



Photograph © JF Paga Grasset

Amin Maalouf is an acclaimed writer and possibly one of the most visionary thinkers of our time. Amidst French and Dutch lockdowns, Petra Stienen (S) and Hoba Gull (G) meet him digitally. Quarantining doesn't seem to disrupt the life of the man who once travelled the Levant and beyond as a foreign correspondent for the Lebanese paper *An-Nahar* too much. It has given him the possibility to, in his own words, live by the rhythm of his books. In his latest, *Adrift*, he traces back how civilizations have drifted apart over the course of the 20th century. 'We need to know where we came from and how this led towards what we are experiencing today.'

Interview by Petra Stienen & Hoba Gull

Interview
Amin
Maalouf

How our world lost its way and how to imagine a different future

G: In *Disordered World* (2009) you wrote: 'We have embarked on this century without a compass. From its very first months, disturbing events took place which created the impression that the world had gone seriously off-course in several areas at once – it had gone off course intellectually, financially, environmentally, geopolitically and ethically'. How do you look back on this book? 'It turns out that this book was part of a trilogy. Though I did not know it at the time, now in hindsight I see that it's meant to be part of a trilogy that started with my book *Murderous Identities*, published in 1998. The idea of this book was to try to explain why I was so worried by the developments I saw around me. *Disordered World* came as a continuation of this. My focus in that book is that at the fall of

'At the fall of the Berlin Wall there was an opportunity to build a new world order that was more just and inclusive, and this opportunity was squandered'

the Berlin Wall there was an opportunity to build a new world order that was more just and inclusive, and this opportunity was squandered.'

How was this opportunity squandered? 'After the Cold War, its winner could have included other nations in building this system. The first country that should have been included was – I think – Gorbachev's Russia. But the United States made a different choice. Instead of helping the movement towards democracy, development and liberalization in the former Soviet Union, the choice was made to break this engagement. The consequence is that we have given birth to a feeling of resentment and a desire of revenge, which is expressed today in the attitude of President Putin. Another element is that the world order should have been built on a consensus. The United States were in the position to build such a consensus because its primacy was at the time accepted by everybody. The first Gulf War was built upon this consensus. But too quickly, the United States thought it didn't need the world, and could go on alone. The first sign was the war in former Yugoslavia, where the US worked with NATO – although it actually does not have the legal means to intervene anywhere – and bypassed the United Nations. With the second Iraq War even NATO was excluded. With this war, the United States destroyed a burgeoning world order which would have been to its advantage and would have solidified its position as the foremost world power. This is why I talk about a missed opportunity. After that, the world was disordered. There was no world order, and in fact, less and less order overall.'

S: In *Adrift* you speak about the interventionist policies of the US which, according to many, were a big failure. On the other hand, the European Union – by including some of these former Soviet states – has tried to build this consensus. Did this approach work? 'I think the European Union could have played a very important role in building a world based on consensus, because of the experience of its people. Both in relation to each other and in relation to the rest of the world. Europe has learned a lot of its history. Unfortunately, Europe did not give itself the means to do this.'

In which way hasn't Europe given itself the means to play this role? 'I'm a federalist, so in my view there should have been a European federal system comparable to that of the United States. I think we needed a wise, experienced group of countries who should have built a model of how to live together and leave conflict behind us. Not just for the sake of the European people but for the sake of people everywhere. European powers have not always respected these principles, look at Algeria or Indonesia, but they have matured. I would say Europe would have been the ideal nation – although it doesn't conceive itself as a nation – to be the founding father of a new world order.'

S: In her book *Black Waves*, Kim Ghattas views the year 1979 as a crucial year, a turning point. Looking at the glimmers of hope – like Greta Thurnberg, the BLM-movement, who managed to mobilize millions worldwide, or at the inspiring protests in Hong Kong – do you think

'I'm a federalist, so in my view there should have been a European federal system comparable to that of the United States'

2020 could be a new turning point? 'I'm sure 2020 is the beginning of something new. It is always difficult when you are living in the event to say 'well, this will be the beginning of something', because we don't have the perspective. But for once I am sure something is ending, and something is beginning. I see an élan, as we say in French, that is happening in many parts of the world. The aspiration to have more dignity, more freedom, more say in the running of their own country and society is real. Will it lead to a change of their reality? I hope so. It's very possible.' Maalouf laughs. 'I don't think we're doomed'.

