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REVIEW ESSAY

The Arab mind: An ontology of abstraction and concreteness, by Alexander Abdennur, Ottawa, ON, Kogna, 2008, 326 pp., US$45.00, ISBN 978-0-9810727-0-8

Introduction

This review essay started as a book review; however, the importance of the subject-matter reviewed necessitated more attention than ordinary. In fact, this is not just another book, but a turning point in contemporary Arab thought because this is a seminal work – in more ways than one – given that it addresses the issue of the Arab mind.

To understand the significance of the book, it is necessary to put it in historical perspective. Early in the past decade, in 2003, the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) issued in conjunction with the Arab League its first Arab Human Development Report (AHDR). It depicted a rather sombre picture of Arab development. Indeed, despite tremendous resources and wealth, the combined Arab gross domestic product (GDP) did not exceed that of Spain in 2001, which is not a first-tier country of the European Union. The report addressed what it termed three major deficiencies in Arab society, namely: a lack of freedom; an undeveloped knowledge society; and finally, a lack of empowerment for women. Subsequent annual reports expanded on the findings of the first report and continued depicting a negative picture of Arab society. One must point out that the first report did generate a lot of debate. Since it was written by Arab scholars and experts on various subject-matters pertaining to Arab society, it was hailed in the Western media and academic circles as courageous self-criticism. However, the report was also used, misused, and even abused by many opinion-makers in the West as a justification for a robust intervention by the West in Arab affairs. The report appeared about the same time as the invasion of Iraq by the United States and a coalition of 'willing' countries and without the sanction of the United Nations. On the other hand, many in the Arab world perceived the AHDR as self-flagellation and rightly questioned many of its assumptions and findings. It is against this backdrop of Arab debates that Professor Alexander Abdennur's book should be understood, especially since it addresses the process of thought-formation patterns leading to knowledge, a deficit depicted in the first AHDR.

Indeed, the Arab world is experiencing vigorous conversation in almost all matters. This reviewer would even suggest that the Arab world is experiencing an unprecedented renaissance despite the turmoil in which it is plunged. The Centre for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS) published in February 2010 a major document entitled the Arab Renaissance Project (ARP): an undertaking which has been in the works for almost three decades that accompanied a major reappraisal by Arab nationalists of past experiences, failures, and assessments of hopes and aspirations. Many scholars, academics, former officials, and activists contributed to the redaction of the report, and the Arab media are making space available for the discussion of it, which will likely continue for quite some time.

   The basic theme of the ARP is that Arab renewal is an absolute must otherwise Arabs will face regression and extinction, and the dramatic emphasis here is not an exaggeration. In a forthcoming paper, the features of such a project will be discussed. For the purpose of this review, it suffices to say that the ARP provides a diagnostic of problems confronting Arab society. These are fragmentation, diminished national independence through the occupation of Arab land by foreign powers and entities, a lack of freedom and participation, economic dependency, social injustice, and stagnation in renewal efforts. The solutions provided are: unity in response to fragmentation; national liberation in response to occupation; democracy in response to dictatorship; economic independence as opposed to economic dependency; social justice as an answer to inequality; and Arab cultural renewal as opposed to stagnation and regression.

   The ARP is in many ways a direct response to the various AHDRs and other political projects aimed at redrawing the region according to an agenda suiting the ambitions of hegemonic powers. One of many issues discussed is what it calls Arab civilizational renewal. Such renewal is predicated upon the balance between delving into the prestigious cultural Arab heritage and the requirements of what is currently perceived as contemporariness. Though the purpose of this review is not the analysis and critique of Arab civilizational renewal, even it genuinely deserves an in-depth discussion, the work of Abdennur, an Ottawa-based Lebanese–Canadian scholar and practitioner trained in philosophy, psychology, and social psychology, has a direct bearing on it. Abdennur has written extensively about social psychology and personality disorders (e.g. Abdennur 1979, 1980, 1982, 1987, 2000, Abdennur and Ross 1996, and Abdennur and Barhoum 2004) and has combined a solid theoretical and empirical knowledge in his career in his research and publications to make his findings worthy of study.

