for „culture of remembrance“ (Erinnerungskultur) and „working through“ (Aufarbeitung)

In the summer of 2012, I met with colleagues in the fields of German language and literature, philosophy, and sociology in the Café de Paris on Avenue Habib Bourguiba in Tunis for a joint brainstorming session, with the goal of developing a theme for an exchange project we wanted to submit to the DAAD. The topography of individual streets, the proximity or even the neighborhood of resistance and repression, of past and present, is a challenge both emotionally and intellectually. For example, across the street from Café de Paris is the Café l’Univers; in his time as a lecturer at the University of Tunis (1966-1967), Foucault regularly sat here with intellectuals and Tunisian students, who – like philosophers Zeïneb Ben Saïd-Cherni and Fathi Triki – he had influenced (Ben Saïd-Cherni 2018; Triki 2008). Many even today still expressly regard themselves as his followers, continuing to pursue his discourse-analytical approach. Not far away, on the same street, stands the Tunisian Ministry of Interior, in whose cellars intellectuals – women and men of all political orientations – were tortured. And finally, only a few hundred meters away from the Café de Paris are today the DAAD offices, which were established in 2012 for the promotion of academic transformation in North Africa.

I threw the term “culture of remembrance” (*Erinnerungskultur*) into our brainstorming session, and we tried to translate it into Arabic. Like the concept of “working through” (*Aufarbeitung*), the word was very German, bound closely with the German language, culture and history both in subtle and less subtle ways. A literal translation, such as *ṭaqāfat aḍ-ḍākira*, makes little substantive sense, and so only a more or less circuitous description seemed suitable. At the same time, it was precisely this issue of remembrance culture and the question of a working through of injustice that was so virulent for the Arab world, which was on the way to becoming a post-dictatorial world, or so at least we hoped. The establishment of a democratic system is bound closely with the working through of experiences with injustice. Numerous novels and testimonials composed in recent years, as well as in the preceding decades under the dictatorship, await contemplation by the scholarly world; such works include *Cristal* by Gilbert Naccache, *al-Qauqa’a* (*The Capsule*, 2008) by Muṣṭafā Ḥalīfa, and *Bil-ḥalāṣ yā šabāb! 16 ‘āman fī suḡūn sūrīya* (*On the deliverance! 16 years in the Syrian prisons*, 2012) by Yāsīn al- Ḥāḡḡ Ṣālīḥ. Even if the “culture of remembrance” and “working through” were not yet themes being addressed by Tunisian and Egyptian universities (in Morocco, the issues were already being discussed), they began to be so in the course of the authorized Responsibility, Justice and the Culture of Remembrance project – and not only in a cross-Arab comparative sense. In Tunis, but also in the rather more neglected province of Medenine in Tunisia’s structurally disadvantaged south, workshops and seminars were carried out, a small amount of international research literature was acquired and made available to students, and in the German-Arab conferences, we discussed issues including the differences between a German and Arab “working through” (*Aufarbeitung*) (Dhoub 2017). Given the political changes beginning in 2014, the thematization of specific experiences of injustice in Egypt was by contrast still possible only in mediated form, for example through the literary discussion of fictional texts. Unfortunately, some Egyptian colleagues were no longer able to participate in the project.

The discussion of director Hichem Ben Ammar’s film *Against Forgetting* (*Gegen das Vergessen*) in the project’s first workshop in Germany in 2013 served as prelude to a reflection on testimony and torture that continued over the course of the year. This documentary film on the history of torture and on the working through of Tunisia’s past was created in the context of the *Contre l’oubli* – Project for the Working through of the Past in Tunisia project led by cultural studies scholar Hamza Chourabi. The project was located at the Berlin-Hohenschönhausen Memorial. In this film, members of the leftist “Perspectives” movement were interviewed about their time in prison under Bourguiba, about torture and abuse, about the importance of literature and communications between prisoners. The film also tells the story of a random meeting between a torturer and a torture victim following prison, and reflects on violence as an anthropological constant among human beings, as well as the (im) possibility of reconciliation and reparation. Such topics were addressed incisively, for example, in Fathi Ben Haj Yahia’s narrative about his prison experience (Ben Haj Yahia [Fr. trans. 2011]).

One of the prisons from the “dark years”, formerly located near the “Faculty of 9 April” (*Faculté des Sciences Humaines et Sociales de Tunis*), has been destroyed. Today only individual piles of rubble on a broad piece of ground can be seen. This site of torture and dehumanization and the site of free

and humanistic education were located nearly side by side. The name “9 Avril”, borne by both the prison and the college, recalls an important date in Tunisia’s national history. The date 9 April 1938 marked a bloody event in the struggle for independence. It is an irony of history that this prison, which held the “freedom fighters” of that era even during the colonial period, persisted after independence in order to torture the new oppositional elite.

How to handle such a “*lieu de mémoire*” (site of memories)? Should it be preserved, and if so, under what auspices? These are questions for which new answers must be found again and again. We – the German, Tunisian and Moroccan lecturers and students – had the opportunity in June 2014 to inspect the site with one of the film’s witnesses, Ezzedine Hazgui. In his stories, the walls of this hated building rose once again from the ruins.