G: What can we do to help this change, to spur the transition to a brighter, more just future? 'I think my generation needs to give some of its experience. The change will come from younger people, but I hope we can try to do it together. I believe we need to know where we came from and how this led towards what we are experiencing today. This was also the intention of *Adrift*. When we know that, we can imagine what path we can take toward a different future. And which different future? We need to build a strategy that will give the aspiration of so many young people around the world the possibility of realization. We talked about the year we're in: I think something has ended this year. We need to state what has ended and where we are going from here. You smiled when I said we are not doomed, of course we are not doomed. Because it's not an option to continue on this path, which we today know will lead to destruction. If we continue this way, we're going towards a new Cold War – which is looming –, a new arms race, and towards an acceleration of climate change. Climate change is no longer something that will happen at the end of the century, or at the middle of the next century. It will not only affect my grand children and great grandchildren, but also me and my children. We need to change course very quickly.'

S: In your trilogy I can see your warning about tribalism – whether it's religions, ethnic, racial or even gender-based. There is, however, also an emancipatory aspect to putting one element of your identity on the frontline: I am Hong Kong, I am woman, I am LGBT. And from there: I want to be included in this society. How do we balance the danger of tribalism on one hand and the emancipatory potential of identity on the other? 'I think diversity can be the best and worst tool for the 21st century. If we can organize our society in a way that nobody feels discriminated against, diversity is a huge asset for our society. If we don't know how to manage it and we let things explode in all directions, it can be a very disruptive force. My experience as a Lebanese shows both paths. Diversity can become a resource if there is a new vision on what identity is. If we conceive our identity as being only limited to one aspect, we are in a struggle. Sometimes elements of our identity are antagonistic towards each other. It is the responsibility of society and its politicians, media and writers to harmonise different elements of identity, and to convince people they are part of one society and one history. That they have their part in society and are not excluded. So there should be a kind of social contract that lets people know what they owe their society and what their society owes them. This – and I stress this very much – can't

'If we continue this way, we're going towards a new Cold War – which is looming –, a new arms race, and towards an acceleration of climate change'

‘There needs to be a policy for harmonising relations between citizens – regardless of their origin, colour, gender or creed – and communities. This should be a priority for any government’

be left to time or to chance. There needs to be a policy for harmonising relations between citizens – regardless of their origin, colour, gender or creed – and communities. This should be a priority for any government.’

S: You perceive the world as being adrift. So we have to ask ourselves: where is the safe harbour? Who is the captain? I think of Saint Christopher, the patron of travellers. He is considered to be like a ferryman for those without a bridge or a boat. Seen as someone connecting the people on two shores, divided by a river. Are you not a ferryman, connecting France, Europe and the Middle East? Not the captain of a big ship, but someone who brings people together? ‘This is similar to a term in French: *passeur*. I like this metaphor a lot. I think that this is an element which is very important. People who can be the conveyers, from one place to another, from one culture to another, from one country to another. And I would add that it is our responsibility – of every person who has different elements in his or her identity – to do this. We have to help these people become a meeting place between different cultures, and a transmitter in both directions.’

G: That seems like a great deal of responsibility for people who have multiple elements to their identity, such as bicultural people. Is this fair to ask of them? ‘I do not think we should let them carry that responsibility alone, that would not be fair at all. I think this is the responsibility of the leaders of every country, of every society, and the responsibility of all of the responsible people in them to try to give their fellow citizens support in this role of ‘*passeur*’. One cannot ask people to reinvent that role. We have to invent it and then give it to them as an option. And we are not doing that. I think we need more inclusion and we have to define how to achieve this. We should do it absolutely more actively. We can not leave this to evolution. We need to draw a clear policy and implement it. In order to – as you said – not let people carry this alone and be left to decide under other influences. We need to give every citizen the tools they need to deal with this.’

G: How do you view the recent demonstrations in Lebanon? Do you think it can develop into systemic change? ‘Well, I hope so. But it is not very easy to jump from the idea that people are sick of tribalism to the result that they will want to get rid of it. The political structure of the country is made in a certain way. And it’s usually relatively easy for the leaders of a given community to maintain the cohesion of their community under the argument that if we do not stick together, our rights will be lost. So will there be a kind of common revolt of the people who would build a new political system? I do not see it coming. I think there are desires of change, but there is no mechanism yet that could bring the change. That is also true of many other countries in the area. We see movements against the leaders – against the political system – but it is not an easy step to go from a movement towards the establishment of a new political reality. This has failed in most of the countries. When people hear slogans, articulate speeches, they will think things are changing. But it is not as easy, these entrenched things don’t just change because of good ideas.’

