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Iraqi sociology and Al Wardi's contributions

Hamied G. M. Al Hashimi*

International Colleges of Islamic Sciences, London, UK; and NatCen (National Centre for Social Research), London, UK

This paper offers an appraisal of the contribution of Dr Ali Al Wardi – one of the Middle East's pioneers in sociology – to the foundation of Iraqi sociology. It opens with an introduction to sociology in Iraq past and present, followed by an assessment of the sociological approach of Al Wardi, his hypotheses including his theories on the 'ambivalent personality' exemplified in Iraq, which was later generalized to the Arab personality more broadly, and his sociological critiques. It was in these areas that Al Wardi became one of the leading liberal thinkers in the Arab world and his books continue to be bestsellers to this day. The paper will also posit the direct reasons for the success of his scientific contribution and the popularity of his premises and arguments. To achieve these objectives, it examines the most lasting aspects of his research, Al Wardi's own published works and those written about his contribution, including books, papers and articles which either glorify or criticize, to help form a better understanding of Al Wardi's contributions to Iraqi sociology.

Keywords: Iraqi sociology; Ali Al Wardi; Iraqi and Arab 'personality'; 'ambivalent personality'

Introduction

Iraqi sociology and Professor Ali Al Wardi are twins in the Iraqi intellectual scene. Indeed, he was essentially the founder of sociology in this country. His works, his approach to the study of society, and his hypotheses and generalizations on the Iraqi and Arab personality have become well known both inside the Arab world and beyond. Some of his books have been translated into different languages, including English, German, Spanish, Polish and Persian.

This paper is divided into ten parts, starting with 'Iraqi sociology: back to the foundations', when Al Wardi played a key role, including establishing the first department of sociology in the country. The section on Al Wardi's background uncovers connections between the circumstances surrounding his birth and how these influenced his research. One of the paper's main topics is the concept of the 'ambivalent personality',[1] which is one of Al Wardi's hypotheses on the 'Iraqi personality', which was later generalized to the 'Arab personality' more broadly, and the heterogeneous social fabric of Iraqi society. To a certain extent, this paper also investigates Al Wardi's methodology, his references, data collection, and the range of hypotheses which he continued to develop and test. The objective is also to identify reasons for the success of his scientific

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*Also visiting professor at Al Qadisiya University, Diwaniya, Iraq.
E-mail: hashimi98@gmail.com

approach and the popularity of his premises and arguments, in the sociological criticism of society. Al Wardi became one of the leading liberal thinkers in the Arab world and his books continue to be bestsellers up to the present.

This study is intended to contribute to the resources available to scholars interested in Iraqi and Arab sociology, culture and personality. Furthermore, it aims to shed light on the growing expansion of sociology as a (new) discipline in the developing countries.

Iraqi sociology: back to the foundations

According to the references, the first beginnings of sociology in Iraq date back to the second decade of the 20th century, when the first university (Aal Albeit University) was established by King Faisal I in 1924. At that time, the modules or courses offered by the university included 'sociology', but the instructor was definitely not a sociologist (Scientific Division 1926, 24).

The first book in the field of sociology to be written in Iraq was by Abdulfattah Ibrahim,[2] who was the first specialist in sociology in the country (Ibrahim 1939). After that there were some books and theses dealing with Iraqi sociological issues before 1950, at which point Dr Ali Al Wardi returned to the country having completed his PhD in the United States, and he initiated the establishment of the Department of Sociology within the College of Arts at the University of Baghdad. Following in Al Wardi's footsteps, within in few years a number of other Iraqi sociologists emerged, having also finished higher degrees in both the United States and the United Kingdom.[3]

The contributions of these academics expanded the field, but the Department of Sociology at Baghdad University remained the only one of its kind, at least until 1975 when a new university was established in Sulaimaniya (northern Iraq): it opened the second Department of Sociology in the country. Today there are ten such departments, besides one devoted to teaching the practice of social work and another for applied anthropology, across the country.

Tens of hundreds of students have graduated in the discipline, and hundreds have gained higher degrees both inside the country and abroad; many books have been written on sociology, but still Al Wardi and his main book on the subject remain at the forefront of Iraqi sociology.

