

Wither the Arab Liberal University?

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Friends and Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is indeed an honour and a privilege to be here and I wish to thank the organisers for giving me the opportunity to address such a distinguished audience.

Ladies and Gentleman,

I do realize that the title of my address (Wither the Arab Liberal University?) is provocative; some would even go as far as describing it as outrageous. Yet, the horrific barbarism being visited upon so many of our Arab countries, sometimes with active participation of some university graduates, often times with their collusion, connivance or submission, must lead us to wonder whether Arab universities are failing their civilizational mission.

Unfortunately, in as far as one can postulate the existence of an Arab public mind, it seems that the Arab public has a doggedly instrumentalist attitude towards higher education. Universities are perceived of as places where students get the knowledge and are provided with the skills that will stand

graduates in good stead in the face of the vicissitudes of the labour market. I have often listened to people talking of the university in terms suggestive of an image of a service station or a production line producing degree holders. Education should indeed be responsive to the needs of society, but not necessarily, or even not primarily, in a direct utilitarian way. And this is a theme that I shall return to.

But if the university is not that, then what is it? It is a community of scholars whose mission is to safeguard rationality. And it does so in two ways. First, by intellectual and scientific production that defends rationality, develops it, improves it and establishes it in disciplines of all kinds, from the most mundane to the outlandishly esoteric. Secondly, it does so, by educating generations of young people into internalizing rationality, embracing it in their modes of thinking and behaviour almost subconsciously and imperceptibly. Moreover, in our particularly unfortunate Arab circumstances, where extremism is running amok, causing horrendous damage to our present and our future, it is also incumbent upon the community of scholars that constitutes the university to inculcate reasonableness and moderation into the young minds that we serve. In this sense, the value of the university stems not so much from the services it offers, but rather from the values it represents, defends and advocates, which are in fact the same values of open-minded, democratic citizenship.

For the university to fulfill its civilizational mission, it should not meekly surrender to the forces that relentlessly push it towards adopting impoverished curricula where technical subjects incessantly ease out the liberal arts, i.e., arts, humanities, languages, literatures, social sciences, mathematics and physical sciences. Indeed, even for professional degree programs, the need to educate necessitates curricula with a healthy provision of liberal arts, distributed over its major disciplines; a provision that is often referred to as the general education requirement. And this ought to be the case, even if at the expense of narrowing down the technical provision. Unfortunately, I probably need not tell you that general education has been beating a steady retreat in curricula throughout the Arab university system.

On occasions when I mount a spirited defence of the liberal art provision, like I am attempting to do now, I am often asked: but what is the purpose? I think the best answer to that question is to borrow from the German philosopher Immanuel Kant his defence of art. He said that beautiful objects are 'purposive without purpose'. What this in lay terms means is that beautiful objects should affect us as if they had a purpose, although they were designed with no particular purpose in mind. And so it is with liberal arts education. To see why and how, I shall briefly consider a few

habits of mind and modes of behavior that are generally accepted as desirable.

I think we can all agree that the world has been getting more complex, and will continue to get more complex, perhaps at an exponential rate. Hence, acquiring analytical reasoning and problem solving skills has become essential for conducting everyday life, let alone for professional activity. And there is no better way, perhaps no other way, for acquiring such skills than being firmly grounded in several disciplines, particularly the liberal arts; being familiar with their methodologies, methods and ways of structuring knowledge.

You will have noticed that I said grounded 'in several disciplines', rather than 'in a discipline'. In the modern world, most work requires familiarity with more than one discipline, if only to facilitate team work. Moreover, most interesting work is by its very nature interdisciplinary or lies at the interface between disciplines. And what better than basic familiarity with the liberal arts to provide the intellectual flexibility necessary for interdisciplinarity, for moving into uncharted fields later in life, for the ability to undertake life-long learning.

The fruits of analytical reasoning, problem solving and synthesis would be laid to waste if their bearer failed to communicate them to fellow humans. More, it could be said that such fruits do not come into being until and unless they

are communicated. Indeed, the ability to explain, explicate, adumbrate and bring closer to comprehension in speech, writing and other forms of presentation and representation, in short, having communication skills, is clearly important, as is mastery of languages. It is, of course, essential and admirable to master one's own national language. However, this is not enough. To survive and prosper in the world of today, one needs to master at least one foreign language; principally English, which, like it or not, has become the international lingua franca.

