

Culture (II)

Al-Siyasa (Hadith al-Yawm), 25 July 1932.

Between those who understand education for what it truly is, who appreciate its role in shaping the nation, and who likewise appreciate the connection between it and the nation's highest ideals—between these people and the Ministry of Education there lies a wide, deep, far-reaching disagreement over Egyptian culture: what is it? On what does it rest? And what ought it to be?

The source of this disagreement is that the Ministry of Education has never once put these questions to serious inquiry and thought; for it is, it would seem, too narrow in mind to be capable of thinking about such subjects, and it regards those who think about Egyptian culture, its foundations, and its future as a band of pretentious dabblers who philosophize in thin air, wasting their own time and their readers' time on what neither enriches nor profits anyone.

And I speak to you from experience when I tell you that you will feel a great deal of weariness and boredom, and then of despair and hopelessness, when you talk to the men of education at the Ministry about these questions I have just raised; for you will find people who do not understand you, and who are incapable of understanding you. And it is hard for one who has not understood you to go on listening to you, so you will meet with avoidance and aversion. If the man you are speaking with has some measure of courtesy and good taste, he will turn the conversation toward jest and banter, offer you a cigarette, order you coffee, and say to you with a laugh: "These are questions ahead of their time; it is best to wait with them until independence is complete." And if he speaks to you coarsely, thick-skinned and coarse in taste, he will let you talk on while he yawns and stretches and fidgets with whatever he finds before him on the table—a pen, a paper, a book—until you feel that you are really talking to yourself, since your companion is not listening to you at all; so you change the subject, and at once your companion turns to you, his face open and beaming.

I have met both types of men at the Ministry of Education, and tested them, and tried to reach some understanding with them, but I did not succeed in that, whether a little or a great deal.

For the Ministry of Education has proceeded, ever since the Occupation, on the assumption that education is a means of producing civil servants. Then the number of the educated grew until it exceeded the number of posts, and the newspapers began publishing chapters and articles showing that confining education to the production of civil servants was one of the evils of the Occupation, and it became a mark of the enlightened man to hold this evil against the English, and to affirm that education has other purposes besides this modest one. So the Ministry of Education fell in behind the newspapers, and its men adopted this view—being enlightened men themselves—but they never inquired into what these other purposes might be, nor attempted to define them. I was astonished, at the beginning of this school year, by an exchange between the Minister of Education and myself over the students whom the Ministry was crowding, in great numbers, into the Higher School of Commerce. I asked the Minister: "And what are these students to do—those who are packed in by the hundreds into this school—once they finish their studies? For what we observe in other countries is that the higher specialized technical schools admit students only in measured numbers, and that the universities alone admit them without limit, because universities make learning freely available to people, nothing more. These schools, however, prepare their students for particular jobs, so the number of such students ought to match the actual need." The Minister said: "What concerns me is simply to relieve the pressure on the Ministry, and to remove the resentment of people who do not know where to place their sons after they have won their baccalaureate. As for their future once they finish their studies, that is no concern of mine; people ought to be educated at their own risk. Higher education is not a treasure that people must throw themselves at!"

So the Minister of Education, then, was practicing politics, not education, when he crowded students into the School of Commerce in such numbers. He wanted to relieve the government—even if only temporarily—of the resentment of the discontented and the protests of the aggrieved. As for the future of these students, as for their actual education, that was something that concerned him not at all. The result was that the School of Commerce became, in effect, two schools: one operating in the first part of the day, the other in its latter part, with scarcely any increase in the number of professors. So pity, along with me, these poor professors, forced to repeat the very same lecture several times over in a single day. And yet the Minister of Education is, among all the men in his Ministry, the broadest in mind, the furthest-reaching in

outlook, and the most given to discussing such matters—so judge for yourself, after this, what share the Ministry of Education has of breadth of mind, far-reaching outlook, and soundness of thought.

And the Ministry of Education has proceeded, ever since the Occupation, on the basis that education must be English; for the English wanted this, and fought French culture until they drove it out of the government schools. Then independence was declared, and the newspapers began saying that English culture alone was not enough, and that restoring some measure of French to the schools would be beneficial. So the Ministry of Education resisted this idea with every means of resistance available to it, so as to please that quarter I pointed to in yesterday's article. And I know of two ministers who met with a great deal of harm from this resistance, which exposed them to no small amount of unpleasantness. The first of these was Ali Maher Pasha, who came to the Ministry of Education full of enthusiasm for Latin culture, defending it, insisting on strengthening it; it seemed to him that he could do this, and that he was independent in the affairs of education, so he pressed ahead and ordered Latin to be taught in some secondary schools, Greek in others, and French in all of them. But it was not long before he learned that his independence was in doubt, that Greek and Latin were a kind of luxury to be permitted to Europeans but not to Egyptians, and that French was to be taught, but only in measured amounts. The man found himself caught between resignation and submission, and he submitted; Latin and Greek were erased, and their teachers scattered among the provinces to teach French in a modest way.