Al Wardi's background

Ali Hussein Al Wardi, to give his full name, was born in the Kadimiya district of Baghdad in 1913 to a family which enjoyed a middle-class standard of living. His father worked in a spice shop in Kadimiya, and he used to help him in the shop after completing his studies at a school run by mullahs or religious scholars.[4] In going to such an institution he was just like most children of his age, for whom that was the only option for education, owing to a small number of government schools at the time. Iraq was then part of the Ottoman Empire. However, when the Empire collapsed and Ottoman rule ended in Iraq, following British occupation during the First World War, Al Wardi started to study in a proper governmental school (Al Hashimi 2002, 38).

Al Wardi realized that the fall of the Ottoman Empire, which affected Iraq and the whole region, would open new horizons. On many occasions he said that without modern teaching in schools, he could have simply followed in his father's footsteps and worked in the spice business.

After gaining his high-school qualification, Al Wardi worked as a teacher for two years; he then travelled to the Lebanese capital of Beirut for further studies. From Beirut he went to the United States to study at the University of Texas, where he discovered that the world of his ancestors was not the whole world, and that he had assumed to be right could be seen by others as wrong, and what was taboo in his home culture was acceptable in another's. This kind of challenge to his thinking led Al Wardi to realize, not only in theory, but also in practice, the concept of cultural relativity which can be seen below in the arguments he subsequently developed.

Al Wardi's sociological awareness started to form in response to the seeming contradictions and contrasts that he encountered, between different cultures and societies. In fact these contradictions produced his scientific personality or approach that threw received wisdom into doubt and provoked all manner of thoughts on whatever an intellectual person might assume.

Therefore, it is not easy to characterize Al Wardi's writings simply: he was a cultural phenomenon, with a scientific approach, who became a preoccupation in Iraqi cultural circles from 1950, when he wrote his first book about the 'personality of the Iraqi individual', which caused a great deal of controversy.

His topics ranged from sociology to social psychology, social history, sociolinguistics, epistemology, literature, parapsychology, culture, religions and spiritual thought. Therefore, to study his writings, a researcher has first of all to discuss his most important arguments about the split personality, which he wanted to generalize to all Arab societies (Al-Nouri 1997).

Ambivalent personality and social contradictions

Al Wardi made it clear that the split personality is a social phenomenon that appears in many societies where there is a cultural conflict. He believed that the Iraqi individual suffers from a split personality, which can be traced back to ancient history, and especially since the advent of Islam. A number of reasons seemingly lie behind this phenomenon, such as the inclination of Moslem scholars to keep arguing with one another, and which resulted in the emergence of several Islamic and philosophical groups and doctrines, as well as the long political conflicts that developed, and the impact of Bedouin values on people, whether they live in cities or in countryside.

To clarify his argument Al Wardi posited the interesting illustration that a tribesman has a double personality. On the one hand, he is valiant and in his dealings with other tribesmen he may be very emotional and keen on taking revenge. However, this same tribesman becomes a completely different person when he sees a government income taxman or other influential figures. Then he becomes quite submissive, well prepared to accept insults and even ready to capitulate or accept defeat, without having the slightest desire to hate or revolt (Al Wardi 1996a, 86). Other examples about the split personality include attitudes toward bribery, and pretending to respect woman and believe in woman's right as well as human rights in general.

When nomadic tribes leave the desert and settle in rural or more particularly in urban areas, they confront harsh circumstances with which they are not familiar. They face psychological as well as social pressures in their adjustment and in their inability to preserve the old nomadic values. Some deviation from those values is expected which can lead to personality conflict (Al Wardi 2008, 67).

Al Wardi's methodology

The concept of methodology can be quite ambiguous, as it deals with the way a person speaks and behaves. It is therefore closely connected to the person himself (Khalil 1995, 270). In Al Wardi's writings, a scholar may discern some characteristic methodological constructs.

First, he depended, as he acknowledges, on a methodology that makes a compromise between Ibn Khaldoun's theory[5] and modern theories, which are, in turn, divided between Marxist and idealistic. He believed that a scholar has to take advantage of all ideas that benefit sociological development in the world. Al Wardi also adopted the historical approach in sociology, unlike other sociologists who preferred the statistical approach. He also pursued a sociological approach to the study of history and in his interpretation of behaviour in Iraqi society, such as his discernment of split personality or 'bad' behaviour. Al Wardi also stressed the importance of both objectivity and neutrality in all his writings. He believed that a scholar has to study history without any preconception, otherwise he will turn into an advocate of propaganda.