   Indeed, his work is a major step toward achieving the renewal Arabs need; a step which entails rehabilitating the Arab mind that has been vilified over the last four decades in the aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967). Many critics, Westerners and Arabs, believe that the Arab defeat was a turning point in Arab history and that numerous paradigms and precepts needed to be reviewed and such would make for a fascinating narrative, although beyond the scope of this review. However, the subject-matter of Abdennur's book is a rebuttal of many of the theses that have been advanced to explain or even *justify* Arab defeat. The AHDRs are nothing but a continuation of a trend of self-criticism bordering most of the time on self-flagellation rather than on constructive criticism with integrated responses to the challenges.

The context of the problem

Arab scholars who have participated in the redaction of the AHDRs have confirmed a trend established in certain media outlets, both Arab and Western, systematically denigrating Arab culture and even the Arab mind. In the West, the first to deal with the issue in the aftermath of the Six-Day War and preceding the publication of Edward Said's (1935–2003) seminal book entitled *Orientalism* (Said 1978) was Raphael Patai's (1910–1996) landmark book on *The Arab Mind* (1973, revised Patai 1983). For a long period, Patai's stereotyping of the Arab mind has served as the foundation of a cultural narrative in the West to explain the 'inherent backwardness' of Arabs and the superiority of the Western mind. Many Arab scholars in their self-deprecating mode of seeking recognition in the West appear to have adhered either implicitly or explicitly to Patai's 'findings'.

Abdennur undertakes a major refutation of Patai's flawed analysis as well as that of Mohammed Abed al-Jabri, a Moroccan scholar who also undertook upon himself the task of deconstructing the Arab mind. Abdennur's refutation of both Patai and al-Jabri is gentle in style but devastating in content. He has deliberately avoided the polemicist approach for an objective, almost surgical approach to dismantling the paradigms each tried to establish about the Arab mind.

Abdennur has no illusion about the relationship between the West and the Arabic–Islamic word. In his Preface, he writes that 'conflict between the West and the Arab–Islamic world has a long history and, probably, a long future. We are besieged on a daily basis with evidence, often bloody, of the consequences of these conflicts' (p. ix). More sombrely, he adds:

> We are also besieged with evidence of the less than impressive efforts at dealing with these conflicts. Skilled politicians, negotiators, and expert advisors have exerted great efforts at understanding *what* each side thinks about the political conflicts and social, religious, and moral issues. But what may also be needed is more understanding of *how* each side thinks. The clash of cultures may be rooted not only in the conflicting positions that each culture takes on interpersonal, moral, economic, territorial, and political issues, but also in the way such issues are conceptualized and constructed as a result of differing styles of thinking. Attempts at understanding the different thinking styles that are inherent in the perspectives of other cultures also promote a critical self-examination of one's own cultural products, and may thus lead to improved communication among civilizations.   (p. ix)

The last sentence in the quote is in line with the ARP. Though there is no evidence that Abdennur was aware of such a project, the meeting of minds with his fellow Arab thinkers illustrate the contention that indeed a major overhaul of Arab thinking is taking place in the Arab world and where the Arab *diaspora* has settled. This renaissance effort cannot take place until Arabs have been reconciled with their own ability to extricate themselves from the state of dependency created by being constantly assaulted in their beliefs, achievements, and prospects for a free future. Abdennur's endeavour is a major step in that direction. The reconciliation cannot take place until Arabs and their critics have become aware of the power of the Arab style of thinking. Abdennur's book 'attempts to identify the styles of thinking that are inherent in Arab cultural expression, with its main goal being to present these styles in their proper epistemological and social contexts' (p. ix). A second objective of the book is 'the feel good' part in which the positive aspects of Arab cultural expression are emphasized. The complexity, creativity, and potential in contributing toward a broader consciousness of world issues are the trademark of such cultural expression. The final objective is quite political as it aims at 'identifying common elements that can reinforce a sense of Arab cultural identity'. Indeed, Abdennur believes that sense of cultural identity is needed 'as large parts of the Arab world face the threat of further political fragmentation and social disorganization' (p. ix).

A brief review of the literature on cognitive–epistemological research

How did Abdennur undertake this task in 310 pages and with an impressive list of bibliographical references of over 170 titles listed in nine pages at the end? From the onset he recognizes the magnitude of the task and is quite critical of the simplistic models advanced by intellectuals and scholars to understand the culture of a people.

He firmly believes in the need for requisite knowledge of the constituent components of the culture being studied.

