

## Some Western concepts through Arab eyes: toward a new Arab epistemology

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This article is a call to re-examine current Arab epistemology in behavioural sciences in order to develop an Arab grown set of tools and concepts that will contribute to the civilization renewal as promoted by the Arab Renaissance Project. In particular, some thoughts relating to debates about ‘freedom’, ‘state’, and ‘democracy’ are provided.

**Keywords:** Arab Renaissance Project; freedom; state; democracy

### Introduction

When the Center for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS) launched the Arab Renaissance Project (ARP) in February 2010 (CAUS 2010b; Hafez 2011) in commemoration of the 52nd anniversary of the unity between Egypt and Syria, little did it know that an intellectual time bomb was set to explode. Indeed, among the various components of the ARP, civilization renewal would be the umbrella of an intellectual debate about contemporary Arab epistemology in behavioural and/or social sciences.

This writer has written extensively about the subject in the publications issued by CAUS where he called, and still does, for a new Arab epistemology, especially in behavioural sciences. Those employed in the Arab world are mostly translations of Western concepts and tools of analysis. The argument was and still is that a re-examination of such concepts is a prerequisite for the establishment of a new Arab epistemology, where concepts and tools of analysis developed in the West are being indiscriminately used by Arab scholars, thinkers, activists, and politicians with little relevance to Arab issues and problems. The purpose of this paper is an attempt at re-examining some of such concepts in order to test their relevance to Arab reality.

Most of these concepts and programmes in the Arab world are based upon those established in the West and imported through direct and indirect European colonialism and American hegemony. Most Arab elites’ minds are in fact ‘occupied’ by such concepts, an indication of the political, economic, social and cultural extent of Western hegemony. There has been an abandonment of Arab knowledge developed in the golden age of Arab intellectualism, with significant consequences. That is the central issue at the core of any debate concerning the cultural and civilization renewal of the Arab world.

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Significant recent political developments and changes have reinforced the need to define new paradigms in behavioural sciences. The call for an Arab epistemology is a prerequisite for Arab civilization renewal. This means that a new reading of Western paradigms and heritage as well the rereading of Arab cultural heritage are required. These are necessary but not sufficient conditions. Once the deconstruction process of both legacies is under way, the other condition will be in the promotion of science as a producer of knowledge. It must be remembered that Arabs in the past have not produced wealth as their Western counterparts but instead have produced knowledge and transferred it to the rest of the world. This is a call for a resumption of that role. Arabs need to invest a significant portion of their gross domestic product in research and science (Hafez 2012).

In this paper there will be a review of some of the concepts adopted by Arabs in behavioural sciences that need to be revisited in view of the inconsistencies – or even shortcomings, if not outright contradictions – they may contain. This paper is based upon a paper submitted in June 2012 to the 21st Annual Conference of the Arab National Conference held in Hammamet, Tunisia.

### Starting thoughts

Viewing the West through Arab eyes and minds not particularly overwhelmed by the West's mystique (Corm 2009) leads to some sobering thoughts. Indeed, ever since the Arab renaissance period, or *al-Nahda*, from the late 19th century to date, there has been a fascination with Western civilization because of military achievements on the battlefield (Lewis 2002), in science, in economic performance, in social sciences. An accepted proposition in the Arab world is that the West's superiority is due to its intellectual openness that started with the Enlightenment and the crumbling of absolute monarchical rule and despotism. Since the celebrated mission of Sheikh Rifa'a al-Tahtawi (1801–73) in the first half of the 19th century, through Qasim Amin (1863–1908) and Farah Antoun (1874–1922) to Constantine Zurayk (1909–2000) and the current legions of Westernized Arab intellectuals occupying satellite news stations, newspapers, magazines and radio stations, a paradigm has been set that Arab renewal is through the West. The latter's achievements in sciences and concepts in behavioural sciences analysing political, economic and social reality in the Arab world were used indiscriminately.

Added to that is the impact of the Industrial Revolution that has generated wealth and welfare in the West, and the fact that the West has undergone its transformation into a new hegemon rivalling previous empires as a result of its critique of religious thought and the establishment of the Reformation. There are many Arab intellectuals<sup>1</sup> and thinkers who believe that the necessary and sufficient condition for progress in the Arab world is to undergo a similar experience. Yet this proposition is not supported by the evidence. Asian countries have experienced significant progress without resorting to the critique of religion. Hence, the need to 'import' ready-made explanations from the West leads to erroneous policy decisions with catastrophic results in many cases. Indeed, why should the Arab world undergo its own set of bloody religious wars as in the West in order to achieve 'progress'? Such wars in Europe threatened the fabric of society and almost destroyed it. So should Arabs and Muslims undergo the same 'experience' notwithstanding the fact that modern arms are much more lethal than several centuries ago?

