

The defects in Bennabi's Renaissance Project

نقائص مشروع النهضة عند مالك بن نبي

Ahmad Usman أحمد عصمان ahmadusmanabbkr001@gmail.com	Religious Studies	B.A Usuluddin, Islamic University in Niger.
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Abstract (En): The question of retardation had been one of the great, if not the greatest, concerns of every Muslim thinker since the first direct contact of the Islamic world with the west in the 18th century. Different perspectives, sometimes, even conflicting, were proposed by legion of thinkers on how to approach and solve the problem, for the Islamic world to catch up with the wave of advancement and play its civilisational role. From political, economic, cultural, to pedagogic and religious dimensions, depending on thinker's intellectual background or preference. Amongst which a special model, called 'civilizational' dimension proposed by the prominent Algerian thinker, Malek Bennabi, remains exceptional for its insightfulness and comprehensiveness. Malek wrote extensively about the problem of retardation in the Islamic world in a series of books titled "civilizational bankruptcy" and proposed solutions. Withal, Bennabi's project basically examined the historical sociology of the formation, evolution, decline, and death of cultures and civilization, and presented it as a universal architectural blueprint for civilisational development. This paper aims beyond simply debating the superiority of Bennabi's theoretical project, or descriptive account of his works. Instead, it unearth the perceived flaws and deficiency of that Renaissance project, in both its theoretical framework and methodological approach, that remained somewhat overlooked by most researchers..

Keywords: Bennabi; Defects; Renaissance; Project; Islamic .

ملخص باللغة العربية

كانت قضية التخلف واحدة من أعظم، إن لم تكن الأعظم، الاهتمامات لدى كل مفكر مسلم منذ أول اتصال مباشر بين العالم الإسلامي والغرب في القرن الثامن عشر. حيث اقترحت وجهات نظر متنوعة، وفي بعض الأحيان متعارضة، من قبل جموع من المفكرين حول كيفية التعامل مع وحل هذه المشكلة، لكي يلحق العالم الإسلامي بموجة التقدم ويؤدي دوره الحضاري. لقد تنوعت هذه الوجهات من السياسية والاقتصادية والثقافية إلى التربوية والدينية، اعتماداً على الخلفية الفكرية أو التفضيلات الشخصية لكل مفكر. ومن بين هذه الوجهات اخترنا النموذج الخاص بالمسي "البعد الحضاري" الذي اقترحه المفكر الجزائري البارز، مالك بن نبي. كتب مالك بشكل موسع حول مشكلة التخلف في العالم الإسلامي في سلسلة من الكتب بعنوان "مشكلات الحضارة" وقدم حلاً نظرياً لها. ومع ذلك، فإن مشروع بن نبي درس في الأساس علم الاجتماع التاريخي لتكوين وتطور وانحسار وموت الثقافات والحضارات، وقدمه كمخطط نهضوي عالمي لتطوير الحضارات. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى أكثر من مجرد مناقشة تفوق مشروع بن نبي النظري أو السرد لأعماله. بدلاً من ذلك، تكشف عن العيوب والنقائص المدركة في هذا المشروع النهضوي، سواء في إطاره النظري أو النهج المتبع، والتي بقيت إلى حد ما غير ملفتة للنظر لدى معظم الباحثين.

كلمات مفتاحية: بن نبي؛ نقائص؛ نهضة، مشروع، إسلامية.

Malek Bennabi is among the most profound Muslims that treated the concept of civilisation in an exceptional scholarly manner. However, his works, didn't get enough recognition during his lifetime until eventually after his death. From 1980s to now, there's an ever-increasing concern with Bennabi's theory of Civilisation, particularly the elements of Renaissance, in his works (Milad: 2021). Notwithstanding, this concern is confine to presenting Bennabi and giving a descriptive account of his ideas with no scholarly or critical engagement, not to talk of intention of further development of such ideas. Bennabi's ideas, just like any other humanly thing, has it's positive sides and it's flaws, or where it falls short. The positive sides are explained and celebrated enough, yet not utilised or developed. However, the defects remained veiled and ignored.

