

GOETHE MEDAL 2015

LAUDATORY SPEECH FOR SADIK AL-AZM

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Sadik, Iman, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I. At the beginning of the year 1969 I had not yet been long in Lebanon, but I had already heard a great deal about a Syrian named Sadik Jalal al-Azm. The Lebanese newspapers contentiously reported about this headstrong fellow from Damascus. And the correspondent for the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* in Beirut at the time warned me about this leftist, this Marxist in the flesh. I overcame my fears and attempted to reach Sadik in his small flat across the street from the American University of Beirut to learn, however, that Sadik was in prison.

It happened like this: After his return from Yale University, Sadik taught European philosophy at Beirut's American University and also wrote two books in Arabic in 1968 and 1969 that instantly made him famous – for some, infamous – throughout the Arab world. The first book was entitled *Self-Criticism After the Defeat*. The defeat was Israel's routing of Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian troops in June of 1967. In spite of all their high-sounding propaganda, it blindsided the Arab regimes. And Sadik was the first to analyze this defeat as a shameful, self-inflicted failure and not, like almost all of his Arab colleagues, as a temporary “setback.” Those Muslim scholars who entrenched themselves behind the slogan “Islam is the solution” – namely, the solution to all problems of the modern world – became Sadik's fiercest adversaries. One of Sadik's Arab fundamentalist archenemies succeeded in publishing a book in Germany in 1968 entitled *Wohin treibt die Arabische Welt?* – Where is the Arab world headed? According to him, the Arabs had lost the June War because Muslims were not pious enough and revered communism and Bolshevism. It was exactly this religiously veiled obscurantism that Sadik would fight against all his life.

Sadik's second book put him behind bars for a short while. It was called *Critique of Religious Thought* and was also written in Arabic for Arab readers. It became a bestseller, is read in almost all Arab countries to this day, albeit banned regularly. The Mufti of Beirut took offense at Sadik's critique of the Qur'an and Islam and accused him of having incited “confessional discord.” The prosecutor accused Sadik of doubting and ridiculing the existence of djinn, angels and devils as taught in the Qur'an. In Lebanon, the Arab country with the freest press today, Sadik was discharged from detention after one week.

To me, the main motive in Sadik's life's work seems to be the word “critique.” This has little to do with Kant's critique of reason, which Sadik had worked on at Yale. Rather, Sadik's critique was based mainly on the religious criticism of Karl Marx. Sadik's critique of the partnership of institutionalized religion and politics was, in a sense, his trademark. “Speaking truth to power” was his motto. He also believes in making debate public. Sadik belonged and still belongs to the Arab left, which was greatly weakened after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For many Arab intellectuals, Marxism long appeared to be the only way to better

understand their societies. Socialism seemed best suited to make Arab societies more just. We in Germany have good reason to be sceptical of Stalinism and real socialism, but in Arab societies secularism, rationalism, feminism, independent research and much more only seemed possible if these societies moved left.

In 1990, Sadik wrote a defiant book – also in Arabic – called *In Defense of Materialism and History*. He called for non-dogmatic Marxism at a time when many former Arab leftists began to flirt with Khomeini's Islamic Republic or embraced French postmodernism.

II. Since Sadik is being honoured today with a Goethe Medal, it seems fitting to speak briefly about his relationship with literature. In April, when Sadik received word at Princeton that he was being awarded a Goethe Medal, he wrote me that he immediately ordered a copy of *Faust Part I* from the university library. He had always considered this drama a milestone in modern history. In the 1970s and 1980s, Sadik held lectures on Goethe's *Faust* in English at the American University of Beirut and later in Arabic at the University of Damascus.

Sadik's understanding of literature was mostly politically shaded. When Salman Rushdie's magical-realist novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988) appeared, Sadik recognized the uniqueness of the book. It forced the Muslim East and the secular West into a religious, political and literary controversy for the first time. Sadik saw Rushdie as the Muslim dissident; a literary heir of Francois Rabelais and James Joyce. He revised the overused quote by Goethe that the Orient and Occident are inseparable. Sadik was one of few Arab authors who dared to clearly pledge themselves to this book and to condemn the politically motivated "fatwa of death" decreed by Imam Khomeini.

III. Sadik was and is rightly celebrated in the West – as we are honouring him today. Yet we must not forget one thing: His books were and are widely read in Arab countries, but their author has never been celebrated there. No Arab politician has ever adopted one of his theses. To my knowledge, no Arab university has ever dared to award him a prize. A few years ago in an interview he said that he would do everything possible to never become "an Arab intellectual in exile." Today we sadly are forced to celebrate him as one. Sadik's homeland of Syria is sinking in fire and blood. Even in Lebanon his life is in danger. Is there a light at the end of this terrible tunnel? Yes, at least to a small degree. For some time, Sadik's most important essays have been available in a beautiful edition in English translation. Sadik knows, of course, what Voltaire's *Candide* knew: that the world is neither a Garden of Eden nor the best of all possible worlds, but is full of cruelty. In the final sentence of Voltaire's book, despite fire and blood, Candide goes out "to cultivate his garden." Sadik Al-Azm may not have a garden to cultivate, but he is already working on a new book for us.