As to the Enlightenment, nobody disputes the intellectual impact of the ideas articulated by its philosophers. Yet, one must point out that such ideas were developed during absolute

monarchical rule and despotism as a 'divine right'. Hence, despotism did not prevent the development of progressive thought. One can even venture that progressive thought developed because of despotism, since it was directed against it! Furthermore, the revolutions that shook the European order in the late 18th and 19th centuries led to the rise of nationalisms in Germany and Italy, and were accompanied by the rise of European colonialism causing much of the misery still experienced by brown, black, and yellow-skinned people! One may wonder whether the Industrial Revolution would have succeeded had it not been for the access to cheap raw materials from the colonized world. Nor can one ignore the horrible exploitation of the industrial working class through long hours and low wages as instrumental in the welfare of the ruling classes. The reaction to such conditions was the development of socialist and Marxist thought in Europe and later elsewhere the world. Also, can one ignore the fact that the New Continent (North, Central and South America) was the theatre of the worst kind of genocidal behaviour by white European conquerors (Akash 2002, 2004, 2009)? Shall we also ignore that the 'progress' of the North American agricultural sector was caused by the use of free labour through slavery? Shall we ignore that the railroads in the United States were built with exploited Chinese labour? All in all, it seems that the welfare of the 'white man' was achieved at the expense of the brown, black, and yellow-skinned man.

As for France and UK, their colonial 'experience' is not congruent with the ideals they have generously sold all over the colonized territories. Alexis De Tocqueville, a much admired writer in the West and an admirer of American democracy, wrote a treatise on how to eradicate local culture in Algeria (De Tocqueville 1847/1988).

These are some of the questions and issues surrounding the so-called intellectual and moral superiority of the West. Yet, the purpose here is not really to contribute to such debate so much as to show that intellectual imports from the West are not necessarily the answer to Arab civilization renewal. This paper reviews briefly three 'concepts' at the heart of Arab political discussion and the recent upheaval witnessed in many Arab countries: 'freedom', the 'state' and 'democracy'. By no means is this an exhaustive list but more of an indication. There are other issues dear to Arab intellectuals and thinkers such as dichotomies between Islam and democracy, Islam and modernity, authenticity and identity, alienation and inclusion: issues that have occupied the intellectual space since the Second World War, with little or no progress towards establishing an Arab epistemology.

At the centre of an evaluation of such concepts are the following questions:

- Are the values proposed by the West built upon acceptable human universal principles, or upon utilitarian goals serving ruling elites and put forward to justify the unjustifiable?
- Are the knowledge systems derived from such concepts useful in understanding other societies, or has it become necessary to subjugate such societies to Western culture in order to dispense Western ruling elites from making necessary efforts in dealing with the 'other'?

But on the other hand:

- Is the West's perception of the 'other' not predicated upon deep-rooted racism and a complex of superiority justifying the eradication of the collective memory of the 'other' and limiting it to folklore and parades only?

- Is not the eradication of original native populations of North America an example of that?

The answers to such questions are complex and complicated because of the intertwined assumptions in such concepts, and because time has significantly contributed to the elaboration of values, systems and paradigms that support the elites' ruling structure. Discussion of such assumptions is beyond the scope of this paper, but the intent is to show that many concepts are imports from the West not related to Arab reality.

### **On freedom**

A starting point is the acknowledgement of the fact that revolutions in America and in Continental Europe have abrogated the tradition of embodying all power within the ruling monarch. The establishment of the republic and its separation of powers and system of checks and balances in the United States are trademarks of the American Revolution. In France, the slogans 'liberty, equality, and fraternity' have defined the French Revolution. In both instances, there is the notable absence of 'justice'. In fact, the latter was never at the forefront of Enlightenment philosophy, but instead the concept of 'freedom'. It is true, however, that justice is a tacit value in such thinking whereas in the Arab Muslim world justice is the primary value (Khadduri 2002).

In the West, insistence on freedom as the primary value is explained by its need to achieve the 'pursuit of happiness' as stated in the Declaration of Independence of the United States. 'Freedom' prepared the ground for utilitarianism, and the latter became an anchor of other values. The influence of Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill and Auguste Comte is undeniable. Was it not Bentham who determined that an action is good if it brings happiness? In fact, utilitarianism is one of the foundations of positive economics, establishing the supremacy of the market and competition. However, such thinking led ultimately to the concentration of wealth and economic power in the hands of the few. This author's contention is that it is difficult to isolate political, economic and social thought from the circumstances in which it arises. Economics is nothing but politics but in metrics, and is often used to justify choices and decisions that could not be justified in plain talk.

The 'enlightened' philosophers hardly addressed the issue of colonialism in the 18th and 19th centuries. Through the concepts of utilitarianism and positivism, colonialism was justified among ruling elites. The French thinker Ernest Renan (1823–1892) – widely admired by many Lebanese! – theorized on the underdevelopment of the Semitic mind – or the Arab mind for that matter – on the basis that it cannot apprehend abstract concepts (Renan 1992). He even went further to deny that oriental Christians were the real Christians! Christianity is a Western thing: '*le Christianisme est notre chose*'. The debates between the Muslim Arab reformer Imam Muhammad 'Abdo (1849–1950) and Renan are a testimony to the lack of understanding if not blatant ill-will by the latter in approaching the Arab Middle East and North Africa. It is worth pointing out the excellent refutation of Renan's arguments by Georges Corm, who shows up their misconceptions and contradictions (Corm 2006, ch. 2).