Moreover, globalization has made cosmopolitanism, in the good sense of the word, a necessity; by that I mean the ability not only to move with ease within cultures and between cultures, but also to appreciate and enjoy their beauty and splendour, particularly since temporary or permanent emigration has become a defining feature of modern times.

Yet, safeguarding and expanding the liberal arts provision in all curricula is not enough. The current trend in the Arab world is for good students to flock to Engineering, Medicine and Business, leaving the departments of humanities, social science and natural science to make do for the most part with weaker students, or indeed to wither on the vine becoming eventually mere service departments for the professional faculties. This trend does not augur well for the future of our societies. We do need serious and intellectually

endowed sociologists, anthropologists, literary critics, linguists, paleographers, palaeontologists, museologists, musicologists, ancient historians and so on, if our societies are to enter the modern age truly. Overemphasis on technology, to the exclusion of the arts, humanities, social sciences and natural sciences, is likely to leave us trailing behind as consumers of technology and the products of science, with social structures incapable of withstanding the strains and stresses of modernity. We do desperately need to remunerate adequately and elevate the social status of workers in these fields, particularly those who choose to enter, or end up entering, the school teaching profession. Otherwise, we will fail to break a vicious downward spiral, with poorly equipped school teachers producing poorly equipped school leavers, who end up in lifeless or listless arts and sciences university departments that feed the school system, and so on ad destructum.

By now, some of you must have started suspecting me of being an old-fashioned ivory-tower academic, which is not that wide of the mark. However, I will now don the utilitarian hat of the university president to argue that in fact the type of university education I advocate is eminently useful.

There is sufficient empirical evidence to indicate that alumni of liberal art colleges and universities that emphasise general education occupy in the United States a disproportionately large share of leadership position in various walks of life. The evidence further suggests that this is due to certain liberal-

arts education outcomes, including intercultural effectiveness, inclination to inquire and lifelong learning, well-being, and leadership qualities.

All this is not to say that the university should or can afford to ignore the labour market. However, the relationship between university and labour market is not one-way, with the latter dictating to the former. Rather, it is a relationship of complex interaction, with the university remaining true to its mission of education, while extending the labour market through the products of original research. Moreover, there will always be a time lag in the university's response to developments in the labour market. For one thing, modifying teaching and education is an elaborate process involving lengthy consensus making among the academics. For another, the university would not want to respond to developments in the labour market too readily, lest such developments prove transient, rather than long lasting or permanent.

All too often, industrialists, business people and employers deplore what they see as failure by the university to produce graduates who would when employed hit the ground running and start making money for the employer from day one.

Were the university to acquiesce, being reduced in the process to a glorified training institution, then that would be counterproductive for the employers themselves, as well as for society at large. Direct training on current technologies, instead of education and solid grounding in disciplines, with the associated habits of thinking and learning, condemns

university graduates to rapid obsolescence due to inability to keep pace with the ever accelerating developments in science, knowledge and technology. They, i.e., the graduates, would then become a burden on the labour market, rather than an asset.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When I was preparing this address, my wife told me not to be too serious and dry. Crack a joke or two, she said. I am afraid, I am not that good at telling jokes. And so to lighten the mood, I will tell you about Cedric Villani, who visited our university recently. An article in *The New Yorker* described him in a recent sighting much better than I ever could: his shoulder-length hair was parted almost symmetrically down the middle, and he wore his usual ensemble: a three-piece pin-striped black suit, a silver pocket watch and chain, a peacock-green cravat (purchased at a costume store for actors), an overstuffed backpack, and, pinned to his lapel like a biological specimen, a custom-made spider brooch. Clearly Cedric is an arch eccentric. But he is also a world renowned mathematician. He is a Fields medallist, and the Fields medal, for those of you who are not familiar with it, is for mathematics the equivalent of the Nobel prize. He is also the Director of the Henry Poincare Institute in Paris, which describes itself as the House of Mathematics and Theoretical Physics since 1928. Once again, Cedric is clearly an arch eccentric, and as clearly had Cedric been an Arab academic, he would have been laughed at all the way to exile early on in

his career. Arab universities need to become bastions of liberalism in all the senses that I mentioned earlier, but also in celebrating and nurturing brilliant but eccentric people, such as Cedric Villani.

Thank you.

And the occasion is doubly important for me, since it is one of my last public addresses as a university president, for I am coming towards the end of my term and hope to be soon doing what I love most, i.e., teaching and doing research.