As for the other minister, he was Murad Sayed Ahmad Pasha. He came believing in Latin culture, encouraging it, and encouraging the French language in particular. He and the Prime Minister were both struck by the fact that, when the government had finished drafting the new Constitution, it could not readily find anyone to translate it into Arabic and English except after great difficulty and hardship. So Murad Pasha wanted to strengthen the study of languages, and to encourage the teaching of French. The man did no more than think the matter through and form a judgment, and present his thinking and his judgment to the Prime Minister, who all but agreed with him and supported him; but those who had stood against Maher Pasha came back and stood against Murad Pasha too. And I have been told that correcting the excess into which Murad Pasha had fallen cost the Prime Minister no little trouble. And those who contrived this punishment for the two ministers

enthusiastic for Latin culture are not far removed from the Ministry of Education, and they are neither haters of Latin culture nor lovers of English culture; for they are ignorant of both cultures entirely. They are simply people who never take up any matter of education without asking themselves: what does this quarter think of this matter? What does that quarter think of this matter? And they never ask themselves: where does the nation's benefit lie in this matter?

And I know of no quarter of the Egyptian government in which the sense of independence has grown weaker since its declaration, and in which the eagerness to learn the English view of things, in general and in detail, has grown stronger, than the Ministry of Education. The telling of that would take long, and its details are not the kind that raise an Egyptian's head high or vindicate his dignity.

At the Ministry of Education, then, there is a policy aimed at imposing English culture upon this country, and the Ministry of Education upholds this policy because upholding it pleases the English, and because, to the Ministry of Education, all cultures are equal, none to be preferred over another, except whichever secures an immediate advantage. And what could be closer to securing an immediate advantage than pleasing the English? And yet it is a national sin, and a crime against this people, to impose upon the Egyptians any one particular culture. The Egyptians ought, rather, to have their own pure Egyptian culture. And this pure Egyptian culture will come into being only on the day the Egyptians are permitted to draw upon whatever cultures they wish, and to take their learning wherever they themselves choose, not wherever it is chosen for them.

The Egyptians are permitted to buy whatever foreign goods they need from the English, the French, the Germans, and the Italians; nothing restricts their freedom in this except the competition among these nations, to see which of them can satisfy the buyer with the quality of its goods, the modesty of its price, and the excellence of its service. It ought likewise to be permitted to them to take whatever they need of culture from all of these nations, choosing for themselves, rather than having the government choose for them.

And what would you say if the government forced upon us that we buy only from the English, deal only with the English, and travel only to English lands? It cannot force this upon us. And yet it has, up to now, succeeded—thanks to the Occupation on the one hand, thanks to English

interests after independence on the other, and thanks to our own neglect of education on a third hand—in forcing upon us the English language and English culture. So whoever among us wants another language, or another culture, has no right to seek them in the state schools, but must seek them instead in the free foreign schools.

The simplest principles of political liberty bind the government not to impose upon the country any one particular foreign culture in public education, and bind it to make education, in all its branches, conducted in the Arabic language, and to make all the advanced living languages, or at least the most advanced among them, represented in the state schools, so that pupils and parents may choose among them as they wish. And the slightest measure of discernment and regard for the national interest binds the government not to impose English culture upon the country by force; for we want independence, and we want to wrest it from the English, and so it is a good thing that our pupils should have before them ideals of art, letters, learning, and life other than English ideals.

I believe there is no good in setting one culture against another in comparison, for every culture has its own value and its own merits. We are in need of taking the best of everything. Let us, then, turn away from this absurd weighing of Latin culture against English culture, and direct our efforts instead toward building a pure Egyptian culture that draws its nourishment from a free acquaintance with human cultures, ancient and modern, in general.

And I shall be among the happiest of people on the day I see an Egyptian government possess enough courage to place English, French, and German languages and literatures on an equal footing in the state schools, and leave to pupils and their parents the right to choose. But I am certain that this government will not be the government of His Excellency Sidqi Pasha.