It is therefore no surprise to see repeated attempts by Western powers at forcing the emigration of Christians from the Arab Middle East to the United States, Canada, Europe and Australia. The Middle East would thus become an 'Arab' or 'Islamic' entity, easy to attack and invade because it is the 'other'. De Tocqueville developed a theory of extraction in colonized Algeria (De Tocqueville 1847/1988) and the

eradication of local culture. French, British and American imperialism was developed under the slogan of a *'mission civilisatrice'* for the French, 'the white man's burden' for the British and 'the Manifest Destiny' for the Americans!

The central point to be made in this discussion about 'freedom' is that in Arab and Muslim culture 'justice' is the central value (Khadduri 2002) when compared with freedom's centrality in the West. 'Justice' must be present everywhere: at home, in society, in government. Freedom in the Arab and Muslim world is not subjected to the criterion of utilitarianism but to the criterion of justice and fairness.

The West did not give the same importance to 'justice' as it did to 'freedom'. The latter is focused around the individual as the basic unit of society. British philosophers have succeeded in formulating strategic decision through Hobson's choice: either one path or nothing. Thomas Hobbes, a staunch advocate of autocracy used Hobson's choice as follows: either full power to the state or chaos. Hence the problem is to solve the contradiction between freedom and state powers. There were many solutions to this question – one of them is the separation of powers and the system of checks and balances – but all were tilted towards state power. Libertarians and Jeffersonians were staunch advocates of limited state power, whereas Hamiltonians in the United States advocated strong central power. Today in the West, the political narrative is whether to have a strong or a limited state. Accordingly this justifies the call to dismantle the 'welfare state' as a source of waste and inefficiency, notwithstanding its undesired intrusion into the privacy of people. The heated debates about Obamacare are an indication of such opposing views. So is the best state the least state? Not according to those who advocate world leadership and hence the need for a strong central state. The point here is that there are opposing tendencies between the call to 'freedom' and the call to a central state. In the end, from an Arab perspective, there is a strong dose of scepticism about the truthfulness of the call to freedom.

Stuart Mill has elevated the call to freedom to the level of dogma or credo. He tried to overcome what he called the 'dictatorship of the majority' to the advantage of individual freedom. The individual owns his body and mind and is therefore sovereign. He rejects the domination of the majority and the harm it brings when it ties down individual freedom. No authority should control an individual's freedom unless he is a cause of harm to others. This is the foundation of liberal thought that tries to limit the power of the state. It is also the basis for modern liberal economic thought building upon utilitarianism. Individual freedom launches the individual's creative energy, which we are told is bound by state authority – without really explaining why. As pointed out above, when has despotic power limited or prevented creativity? How can one explain the existence of 'enlightened philosophers' during the reign of absolute monarchy and despotism? In more recent times, have totalitarian systems not provided significant advances in sciences? Hence, where is the compelling argument that freedom is necessary for creativity?

Freedom and liberal economic thought are the foundations of modern Western economies. This freedom is linked to utilitarianism, and 'free competition' within the market has not led to more wealth for the general public but for the few. Joan Robinson and Edward Chamberlain, noted British economists, have shown in the last century the limits of 'free competition', and speak more of 'monopolistic competition'. The concentration of economic power in the hands of the few, the oligarchy becoming a plutocracy, ultimately leads to the corruption of the political and economic system. The financial fiasco in the United States in 2008 and later on in Europe illustrates the limits of total deregulation and the concentration of wealth and power in the hands

of the few. So the question is why the insistence on creating a 'free environment' when ultimately it will end up favouring the establishment of monopolies?

Strangely enough, in Arab and Muslim culture the central power through history only provided law and order, built roads, and minted currency. Social services were the domain of civil society through the millenary institution of the *'waqf'*, an institution similar to a trust fund. Social solidarity, or *'al-takaful'*, was the precursor 1400 years ago of the 20th century's social security. It was provided by civil society and not the central power. One can note that the term 'central power' or 'central authority' is used instead of 'state' because our contention is that the notion of 'state' as defined in the West is absent from Arab and Muslim culture as will be briefly explained below.

There is a marked difference between the concept of 'freedom' in the West and in the Arab and Muslim world. In the latter, 'freedom' can be understood only from the point of *'wasatiya'*, or the Arab equivalent of the 'golden mean'. 'Freedom' in the Arab and Muslim tradition is the opposite of slavery. It is to be viewed and understood at three levels: that of the individual, society and the central authority. In the West, 'freedom' may have contributed to economic advance but at the expense of values, endangering the social fabric. Freedom based upon utilitarianism could ultimately destroy the future of society. Where are the boundaries of utilitarianism and expediency? Where are the limits of maximum freedom and anarchy? Where does responsibility start and where does it end? Is the limit of freedom the law of the jungle? The Enlightenment philosophers tried to address such questions and the answers they provided were based upon a level of knowledge quite different from today. Hence, are their 'solutions' that seem to constitute the basis of policies still valid with the new and fast-changing level of knowledge nowadays? Would they have provided the same answers if they knew what they could not know then? Arabs are strongly advised to revisit such concepts and solutions in light of the various experiences of Western societies while clinging to a values system still dear to their hearts. Why should Arabs adopt patterns that have clearly failed or have reached a dead end in the West and consider them as exemplars?