Bennabi lived most of his life in France, thus having a first-hand experience of the western lifestyle, which had a great impact in his intellectual formation. He also toured a great part of the Islamic world sharing awareness and awakening Muslims from their long slumber that lasted centuries. He's considered by most of his admirers as a reviver of the Khaldunian thoughts, apparently because he's the most eminent Arab intellectual concerned with cultural and civilizational thoughts, since the great 14th century Tunisian social scientist, Ibn Khaldun (Adnan: 1992). Besides, the unswerving impact of the thoughts and methods of Ibn khaldun is plain as a pikestaff. Nevertheless, along with his longtime distant teacher, was also influenced by a legion of western philosophers of civilisation, from Vico to Spengler, Toynbee and others.

Notably, Malek, unlike most of his predecessors, was not a Historian or a social scientist, at all. He was rather an academically trained Engineer (Milad: 1998). He read history of the past in order to have vision and understanding of how to change the future. He presented ideas that connect the past with the present, and the present with future, the universal with the particular, and the theoretical with the practical, in a technical and mathematical way (Mesawy: 1998).

He identified the elements of the formation of civilisation in a mathematical way which he expressed as $\text{Man} + \text{Time} + \text{Soil} = \text{Civilisation}$, with religious idea being the catalyst of this equation (Bennabi: 1981).

Civilization is highest level of human progress, in Bennabi's viewpoint. Therefore, he capitulated the distinct problems of the Islamic world as a merely problem of civilisation. He believed the cultural, economic and material decline of Islamicate civilisation was a by-product of the psycho-social deflection of the Post-Muwahidun Muslims. As a result, the Muslim societies are suffering from deficiency of ideas and Idolatry enthusiasm. Colonialism as he saw it, was no more than a political manifestation of a psychological problem —which he termed "Colonizability" — of the Post-muwahidun Islamic world (Benlahcene: 2013).

There are, indeed, some of Bennabi's ideas and analysis that were composed to address a specific sociopolitical context of the last century, in which Bennabi wrote his books. As the saying goes, a thinker is a product of his society and Malek is no exception. Some ideals of his Renaissance project become outdated and no longer valid or applicable due to time and space dynamics. However, my concern in this paper is the methodological approach as a whole, and the theoretical framework of the project that transcends time and space dimensions.

Here, I outlined only four of the fundamental flaws I figured, which manifest effectively in different aspects of the project. The first one is a flaw in a concept, while the subsequent two are related to the contour of the theoretical framework. The last one is related to the method of expression:

The Myth of Social Control: "The widely accepted reason for changes in institutions and customs is the fact that the customs of each race depend on the customs of its ruler. As the proverb says: 'The common people follow the religion of the ruler' —(Khalidun: 2005).

Bennabi is an ardent believer that any government, works in compliance with the social settings of its given society, and upon this faulty assessment, he built his theory of civilisational development. In his word: "...a government, however, is nothing but a social instrument that yields to the settings of its surrounding...." (Bennabi: 1981).

That's probably because Bennabi lived in democratic era, and experienced the western democratic utopia at its zenith. However, it obviously escaped his attention that any sort of reform -social, economic, religious, et al- in this age, is a sheer political objective, with its set of accompanied implications.

Understandably, in the post-industrial world, people are tempted to believe, the government adhere to the social settings of its society, although, in reality, it's the society that always comply with the behaviour of its leaders.

In the late 19th century, Jamaluddin Afghani called for political grand overhaul which was neither by chance, nor unprompted. It was a resultant of a closer look to the most effective developmental instrument of the modern epoch. At the very base of every modern social, economic, religious or cultural reform, is a political revolution. From French revolution that Bennabi often referred to as an example, English, American, and Russian. Despite differences in mechanisms, were all no more than a political reforms led by leaders, not the masses. The successful semi-zealot modernisation of Japan, and the Herodian mishap of Kemalist Turkey, that swept away all given social, moral, economic and religious settings of the time, were political reforms.

Essentially, in the contemporary epoch, reforms are basically political, and by implications, they don't adhere to the social context of the society, but sweep away the given setting. The 1960s —

90s economic revolution of Lee Kuan Yew in Singapore and the concurrent social liberalisation of Ben Salman in Saudi shows how society's norms can be marginalised by political ambitions. The ever increasing rise of state-absolutism that accompanies current technological advancements is unprecedented.

Henceforth, the inevitable tragic outcome of any Islamic reforms -like the one Bennabis proposed- that has no political-based, is to end up cloistering in the margins of the shadow of contemporary islamicate secular. A soul with no body to protect it.