Second, in Al Wardi's thinking, a sociological phenomenon should be studied objectively and scientifically.

Third, Al Wardi wanted to study Iraqi society in a cultural manner by adopting a socio-anthropological vision. He stressed the fact that cultural studies advocate the pursuit of new theories that produce now concepts and further new theories. This is why Al Wardi's works are pregnant with implications and analyses that show the strong relationships between folkloric culture and man's behaviour and mind. Cultural relativism was yet another element on which Al Wardi depended as an objective approach to analyse behaviour and conduct in a society, regardless of its cultural and ideological nature. So cultural relativism, in Al Wardi's approach, is a method that presupposes tolerance and broad-mindedness.

In this respect, Al Wardi's methodology ran completely contrary to the principle of absolute right that prevailed for a long time in human history. Al Wardi also used the expression 'human nature', using it as a tool and a framework to enhance his philosophy and to confront and neutralize idealist thinking, which was quite a strong trend in Arab and Iraqi cultural circles. He views man as torn apart by two forces: subjectivity and self-denial. An ordinary person is, therefore, the one who tries to reconcile the two forces. If a man tries to step aside from one force or the other, he will be an exception in his society.

In his study of human nature, Al Wardi wanted to establish a methodology and scientific awareness far removed from the idealist way of thinking, from pride or enthusiasm. He also believed that there were two different methodologies for the study of social problems and phenomena. The first of these is the old nationalistic method which looks at society in an idealistic way. Al Wardi did not approve of this approach; in fact he criticized it. The second method is the modern scientific method, which Al Wardi very much admired in his search for social truth.

Therefore, it was obvious that Al Wardi would disagree with advocates of those methods and approaches simply because he was not ready to follow their practices and also because they saw him as an intruder on their field of study. Criticism also came from a third direction, namely those who found Al Wardi very far from being a sociologist following the scientific method. Abdulrazzaq Muhiaddin is one of those critics.

Al Wardi's methods of research

Methods of research and data collection used by Al Wardi were yet another field where he differed completely from other researchers who, after finishing their studies abroad, have tried to implement the approaches they adopted in their home societies. He simply rejected statistical approaches and the consequent use of opinion surveys and interviews, saying that Iraqi society is not like American society where researchers were able to knock on doors and ask residents, typically, housewives, any questions they might have. In the US context, housewives would respect researchers and help them by giving correct answers in most cases. In Arab or Iraqi society, it is very difficult because people are scared of any smartly dressed people, who usually represent government and come to ask for information in order to impose taxes. If such a researcher wears simple clothes of their own, as opposed to something official, they would immediately be seen as a government spy. Another reason is that most people, including educated ones, do not appreciate the significance and role of scientific research in the progress of societies.

Al Wardi's sources

Al Wardi has cited a number sources (Al Wardi 1996a, 6) for his knowledge about Iraqi society. They include, first, books, articles and pamphlets written for academic purposes to obtain postgraduate degrees. Some such academic theses have been published in book form, such as Shakir Mustafa Salim's work[6] *Al Chibayish*, an anthropological study of the Marshland people; Matty Aqrawi's *The New Iraq* (1936); Mohammed Fadel Al-Jamali's[7] *Iraq* (1929); and Salman Hassan's *The Economic Development of Iraq* (1965).

Secondly, Al Wardi made use of the papers he had asked his undergraduate students to write about Iraqi society when he was teaching at the Department of Sociology at the University of Baghdad. He admitted more than once that some of these students were insightful in their discussions of Iraqi society, and included a variety of ethnic and religious minorities as well as sub-cultures.

The third source upon which Al Wardi drew featured in a 1960s' television programme called *You Ask and We Discuss*, which he presented. The material for the programme was based on letters sent to him by various people talking about their problems and wanting solutions. Al Wardi admitted that he had benefited from all those letters, as they provided important insights on Iraqi society. He felt sorry when the programme was stopped for reasons he said he knew nothing about (Al Wardi 1996a, 7).

Fourthly, Al Wardi travelled across the country and listened to the common people he engaged in conversation, especially the elderly who told him that an educated man should not go down to the level of a porter or a grocer and should not listen to their chitchat, otherwise they will disapprove of that behaviour.