On the other hand, the *'wasatiya'* defines the paradigm of 'freedom' in Arab and Muslim culture. While the individual's freedom cannot transgress society's freedom, the latter cannot also transgress the central authority's freedom. The reverse is also true, and the benchmark is the public good. Hence, the concept of individual freedom in Arab and Muslim culture is different from that in the West. It is subject to well-defined limits. The problem is who defines such limits. Muslim theologians and interpreters of *Shari'a* have tried over centuries, interpreting the Quran according to the political, economic and social environment in which they lived, and their rulings were carried out without examination of their relevance to new conditions. Hence it is quite possible to have different interpretations of the text than those elaborated in past centuries. The question facing Arabs and Muslims is: are they bound by rulings defined in the past without any updating to make them relevant today?

'Freedom' in Arab and Muslim culture carries the concept of responsibility and is not based on or linked to a utilitarian principle. 'Freedom' is the means to make the 'right' choices, and entails accountability and responsibility. Again, in Arab and Muslim history political despotism was never an obstacle to creativity. The luminaries in science, philosophy and arts have lived over time in different societies that were never 'free' in the Western sense. The driving value was and still is 'justice'. There is no creativity or dynamism without justice. The latter as a value is prevalent also in the West, yet it does not have the same centrality as in the Arab world. 'Freedom' in

the West, as a driver of creativity, is perceived through the prism of utilitarianism. It leads in the end to the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of the few who ultimately impose limits on the 'freedom' of the rest!

### On state

Another important concept at the heart of Arab political narrative is 'state'. Most contemporary Arab texts deal with the need to 'build the modern state'. However, this concept has not been subjected to serious analysis. The 'state' is a relatively recent concept even in the West. Until the French Revolution, the 'state' was embodied in the person of the king: '*L'Etat, c'est moi*' was the famous quip by Louis XIV. The French Revolution did away with 'divine right' for monarchs, and instituted the separation of powers, an idea adopted in the West and in most of the world. What Arab intellectuals and thinkers seem to have missed is that the new way of governing was accompanied by an economic revival that necessitated the establishment of institutions protecting the productive capacities of each economy. The 'state' in the West protects the productive forces through the institutions it has put in place. It also, until very recently, was the sole provider of services to society. As such, the 'state' is stronger than society in the West, whereas in the Arab and Muslim world, society is stronger than the 'state'. The central authority may wither away but society remains. The American invasion of Iraq destroyed the 'state' and its institutions but Iraqi society prevailed. The Palestinians have been dispossessed of land and rights and expelled, yet the fabric of Palestinian society is still intact despite a hardship experienced by no other people in the world short of outright genocide. The civil war in Lebanon destroyed or neutralized most 'state' institutions, yet here again the fabric of society was intact. In fact, 'central authority' or 'state' was never essential to the survival of Arab societies, whereas in the West society cannot survive without the 'state'. I am by no means advocating a weak state. In fact, I argue quite the contrary. But the conditions of its establishment are not yet in place and would be the subject of another debate beyond the scope of this paper, though some ideas are sketched below.

Arab ruling elites have also been deliberate in structuring 'central authority' as weaker than society. What matters is power and the distribution of spoils. Arab economies are rent-based economies and the rent is in the hands of the ruling elites. Distribution of wealth according to a scale of loyalties is the business of such elites. The role of the city in Arab and Muslim culture is not the same as in the West; it is rather a venue for the distribution of wealth. It does not matter how wealth is generated but how it is distributed and the order of distribution. The writings of the Algerian Ahmad Henni are a significant contribution to this idea (Henni 2010).

What distinguishes the West from the Arab and Muslim world is the former's promotion of the culture of production in the generation of wealth, whereas in the latter no such culture exists. Instead, there is an elaborate culture of the distribution of wealth. The latter is not necessarily generated by productive effort but through the capture of the 'other's' wealth either by force through raids or by consent through commerce. The writings of Ibn Khaldun indicate how Arabs viewed with scorn the generation of wealth by productive effort (Ibn Khaldun 2005, 340–348). However, an elaborate system of distribution of wealth and dispensation of services has been in place for over fourteen centuries. As indicated above, the solidarity system predates social security, and its implementing institution is the '*waqf*'. CAUS has recognized the importance

of this institution in the fabric of Arab society and organized a major conference on the subject (CAUS 2010a).

The relationship between the generation of wealth and the factionalist system in place, as well as the corruption related to them, is more useful in explaining the sorry state of affairs in the Arab world than are ready-made explanations imported from the West with little relevance to local reality (Hafez 2009a, 2009b). It is not a 'democracy deficit' (United Nations Development Program (UNDP) 2002; CAUS 2011), or 'lack of women's empowerment' (UNDP 2002), or absence of 'modernism', or 'lack of proper institutions', all recurrent themes in Westernized Arab narratives. The culture based on rent generates a system of attitudes that are not congruent with a productive culture, and avoids the culture of accountability and responsibility. If wealth is obtained from the ruler in exchange for allegiance, it is difficult to make him accountable for any misdoing.

