

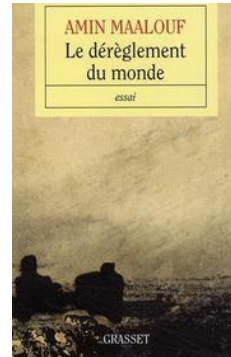
Maalouf, Amin, *Le dérèglement du monde : Quand nos civilisations s'épuisent*

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Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at www.diversophy.com

[Amin Maalouf](#) has snuck up on me again!

Only after 9/11, did I read Amin Maalouf's *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the need to belong* (*Les Identités meurtrières*, 1998), a slim volume that opened my eyes to the critical dynamics of identity politics. It helped me belatedly make some sense out of the attack on New York's phallic financial twins, as well as the ensuing reign of fear in the USA. Not surprisingly, I wanted more of this author, and immediately delved into his *The Crusades through Arab eyes* (*Les Croisades vues par les Arabes*, 1986). This led to my becoming a fan of his novels, the most memorable of which for me are *Samarkand* (*Samarcande*, 1988) and *Gardens of Light* (*Les Jardins de lumière*, 1991).



Now, *Le dérèglement du monde* has been helping me better understand the current revolutionary movement in the Arab world as it is happening, given the author's lucid recounting of the history of the collisions and betrayals that led to the deadening of popular spirit in Arab lands. Central to the book is a lengthy and intriguing analysis of the rise and fall of the hopes of Arab peoples over the last half century. The book predates Wiki-Leaks and the Tunisian uprising, but helps us find them far less surprising.

While this is a timely benefit to the reader, Maalouf's recent book is much more global in its critique and perspectives. The dissolution of the old world order at the end of the twentieth century has left us "without a compass," raised serious questions about the "legitimacy" of governance and power, and brought moral credibility into crisis on the head of specious victories and economic illusions. While Western civilization has invented a set of universal values, it has utterly failed to convey them in an equitable way, and humanity is paying the price for this double standard right now, with people daily uprooted from their native lands and grudgingly given asylum. Not surprising, straying from legitimacy, we have been going through a phase where peoples whose cultures are being annihilated, who are politically marginalized, could choose to despair or throw in their lot with those ready to immolate themselves in radical resistance.

Most of our problems are symptoms of the way we think, live and do business. We were only recently reminded in the news of how the bellies of millions are being tightened by market speculation in foodstuffs. Money has become disconnected from human work, production, and useful social effort. "Our stock markets are transformed into monstrous casinos where the fate of millions, rich and poor, is decided by a roll of the dice. Our most venerable financial institutions have ended up behaving like drunken hooligans." The pockets of the poor are picked to create obscene riches in the closets of tyrants and corporations.

Maalouf argues for a values system in which the respect for and development of culture is a primary value and our way out of the current morass. "Today, the role of culture is to furnish contemporary society with the intellectual and moral tools to survive—nothing less." For years I have, in my professional practice, defined culture as, "the inner conversations developed by a

group of people in order to enable them to survive and succeed in their environment.” The definition works for everything from a football club to a region, to a religion, to a nation. What Maalouf is pointing out, is that culture and values must also be made to work for a planet, not by colonization, leveling and standardization, but by embodying the riches of all in an ongoing negotiation of inclusion with the end of ever more humane coexistence and cohabitation. This essential task must be carried out at the moment in the face of political angling and wrangling that increasingly blames multiculturalism for our ills.

Ideologies pass, but religions persist, the author notes, and what makes them indestructible is their ability to provide a solid anchor of identity to their followers—they are a part of what we call “deep culture.” Their politicization is the result of at least an unconscious recognition on the part of those who attempt to use them for their own ends. Maalouf does an interesting comparison between the role of conservation performed by the papacy, and the absence of such an institution in Islam when it comes to managing change.

How will culture save us? Maalouf tells us that the future will be won or lost on the issues of migrants, bringing their history and their culture to new settings. As noted above, the West is not particularly well placed at the moment to realistically and creatively respond to this challenge. It would also like to think that its colonization, genocides and cultural despoliation are things of the past and let bygones be bygones. Much of the world does not and cannot treat the past in this way, particularly those peoples facing defeat, frustration and humiliation, who must rely on the past to continue believing in themselves.

Maalouf, writing now two years ago, still held hope for the European Union as a self-correcting model with ongoing potential to grow, and that the power and influence, though dwindling, which the USA holds on the world stage would come to a higher stage of consciousness in the Obama administration about how to exercise its influence. With the current Arab uprisings, one begins to realize that the wealth of and behavior of dictators may not be so different from that of politicians and financiers in our own world. Are we capable of transformation or must revolt shake the structure? We, like the author, are condemned to “vacillate between worry and hope” and yet make important decisions.

Maalouf dares to assert at the close of the volume that mankind is still in its “prehistory,” and the larger question is whether it can transcend the givens of its current mentality and social constructions. While this may appear at first as the arrogance of a French intellectual, the author, a child of Beirut, is well humble in admitting where he is inexperienced and where he relies on best guesses and street sense. Almost all of Amin Maalouf’s work, and especially this book, is tagged with a personal cultural imperative: “When one has lived in Lebanon, the first religion which one has is the religion of coexistence.” This book is about how far we are from practicing this faith in a world that is Lebanon writ large, and about the few glimmers of hope that could, if pursued lead us to a new human condition, life beyond our prehistory.

I would hope that *Le dérèglement du monde* finds its way into English, however in this review, where citations are made, translation is my own. The author cites the Prophet of Islam, “The ink of the wise is worth more than the blood of the martyr.” May this blessing fall on Amin Maalouf.