## ► Philosophy and witness

As a Tunisian, one knew much and suspected more; this was shown not least in the many whispered jokes in circulation under the dictatorship (Maataoui 2017). However, this circumstance has not been the subject of public reflection, and certainly not of scholarly contemplation. This is the threshold that must now be crossed. In the course of the project, a number of Tunisian philosophers such as Zeïneb Ben Saïd-Cherni and Salah Mosbah reported – for the first time in this public form – on their experiences in detention and in prison, and posed the question of whether and how testimony can be given. Numerous testimonials, as well as novels about prison experiences, have appeared in the Arabic-speaking world in recent years. Often, though not always, the testimony of Arab philosophers who underwent these experiences with their own bodies possesses a particular value. Not only is it descriptive and a document of injustice; their nuanced, conceptually exact reflections on injustice show the transition from concrete experience to philosophy (Dhouib 2018a). However, providing witness has proven to be a task that is complex, tedious and sometimes full of detours. To me, a short car trip with my former professor Fathi Triki serves as paradigmatic of the difficulty in speaking, and at the same time the great need to speak of what has been experienced. Triki was my most important exchange-program partner for all my projects. I had asked him numerous times in Arabic whether he too had been imprisoned, but my questions were always brushed vaguely aside. “You know how it was...” (*māk ta’raf kifāš*), he responded in Tunisian dialect. What was I supposed to know, and why? Because I am Tunisian? At this traumatic time in his life, I probably wasn’t even born yet. I felt that any further questions would be rude. Why couldn’t I insist? As Triki drove my wife and me to our hotel in his car, we spoke in French, and he suddenly recounted a memory from prison, directly, concisely and vividly, that genuinely shocked us. Somewhat stunned, we said our goodbyes. What role is played by the language in which one communicates memories? To whom can one recount them, and when is the best moment to speak about them?

The issue of compensation, raised in the context of the discussion on transitional justice and the work of the Tunisian Truth Commission, was rejected by all philosophers interviewed in the project.

A personal compensation was impossible, they said; however, anchoring the value of human beings and their fundamental rights in the still-to-be-written Tunisian constitution was the most important political response to the injustice experienced. This stance, which rejects material compensation, can also be found in the testimonies of philosophers Zeïneb Ben Saïd-Cherni (Dübgen 2014) and Salah Mosbah, which are slated to appear in the German language in 2018 (Dhouib 2018a). A portion of the reflection on the multifaceted nature of transitional justice was published in 2016 (Dhouib 2016).

### ► Do women go to school in your country?

At the University of Bremen's Institute for Philosophy, I was once allowed to give a lecture on the status of philosophy in the Tunisian educational system. After my presentation, a student asked whether women in Tunisia were allowed to go to school. I initially thought it was a joke. By contrast, my German host, who had some experience with German-Arab exchange programs, understood that it was not a joke, and answered in my place with a story. When he was at a conference in Tunisia, he and his German colleagues were asked: Where are your female German philosophers? Because at this meeting, all the participants on the German side were men, while the Tunisian contingent had many women as well (Ben Saïd-Cherni 2008).

Prejudices of this kind have also led me in my seminars on modern Arab-Islamic philosophy to begin with what I don't offer and what we will not do in the seminar: no research on terrorism or fundamentalism, although such phenomena can certainly be regarded from a philosophical perspective. Students' initial questions are of course strongly influenced by the media, and reflect what one finds in the press, on television and online about the Arab world. But unfortunately, the academic discourse also suffers often from this asymmetric attention. Instead of philosophers engaging with philosophers, focus is always placed on Islam or the political events in the Arab region. This became clear to me particularly in a conversation with Syrian philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, who died in exile in Berlin on 11 December 2016. In the summer of 2016, I had several conversations with him that touched me deeply. Sadiq, as he wanted to be called, sought throughout his life in his critical works to bring about a societal, political and philosophical transformation (al-Azm 1968 [Engl. trans. 2011]; 1969 [Engl. trans. 2014]). Not only as philosopher, but also as an actor within civil society, he served as an important point of orientation for an entire generation of Arab intellectuals. In one of our conversations, he referred – not without bitterness – to the difficulties confronted by the Arab philosopher. While he worked under difficult political and academic conditions in his country, and thus frequently changed both physical locations and roles (as academic, as public intellectual and as civil-society actor), in the “Western” context he was rarely in demand as a philosopher, but often instead as an “expert on Islam” or “Middle East expert”. “Expertise” on the “homo islamicus” was regularly expected from him. This is not meant only as a criticism of neoliberal language – a language in which cultures and people are treated as commodities, and a judgment on them in the form of “expertise” is possible according to market-economic rules. Rather, the aim is

also to inquire into the reasons why such a skewed perception, in which the voices of Arab philosophers are hardly to be heard, is continually reproduced.

Currently, there are still few annotated and scholarly translations of Arab philosophers. Instead of asking how certain themes are addressed by these philosophers, the question is posed: “What does Islam say about this?” In this way, fundamentalist and Islamist approaches are pushed to the foreground, while the Arab world’s critical and enlightened philosophical approaches remain largely unknown. The *Philosophy in the Modern Middle East* (*Philosophie in der Nahöstlichen Moderne*) series, recently created by Anke von Kügelgen, seeks to resolve the above-mentioned asymmetric perception. The anthology “*Toleranz und Intoleranz in der arabischen Moderne*” (*Tolerance and Intolerance in the Modern Arab World*), which I am currently producing within the context of an AGYA tandem project, will appear in this series of volumes.

German-Arab exchange in times of political transformation not only enables us to think through questions of human rights, experiences with injustice and the culture of remembrance from a dual perspective, and to advance the idea of a transcultural philosophy. It also serves to dismantle prejudices and blinders. With the demand for a dual substantive critique comes the demand for a dual critique of philosophical practice, which also encompasses issues such as gender equality and the promotion of young talent. Dual critique means, for example, a (self-)critical look at scholarly infrastructure and practice in Arab countries, in which the achievement of equality, promotion of the young and decentralization remain critical tasks. It also includes a (self-)critical look at academic life in Europe and Germany, particularly with regard to the issues of equality of opportunity and support for young talent, as well as tolerance for an Arab world which, in its complexity, cannot be equated with Islamism.

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