It is also worth pointing out a basic difference between the meanings of the term 'state' in the West and in the Arab world. In the West, the etymology indicates something 'static' or 'stable'. In the Arab world the term is '*dawla*', whose etymology indicates something changing or variable. Hence, how is it that two contradictory etymologies define the same 'thing' in two different cultures? My contention is that the concept has different meanings in each culture, and Arab thinkers and intellectuals have not paid enough attention to that difference. Arab and Muslim culture has not developed a theory of the 'state' but rather an elaborate system of power rulings (*ahkam sultania*) such as that articulated by al-Mawardi (972–1058) in the classical period. In this respect the Arab world has the caliphate, the imamate or the sultanate as systems of power, but not the equivalent of the Western 'state'. One possible explanation is that the West embodied Hobson's choice: either the 'state' or chaos. In the Arab and Muslim world the 'state' is not 'necessary' as in the West because chaos is supposed to be countered by a system of values based upon justice, equity and fairness. The values system is stronger than the institutional system.

### **On democracy**

Another concept that has been readily admitted into the Arab political narrative is 'democracy'. The latter is almost a synonym for the building of a modern 'state'. Through 'democracy' development could be achieved, at least this is the contention of the famed Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) sponsored by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the Arab Development Fund, and the Arab League, and produced by Arab intellectuals and thinkers (UNDP 2002, 2). The writings of Francis Fukuyama on the 'end of history' seem to have affected this class of thinkers and intellectuals. But in all fairness, the drive to democracy was launched much earlier than that. During the dark days of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), CAUS took the initiative of launching the first symposium on 'democracy' in 1983. The irony was that not a single Arab country was willing to host the conference, so it was held in Cyprus (CAUS 1983)! Since then, CAUS has published over 40 books by Arab thinkers and intellectuals on democracy.

The drive to democracy found its culmination in the Arab Renaissance Project (ARP), wherein democracy is one of the six strategic goals (CAUS 2010b). The contention of this paper is that democracy has been adopted as a strategic goal for good governance without serious debate, even though there is a flood of publications



around that subject (Hafez 2011). Indeed there are many questions that need to be raised about democracy:

- Is it really a ‘universal’ value and a guarantee for ending wars?
- Is it really the ‘end of history’ as claimed by Fukuyama (a claim he later retracted)?
- Is democracy the system that frees the citizen from political slavery and fear, and launches his creative capacities in innovation and production, in competition and accumulation, whether material or moral?
- Is it true that it reinforces national unity based on citizenship?

A reading of history seems to water down the ‘nobility’ in ‘democracy’. The French Revolution that did away with absolute despotism and divine right did not prevent the colonial drive. France eventually lost its colonies after fighting wars, and the ‘emancipation’ of former African colonies was the result of France’s defeat in both Vietnam and Algeria. Even in 2005, a law was enacted in the French Parliament ‘glorifying’ the colonial experience!

On the other hand, what about the genocidal experience of the United States, which eliminated the original native populations (Zinn 2005)? Was the expansion to the West, and across the Pacific Ocean to the Hawaiian and later to the Philippine islands, and to the East and the occupation of Cuba, not against the principles of democracy? Moving to the other side of the coin, were Asian autocracies not instrumental in the economic development of their countries, such as in Singapore, Malaysia and South Korea, in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s? China, whose economy is a significant part of the world economy, is not a model of democracy and yet it experiences record-breaking annual growth rates.

The evidence of ‘democracy’ leading to development is at best inconclusive. Furthermore, how can one explain that the ‘democratic’ world (United States and Western Europe) got involved in two world wars in fewer than 25 years? It is true that their adversaries were not paragons of democracy, but was Adolf Hitler not elected ‘democratically’, as well as Benito Mussolini? Was Fascism in Germany and Italy not instrumental in their economic growth, especially the former when it was plagued with the disastrous reparation resolutions of the Versailles Treaty? Did the Soviet Union not become a leader in scientific discovery even though it was a totalitarian state? More recently, was not George W. Bush elected twice even though he misrepresented facts about Iraq and could be liable for war crimes?

Moreover, from an Arab perspective, Western ‘democracies’ created and perpetuated the existence of the state of Israel at the expense of Palestinian rights. The hypocrisy of the ‘democratic’ West in finessing the right of return of Palestinians to their homeland is appalling. The ‘only democracy’ in the region, i.e. Israel, is practising with total impunity the illegal occupation of land, the spoliation of Arab rights and the enforcement of an abhorrent ‘apartheid’ system – and it is supported by Western democracies! If we add the ill-fated experiences in Iraq, Libya, Egypt and Syria where ‘democracy’ has brought nothing but misery, one should not be surprised at the scepticism felt by many Arabs toward this system of government. Many Arabs strongly believe that such an ‘import’ is something they could do without.