To achieve this rapport, Al Wardi tried to make people trust him first before he started asking questions. However, when we look at the methodological principles that he claimed governed his work, Al Wardi seems to depart from his own dictum. The samples or cases he collected depended only on his knowledge of his society and the people who lived in it. He depended, as already pointed out, on various sources and people in his studies, but his conclusions and generalizations on big social units were based on his study of smaller social units.

Al Wardi also included in his works verses of the Qu'ran, *Sunnah* (methods and life stories of the Prophet Mohammed and his Caliphs and clerics), *Hadith* (sayings of the

Prophet), as well as some of the popular proverbs, whenever these suited his line of argument or fostered his ideas, and because he realized how strongly they would influence his readers and the common people. It was well known that he had always asked his students to prepare and write papers on religion and folklore traditions, as well as making references to a number of Arab and Islamic thinkers of old times, particularly Ibn Khaldoun and Al-Jahidh.

Social criticism

Al Wardi wrote social criticism in smart and different ways. His style was sarcastic and at certain times repetitive, since he believed that this style would be the best to use against some scholars who propounded flawed ideas and values. He stressed that 'investigation of such ideas and concepts is more important than other subjects that our writers have concerned themselves with for years'. One of such concepts that he found wrong was total confidence in so-called rational logic, sometimes called Aristotelian logic. He also criticized in his writings the methods of some of the religious and intellectual institutions, regarding them as weaknesses that plagued the people. His book *The Sultans Advisers* included his severest criticism against advisers who give sermons to the people:

> The Islamic society kept listening to their fiery sermons and speeches for hundreds of years to no avail. The speakers kept advising the aggrieved people and forgot the tyrannies and thus the latter used them as tools to shock people, warning them of the torture in the other world and tried to make them forget the painful agony in the present world.(Al Wardi 1996b, 151)

A number of his critics, who were either idealists or moralists, even accused him of spreading harmful ideas among the people, especially the youth. There was therefore no compromise at all between Al Wardi and his critics. In fact, he insisted on his opinion and rejected the others' points of view. From the criticism launched against Al Wardi, it is quite clear that most of it focuses on his ideas and conclusions and only very little dealt with his research methodology. Thus, we find somebody accusing him of being an advocate of Western civilization and denying the traditions of our nation's heritage and spiritual values. Another critic disagreed with Al Wardi on the latter's call to reform the Arabic language and simplify its grammar.

Criticism of society

Interest in criticism of society increased with the clashes that developed increasingly between the old and the new, represented by social movements and their intellectual trends. Al Wardi examined the social fabric of his society and tried to identify or diagnose its phenomena by focusing on its ills. There were a number of false ideas and values in which people believed. Certain misconceptions have been based on these ideas and values that resulted in social injustice. To clarify his argument, Al Wardi said people used to judge others by the way they looked. For example, if a person is handsome, then he will be a good man; if he is ugly, he will be deemed wicked. He also criticized tribal values and detrimental customs such as revenge and boasting of family kinship.

In order to support all the views he believed in and to combat such phenomena, Al Wardi cited verses from the Qu'ran and sayings of the Prophet. He believed that a number of values like altruism, cooperation among people in the same neighbourhood, valour and nobility have all disappeared with the passage of time. New values had replaced them because the former represented an extension of Bedouin values of the desert which revolved around tribal prejudices. Modern civilization has other values contradictory to those of Iraqi society.

Al Wardi believed that Bedouin values were strengthened during the period of Ottoman rule because of the weakness and corruption of the government. He included psychological and social environmental factors as contributing to the background that enabled people to become prominent. He claimed that most of those who failed were not responsible for their failure (Al Wardi 1996b, 61). Al Wardi also criticized hospitality, the manner of eating, the situation of woman, bribery, nepotism and the nature of melancholic singing. He blamed the poor relationship between government and citizens, which went back to Ottoman rule, and said it was responsible for the indifference of people and their inclination to sabotage public areas and not abide by legal norms and traffic laws.

Why has Al Wardi succeeded?

There are a number of factors that helped Al Wardi succeed in his career. They can be summarized as follows:

- His sarcastic style, which became popular among readers.
- His belief in the necessity and value of education to bridge the gap between people and scholarship.
- His objective analysis and indifference to any specific ideology and the absence of any sectarian, political or ethnic partiality in his analysis.
- His criticism of prevailing values that came at a critical turning point, triggering rebellion, and engendering awareness among intellectuals and educated people.
- His careful dealing with and study of religious subjects which kept him away from all problems that he did not like to tackle.