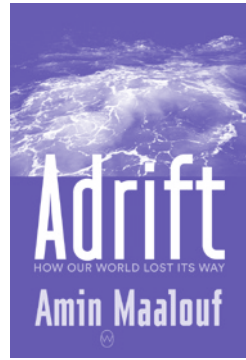


Beirut, Lebanon
Al-Amine Mosque and
17 October revolution
protests, 2019

S: In his book *Don't think of the Elephant*, the writer George Lakoff looks at politics through the lens of family dynamics. He juxtaposes the strict patriarchal family and the authoritarian party or leader against the nurturing family, where the kids are sitting around the table and are part of a consensus society. How do you think about this concept, applying it to the MENA region? ‘First, I think you are right in linking both elements. I think authoritarianism and the paternalistic, patriarchal society are practically one and the same thing. What is interesting is to look at the relationship between the individual and the collective. In Europe – and in the West in general – you can see a trend that may have started with the 1968 student revolutions, in which people consider the public good is an idea of the past: ‘my personal interest is much more important than a public interest’. Then, on the other side, you have the MENA region, where people are also not as interested in the public good. There, you have a tribal link that puts pressure on the individual, and people are focused on their family and tribal links. I think we need something which is not a total indifference to the public good and which is also not meekly obeying traditional power. We need responsible citizens who feel they need to preserve their freedom and at the same time should take into consideration the collective. The people around them. This has to be advanced by public authorities, leaders and media.’

S: When I was in Lebanon in January, my friends were saying: ‘For the first time, I feel Lebanese, not Shia or Sunni or that I’m from Hamrah, Dahyah or from Ashrafiye – I really feel Lebanese’. They felt they were

‘We need responsible citizens who feel they need to preserve their freedom and at the same time should take into consideration the collective’



Amin Maalouf
is a Lebanese-born
French author and
former journalist.
*Adrift: How Our World
Lost Its Way* was pub-
lished in September
2020 by World Editions



Petra Stienen
is an author, Arabist
and member of the
Dutch Senate for D66.



Hoba Gull
is International Project
Officer at D66.

challenging the patriarchal society. Are these not seeds of change?

'Well, when I was a 25 year-old in Lebanon, I never felt I was a member of one community. Instead, I was a member of a nation made of many communities and many people. I was not alone in that. Many people felt that they belonged to a national community, which includes many religious communities. But the idea of people saying 'as a Maronite, I think that' or 'as a Sunni, I think that' was unthinkable. Nobody – nobody! – would behave in that way. So there has been a regression. People should, of course, be able to say we are part of the same nation. We have to build a nation in which there is no discrimination based on religion or anything else.'

'Additionally, I think there is a struggle against the marginalisation of the women in our society. And again, I think it is part of the same struggle. These attitudes of authoritarianism and patriarchy are the same. And they are part of the same problem.'

G: We've been imagining our way forward earlier in our conversation, but we've also noticed that in your works you have also reimagined the past. Such as, when you've written the Arab perspective on the crusades or biographized Ottoman inventors. Why focus on this history? 'I am, as you know, very much interested in the history of this part of the world. I think we need to know it very well and we need to know that what we see today is not something that has always been there. Unfortunately there is a very human attitude that whenever you see people behaving a certain way, you are convinced that they always have. Today, the region I come from is producing some of the worst events in its history. But of course, its history is not made of that. Its history has so much more, in all fields. And it's important to add that one does not have to go very far to name visionaries or inspiring ideas from the region. I knew societies where people were not as fanatic as we might imagine today. And fanaticism is something I wouldn't say is new, because fanaticism exists in any society and in all times. But it was something marginal in our society. It was different. And I think we have to say it. We have to remind people that what they see today was not always the case.'

'And this is true everywhere. Look at somebody who knew Germany in the 1930s. They could not imagine what Germany was fifty years before – one of the most open most liberal societies – and what it would become fifty years later. People and countries go through moments of history and this doesn't define them for eternity. So I hope the area where I come from will not be defined in history by what has been happening in the last few decades. I think we need to believe that the future is not determined by the worse things that we are seeing today. Our histories entails many elements of beauty in literature, movies, theatre, poetry that can bring us forward.' ●

In December 2020, it is ten years since Tunisian street vendor Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire, which sparked a series of revolutions across the MENA region. Looking back at the developments in the last decade, it might be tempting to take stock of the current situation and to conclude that the 'Arab Spring' has failed. But it would be unfair and unwise to do so.

By Mark Snijder

Complexity
of the
Arab Spring

The Arab Spring is still with us