Some Western economists and political scientists have proposed a new line of thinking that explains why wealth is generated in certain countries and not in others. Their argument is for what they call ‘inclusive’ institutions, where components of

society are stakeholders in the generation of wealth (Acemoglu and Robinson 2012). Failed countries are plagued with what they call ‘extractive institutions’. This approach is clever because it circumvents the propagandist literature about ‘democracy’ and its obvious shortcomings. Participation is the key word, and the mechanisms for its implementation need to be worked out. This is a task that Arab intellectuals and thinkers should undertake because the ‘democratic’ process is vulnerable to being hijacked by economic interests. Soviet and other forms of totalitarianism have seized individual freedoms by force in the name of ideology. Western ‘liberal democracies’ have seized individual freedoms by ‘consent’. The Patriot Act in the United States is but one example.

If one takes a closer look at ‘democracy’, one finds that the word has a Greek origin made up of two words: *demos* meaning people and *cratia* meaning ruling or governing, hence government by the people. In Athens, the credited birthplace of democracy, not all citizens of the city-state were allowed to participate in the decision-making process. Women and slaves were excluded. The American Founding Fathers also excluded women and those who could not pay taxes from the electoral process. Only landlords and persons of means were eligible to participate (Zinn 2005, 59–76). The US Constitution, taken as a model by many Arab intellectuals, was built on the exclusion of the female half of the population, and of the poor. Exclusion in American politics is a trademark. It took a civil war to emancipate African-Americans brought against their will into slavery, and it took another century to grant them their civil rights. Martin Luther King’s long march, which started in 1968, saw its achievement only 40 years later when Barak Obama became the first African-American president. Yet even now, a significant portion of the American public rejects him on the basis of his skin colour or, even worse, on the allegation of being Muslim, even though the US Constitution asserts the separation of Church and State and the freedom of religion. But it seems that the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant<sup>2</sup> character of the majority of the American public is stronger than the stipulations of the Constitution. Only one Catholic, John F. Kennedy, was ever elected to the presidency, and he did not complete his term! Exclusion on the base of skin colour, religion, sex and wealth is a pervasive trait of American politics. Women had to wait until 1920 to get the right to vote, and even now residents of the District of Columbia have no voting representative in Congress. Special interests control the political agenda, hijacking the democratic process.

The ‘agenda’ is what democracy theoretician Robert Alan Dahl considers the key element of the democratic process (Dahl 1989, 1999). Those who control the agenda control the political process and therefore government. The ‘agenda’ is the list of what people want at the national level. So special interests – a much recurrent theme in political debate yet without any steps taken to curb them – control the political process. If money – the key element in the expression of goals and aspirations – dominates and controls the agenda, then the elected representatives of any political process are bound to do the bidding of their donors. Hence such representatives are not ‘free’ and do not represent the interests of their constituencies as much as they represent those of their financiers.

One has also to point out the increasing cost of the electoral process. The last US presidential elections, in November 2012, saw estimates climbing to US\$6 billion for both candidates. In Lebanon, the last parliamentary elections in 2009 have seen large numbers relative to the size of the country, where the March 14 coalition is estimated to have spent almost a staggering US\$750 million, while the opposing coalition is said to have spent close to US\$500 million. Irrespective of the accuracy of such

numbers, one cannot but conclude that money is the most important element in the 'democratic' political process! Another factor that questions the credibility of the electoral process is participation. If electoral turnout is low then is the elected 'majority' really a majority? Some serious thinking must be done to devise a system of participation in which money is neutralized from the setting of the political agenda.

In the Arab and Muslim world, questions arise about the relevance of such a process:

- Is representative democracy relevant in a factionalist society whose wealth generation is based on rent and where allegiances are given to the dispenser of wealth more than to the nation?
- How can one make sure that accountability and responsibility are in place if money controls the process?
- Will not 'democracy' lead to an 'oligarchy' or even a plutocracy?
- Is not the final product of a plutocracy essentially a kleptocracy?

The financial scandals in the United States and Europe have not led to those responsible being brought to account. Instead, they were helped by generous injections of taxpayers' money and were even rewarded with extravagant bonuses.

Westernized Arab intellectuals and thinkers are called upon to look more closely into the objective conditions that have led to the rise and development of democracy, instead of looking only at the justifications supporting it. Among these conditions is the existence of a strong state with working institutions and a culture supporting the generation of wealth through effort as well as a production-based economy. Again it must be emphasized that in the Arab world society is stronger than the state. The 'state' institutions in the Arab world are weak and do not have the trust and confidence of citizens. The second condition is that information must not be the privilege of the few, but must be disseminated without bias and distortion so the citizen can make an informed decision, otherwise the electoral process would be a mechanism for the reproduction of the same elites that are controlled by financial power. Information is the way to install accountability and responsibility, and to provide the necessary supervision. Relevant and accurate information will help in reducing the impact of primal instincts of clannishness and exclusion of the 'other'. Hence there is a need to supervise and control the media and their narrative. The third condition is the effective participation of all components of society in determining the political agenda. The fourth condition is that nobody must have exclusive control over that agenda.

There is a need to revisit the traditional Arab and Muslim idea known as '*ahl al-rabt wal-'uqad*', which is a form of parliament whereby members are chosen for their knowledge, their organisational ability, and mostly for their strong sense of ethics. It is a restricted club open only to candidates who fulfil these necessary requirements, and not because of their access to money. This could be a venue for representation based on ability and character but not on wealth. The same would apply to the body of electors.