Conclusion

Al Wardi gathered together a body of vigorous intellectual thinking, Western scientific sources, providing a specification of the social environment he was studying, making sure he had learned from the mistakes committed by others and from the criticism railed against him. He has in fact become a landmark in the sociological analysis and interpretation of many aspects of one society.

Al Wardi should definitely be considered the father of sociology in Iraq and the founder of a unique method for studying that society which generated some findings later generalized from Iraq to other Arab societies and 'personality'.

Postcript

Professor Fuad Baali has a fresh memory about Al Wardi.[8] Baali considered Al Wardi a reliable and worthy friend and he was for him indeed a gentleman. Baali dedicated his

book *Ibn Khaldun Wa Ilm Al-Ijtima'a Al-Hadeeth: Dirasa Tahliliyah* (Dar Al-Mada, 1997) to Al Wardi's memory (Baali 1997). It is interesting to note that Al Wardi and Baali co-authored a book and an article both in English.

Baali admits that Al Wardi had an impact on some of his works, especially the book *Arab Unity and Disunity* (2004). As Baali said in the Preface to this book:

> the idea of the book was suggested by the well-known Arab scholar Ali Al Wardi. In some of his published work, Wardi emphasized the important role of the nomadic asabiyah (solidarity, unity) in any federation, union, or unity of the Arab states.
>
> (Baali 2004, 4)

Al Wardi's books were bestsellers during the last six decades.[9] Indeed, an Iraqi reader's knowledge is measured by the fact whether or not he has read Al Wardi. Many authors have written about Al Wardi, but most of their writings, as some believe, are far from being thoroughly examined by scientific standards of sociology. A number of sociologists have tried to deal with him, but only severely criticized him. One such critic accused Al Wardi of being a follower of positivism and based his argument on Marxist theories!

Notes

1. There are some similar terms that refer to this socio-psychological disorder, e.g. schizoid, split, dual, multiple personality and duplicated personality.
2. Ibrahim, one of the pioneers of Iraqi liberal thinking, was born in Nassiriya (southern Iraq). He obtained his first degree from the American University in Beirut in 1928, and MA in social history from Colombia University. He founded and led many political and social organizations and parties, such as Al Ahaly party.
3. Namely, Abduljalil Al Tahir, Hatem Al Kaabi, Abduljabbar Uraim and Shakir Mostafa Salim.
4. Mullah teaching or Katateeb teaching is the traditional teaching in the Islamic world. It is most often conducted in connection with the mosques and carried out by junior religious scholars who teach children the basics of writing and reading, in addition to Quran verses.
5. Ibn Khaldoun (1332–1406) is regarded as a precursor of the science of sociology and the first to attempt to formulate social law. Almuqaddimah, is recognized as one of the six important monographs in general sociology (Baali and Wardi 1981, 7).
6. Salim is best known for his groundbreaking ethnographic work entitled *Marsh Dwellers of the Euphrates Delta*, which he submitted as his doctoral thesis at University College London in 1955. It was first published (1956–1957) in Baghdad in Arabic in two volumes, and subsequently published (1962) in English in a series entitled 'London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology'. This was an anthropological report on a year spent among the Marsh Arabs of Ech-Chibayish in Iraq in 1953 (Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia 2012a).
7. Muhammad Fadhel al-Jamali (April 20, 1903–May 24, 1997) was an Iraqi politician, Foreign Minister and Prime Minister of Iraq from 1953 to 1954. In 1945, al-Jamali, as Minister of Foreign Affairs, and signed the United Nations Charter on behalf of his country. During the 1960s through the 1980s, he taught as Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Tunis. There he was able to spread the Islamic beliefs that he had developed in several books (Wikipedia the Free Encyclopedia 2012b).
8. Baali is an Iraqi-American sociologist. He was a student of Al Wardi's in his first year of teaching (1950) and they then became colleagues during the year Baali taught at the University of Baghdad (1962–1963).
9. 'Works by Iraqi sociologist Ali al Wardi and Saudi literary critic Abdullah al-Ghadhami were in particularly high demand', as the *Saudi Gazette* reported that sales of nonfiction (or 'works of an intellectual bent') beat out fiction at this year's Riyadh book fair, which ran from 1–11 March 2011 (Awfiqir 2011).

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