Sociopolitical dynamics: "Scholars are, of all people, those least familiar with the ways of politics" — (Khalidun: 2005).

In chapter 6 of his muqaddimah, Ibn Khaldun mentioned that "scholars are, of all people, those least familiar with the ways of politics. The reason for this is that scholars are used to mental speculation and to a searching study of ideas which they abstract from sensibilia and conceive in their minds as general universals, so that they may be applicable to some matter in general but not to any particular matter, individual, race, nation, or group of people. Scholars, then, make such universal ideas conform (in their minds) to the fact of the outside world" (Ibid).

Malek is certainly one of the best thinkers, both in the global north and south, that vehemently understood the dynamics of psycho-social factors and it's effects on civilization. However, the sociopolitical dynamics of time and places, and the effects they could have on cultural, civilizational and even religious reforms are lacking in his theoretical framework, despite their importance. I couldn't help but notice the indifference of Bennabi towards political dynamics. I conclude, apparently, his personality as a Mufakkir (Thinker) is what made him more obsessed with the speculative aspects of the mind and indifferent towards realistic spheres, as Ibn Khaldun accused scholars of being. Bennabi utilised the Khaldunian pyscho-social perspective to its full potential, however, the Khaldunian experience of politics remained unutilized.

The political experience of Ibn Khaldun entitled him to have a deep, realistic insight on politics, it's dynamics, and it's societal and moral implications. Only few amongst the subsequent political theorist, in the Islamic world, realised the potential of this copious experience, utilise it in their theoretical frameworks, or base their expectations upon it.

Excessive Idealism: "The mode of production in material life determines the general character and behaviour of the society" — (Marx: 1976).

Bennabi's unwavering regard for ideas hardly escape any of his readers. The term Idea, thought, are ubiquitous in all of his books. Despite his earnest try to present a realistic solution, unfortunately, he was so engraved in abstract matters. He divided human interaction into three realms: The realm of people, the material realm, and the realm of ideas, which was, conspicuously, the base upon which

Bennabi built his theoretical framework. As Ibn Khaldun said about scholars, "All their conclusions and views continue to be something in the mind" (Khaldun: 2005) and it's regrettably true in Bennabi's approach to society. This is probably as a result of his academic orientation as an engineer. In the unending debate of ideational and material approach to society, Bennabi fall in the ideational category. He believed ideas make every aspect of the society. However, even superficial reading of history will suggest humans are entities with endless possibilities and potential towards material and ideational formation.

Material realms determine humans thinking faculty and it's as Ideas often determine the material reality of a given society. The two are not mutually exclusive and will be better to both be put into consideration. History barely noticed when men passed from hunting to agriculture, but it taught this material mode of production changed their values, ideas, and behaviour. The industrial revolution also came along with these lessons.

Elitism of Thoughts/Expression:

The first time I came across Malek Bennabi was 2020 when I was just a level 2 undergraduate student. I listened to a lecture about his book *Shurut An-nahda* by Dr. Badrane Benlahcene. I started reading books and I found it very hard to grasp. At first, I thought I'm the only one having this difficulty cause I'm apparently just a small student of knowledge, however, after some time, I learned many people find his books quite inscrutable. I read his books in Arabic and I have to admit the translation is excellent, and hardly this complexity being a resultant of this superb translation. It's an integral problem of expression. I suspect it's a byproduct of Malek's technical orientation. This, anyways, can not be declared a defect in Bennabi's theoretical framework or methodological approach but a deficiency of his pedagogical method. His books are hardly grasped by the people he aimed at.

Conclusively, while it's certainly true that the socio-political landscape of the Muslim world has altered substantially in the last 50yrs (since Bennabi's death), in ways that he had not anticipated and some of his ideas, analysis, and proposals are slightly or vaguely inaccurate, our current situation may be a great deal less sanguine than he supposed.

Even if some of Malek's theoretical details are confined to address such specific sociopolitical context, it does not follow that his critical diagnosis of the predicament of civilisational development is not applicable to the present.

In collecting together a broad selection of Bennabi's writings on the Renaissance, the aim is to allow a wider appreciation of his achievement in this area, as well as, and more importantly, suggest an avenue for critical evaluation and more nuanced development of his project.

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