This leads us to use the following analogy: if driving is a right given to citizens, yet a driving licence is only granted after the candidate has successfully passed a driving test and has demonstrated a solid knowledge of traffic rules, then why is the right to vote and to run for office not subjected to the same process? Electors as well as candidates for office must demonstrate knowledge (which is by no means a given among ruling elites in Western democracies and even less in Arab power structures), an

ability to organize and operate institutions, and a strong sense of ethics. Otherwise, the fate of the nation would be decided by ignorant, inept persons and/or persons with serious character flaws. People may get elected by appealing to base instincts that are divisive in a plural society. Arab society is pluralistic, and appealing to base instincts of kinship, sectarianism or any form of factionalism is destructive. The civil war raging now in Syria is the latest example. The right to vote must be earned, and is more of a privilege than a natural right. How can this be achieved? This is the task that Arab intellectuals, thinkers and activists should address.

Finally, it is said that democracy is the best of bad forms of government. If so, a question that jumps to mind: it necessary to choose what is inherently bad? If in the past it was not possible to devise a better form of government, then may be now is the time to think about it and use modern technologies in computing, communication, and transportation for the elaboration of a new system of government. Who said that 'democracy' is a universal value? It is only a form of government that may have suited certain groups in certain countries at certain periods with, more often than not, unintended and irreversible negative outcomes resulting from bad choices.

### **Toward an Arab epistemology**

In the above paragraphs an argument was made about the need to revisit concepts at the core of Arab social sciences. It is not necessarily a call for their rejection, but their subjection to a deconstruction and evaluation of their relevance. Whatever is deemed suitable would be kept and the rest left aside. Arabs have to come up with something they can use based on their past and current reality. What is compelling in the need to look for a new epistemology is that the current one inherited from the West is not really working even in the West and certainly not in the Arab world. The purpose of a new system of knowledge is to extract tools of analysis adapted to Arab reality. This is the first challenge facing Arabs.

In fact, what is needed is the rehabilitation of the Arab mind. As indicated above, the assault started with Renan. More recently, there was the dubious scholarship of Raphael Patai (Patai 1973), aptly refuted by Alexander Abdennur (Abdennur 2008; Hafez 2010a). There has been a systematic denigration of the Arab mind as incapable of comprehending abstract concepts. Abdennur's work demonstrates the rational orientation of the Arab mind and its multidimensionality, whereas the Anglo-Saxon mind is pragmatic, erring toward the one-dimensional.

The second challenge lies in the definition of Arab 'reality'. How is it to be defined and by what criteria and standards? The latter have to be congruent with both cultural heritage and the present. Yet one cannot escape the existence of a vicious circle in the definition of 'reality'. Indeed its definition requires tools of analysis that are not available indigenously for the time being but are 'imported'. Hence the circularity of reasoning: Arabs need a new epistemology to extract tools of analysis, yet they 'import' tools that produce an epistemology different from what they want and need. This dilemma is illustrated in the question: is there a need to define 'reality' by the criteria and standards used in the much-touted AHDR, opposed by many because deemed irrelevant (Shafiq 2005), or must new standards be created? Is Arab reality defined by a 'democracy deficit', or female empowerment deficit, or knowledge deficit? The latter is the most important, but the question is: what knowledge? On the other hand, what would be the role of colonialism, imperialism, the occupation of Arab territories, the occupation

of Palestine, the presence of foreign military bases in several Arab countries whose independence has become questionable?

The creation of such standards could require 'imports'. There is no clear answer to that for the time being. One step in the right direction, after the deconstruction of Western paradigms and concepts, is a rereading of the Arab cultural legacy. In the past, Arabs produced knowledge and transmitted it to the rest of the world. Today, they need to reread it. Arab intellectuals and thinkers who call for a total break with the Arab past and cultural heritage, and embrace Western culture without reservation, must be vigorously opposed.

The third and most important challenge lies in the revision of the educational system of the Arab world. The present system is designed to produce elites that perpetuate the current state of affairs, i.e. a leadership surviving on a rent-based economy that spurns effort and accountability, with corruption to keep factions in line, and a fragmented polity relying on all sorts of factionalism: tribalism, sectarianism, regionalism, sectoral divisions. The current education system marginalizes sciences and critical thinking, and relies on rote. The AHDR has correctly identified the lack of interest in sciences, which is in our opinion a deliberate policy by ruling elites. Arab countries spend less than 1% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on research (UNDP 2002).

What is therefore required is the establishment of an education system based on sciences and a system of values such as effort and ethics. The culture of effort is lacking, as was pointed out by Ibn Khaldun himself some seven centuries ago. He made the distinction that peoples north of the Mediterranean – meaning Europeans – had a solid culture of effort (Ibn Khaldun 2005, 345), whereas Arabs professed disdain because of the 'unmanliness' of work. Nowadays, a new epistemology cannot be put in place through individual or collective effort without the solid support of government. Here the effort is lacking. A significant portion of GDP must be spent on scientific research in order to create a culture and philosophy of knowledge. I call upon Arab governments to spend no less than 10% of their GDP on such efforts.

Unfortunately, the culture of rent prevailing in Arab countries opposes such policies. The current thinking among ruling elites is that money can buy the research done outside the Arab world without undergoing the hassle of actually doing research. It is not only oil-rich countries that have developed such an attitude but also the rest of Arab countries. A country like Lebanon, described as one of the 'few democracies' in the region, has a very poor record in research and science, especially since the end of the civil war (Abu Zaki 2012). The culture of rent dominates, and therefore the question of effort and reward is marginalized. So the establishment of an Arab system of knowledge requires the abandonment of rent-based culture and the subsequent frantic consumerism dominating the landscape. This in itself is a major political decision, even a revolution in the full sense of the word, since it will entail a revision of economic, social and cultural relations in the Arab world.

The establishment of a new education system that promotes science and effort starts with the eradication of illiteracy, especially among women, though many Arab countries have taken significant steps in that direction. Yet even a modest rate of illiteracy is not acceptable. With literacy, the spread of information technology will enable the new education system to achieve the proposed goals.

A question that arises in discussion of the education system is the future of the Arabic language. The latter is under assault from various quarters. The Arab National Conference, in its last annual meeting in Hammamet, Tunisia, early in June 2012, recognized the danger of the assault on the Arabic language (Arab National Conference

2012). Many Arab universities in the Gulf have abandoned Arabic as a teaching language in favour of English. I strongly oppose that measure and reject the absurd justification that an English-based system of higher education will enable Arab students to compete with advanced countries, and that it is part of the globalization of knowledge. Are the Chinese teaching their youth in English? Why do Arab ruling elites forget that the founder of algebra, al-Khwarizmi (780–850), wrote his treatises in Arabic? Do they forget that advanced differential equations by al-Haytham (965–1040) were also in Arabic? Or that Ibn Sina's ('Avicenna', 980–1037) treatise on eye surgery was also written in Arabic? For more information on the matter, read the brilliant exposé by Georges Saliba about Arab and Muslim scientists of the golden age who wrote in Arabic (Saliba 2007).

The decision taken by Arab Gulf governments to switch to the English language is more a political decision than an educational one. The assault on Arabic is also an assault on Arab identity, since language is a primal constituent of national identity. It ignores a 1400-year tradition of production of knowledge, as shown by Saliba (2007). The decision also enables the implementation of education systems that reproduce and rejuvenate the stock of ruling elites committed to the *status quo* and opposed to change. Misusing the globalization argument, it also establishes the foundations of a ruling system totally dependent upon foreign decisions, a significant encroachment on national sovereignty. If anything, one of the major lessons drawn from the upheaval in Arab countries is that Arabs are staunchly opposed to dependence on outside powers. Cultural dependency is another form of subjugation. If anything, I might dare say that occupying Arab minds is worse than occupying Arab land.

In this respect, the media plays a crucial role. It has already established its devastating power with the coverage of wars and recent upheavals. The new Arab media, modelled on its Western competitors, has been implementing an agenda sponsoring consumerism and the base instincts of Arab society. An eminent expert on the matter, Hayat Howayek, has conducted extensive studies on contemporary Arab media (Howayek 2011). Her dissertation on the satellite stations al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya, Abu Dhabi and al-Manar examined whether such channels were an expression of adaptation and change, or whether they were designed to perpetuate the status quo, globalization, the West and consumerism.<sup>3</sup> She has been critical of petro-monarchies who are trying to 'acquire' culture through money. The point here is that a counterrevolution is already in place to hold off real attempts at changing the Arab order, including Arab epistemology. Consumerism based on the satisfaction of artificial needs created by the media goes against the culture of effort and innovation, and will do so as long as money is able to 'buy' culture or science.

Finally, the new Arab epistemology should be strongly linked to a system of ethics and values removed from the utilitarianism that has plagued Western systems and concepts. Many writings have shown that 'economics' as taught in Western universities is facing dead-ends and is unable to address the problems of society anymore. 'Economics' should be linked to a system of ethical values that prevents the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few (Hafez 2010b). Some Arab thinkers and researchers have found that technological advances resulting from scientific research have had loose relations with ethics (Zahlan 2012). Science without strong ties to ethics supported war crimes in Nazi Germany, enabled the Balfour Declaration to define policy in the Arab Levant,<sup>4</sup> and of course facilitated colonialism. This paper is a call to change that.

## Notes

1. Communication by Lebanese philosopher Nassif Nassar in discussion of Georges Corm's *Religious Plurality and Systems of Government in the Middle East*, on 14 February 2012.
2. Samuel Huntington's last book (Huntington 2004) before his death warns of the loss of its white Anglo-Saxon Protestant character as the greatest danger facing the United States.
3. Lecture delivered in Arabic at Dar al-Nadwa, Beirut, May 2012.
4. The Balfour Declaration in 1916 was made by the British government as a *quid pro quo* with Chaim Weizman, later first president of Israel, for the use of yperite (sulphur mustard gas) in the First World War.

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