> Present in all cultures, these components include, among others, the values that are manifest in the culture's belief systems, norms, and customs; the self-expression that takes form in the culture's languages, literature, and arts; and the knowledge that derives from the culture's folk wisdom, philosophy and science. Each of these elements must also be analyzed within time-related social changes and with attention given to regional variations.   (p. 1)

In these two sentences, Abdennur defines the scope of his work, which by any measure is almost an impossible task to be carried by one person, yet he does manage to convey a true sense of the components of Arab identity and also recognizing the need for further empirical and theoretical research.

However, before plunging into the particulars of his research, Abdennur reviews the body of literature that has defined the established paradigm of the Arab mind in Western and Arab circles. He summarizes the various approaches employed by scholars and experts in the field into two major categories. The first has been to look for typical traits or a national character. Such approaches have given rise to two types of research: one anthropological and analytical. The second is engaging in limited empirical investigations based on questionnaires or published measures of psychological constructs. One can sense Abdennur's unease towards this approach. Anthropological analysis in the West of Arab and Islamic societies has been tainted with the hidden agendas of hegemonic powers, and criticisms such as those levelled by Georges Corm (Corm 2002) provide ample justification for reservations about anthropological approaches towards Arab and Islamic societies. The second major approach aims at reaching a simplified understanding, seeking to identify patterns, or underlying epistemic styles describing the Arab mind (p. 1); and Abdennur's book is an expression of this approach termed as 'the cognitive–epistemological approach'.

Historically speaking, the earlier research on the Arab national character was conducted from the mid-eighteenth century by Western scholars using the anthropological and analytical approaches. Abdennur subscribes to Said's assessment that such scholars, the 'Orientalists', 'approached the topic from the imperatives of dominance, ideological bias, static perception, and a negative evaluation of Arab cultural forms' (p. 2). On the other hand, Abdennur points out that Arab scholars and social analysts, 'in contrast, were passionately concerned with reforming what they considered to be the backward aspects of Arab society relative to Western models' (p. 2). There is a wide spectrum of positions where the most extreme 'Westernizers' tended to identify fully with the foreign models.

At this stage, one may wish to pause and reflect. Staunch advocates of Arab nationalism in the 1940s and 1950s believed that the way of salvation was the 'West' (Zurayk 2001). Earlier in the twentieth century, Egyptian Salameh Musa advocated bluntly the abandonment of Arab paradigms and the adoption of Western ones. To date, there is a lively debate still ongoing among Arab scholars and intellectuals about the adoption of Western paradigms. Abdennur does provide an interesting analysis in his deconstruction of the collapse or retreat of Arab culture, and, as indicated above, the AHDR reports added fuel to such debate. The invasion of Iraq has led some Arabs in many media outlets to reject outright Arab and Islamic models and adopt without reservation Western ones. It is the quintessential representation of the culture of defeat as described by Wolfgang Schivelbush (2003). Abdennur's explanation of the

collapse of Arab culture will be explored below. On the other side of the spectrum, there is a call for a rejection of such models and the adoption of early Islamic period models. In that sense, Abdennur's work is a pivotal step in such debate because he lays down the scientific basis for the defence of the Arab mind. He also deconstructs the Western paradigms of thinking and shows their limits, as will be discussed below.

The focus of his book is to debunk stereotypes of emotionalism, irrationalism, suspiciousness, conspiracy-driven thinking, free-floating hostility, a lack of reality testing, the prominence of shame as a motive for behaviour, a tendency for categorical judgements, rigidity of thought, ambivalence, a sudden fluctuation from depression to exaltation, the polarization of praise and blame, a lack of cooperative spirit, fatalism, and authoritarianism (p. 3). These traits are examined exhaustively one by one in the book. These latter refute the results of sample findings, of static models of integration, of reductionism, of even ideological and value assumptions leading to tautological results. Alternative approaches to 'explaining' the Arab national character based on value orientations were related to social and historical contexts (Barakat 1993). One finding was that 'value orientations in Arab society … differ according to social class and exposure to the Western world' (pp. 3–4). In the author's view:

> while making assessments on these value continua may provide description of value directions in time and place, such an assessment fails to provide the dynamic understanding of the interaction between these value states. Arriving at a profile that features the uniqueness of the culture and one that is capable of predicting future behavior would require an understanding of the interaction of the culture's constituent components.   (p. 4)

Abdennur prefers the approach that focuses on identifying thinking patterns or underlying epistemic styles. Patai's *The Arab Mind* (1973, revised Patai 1983) is the pivotal work here. It popularized the concept of 'national character' or 'collective personality' even though there are only individual minds, psyches, characters, or personalities. Patai, a Hungarian-born Israeli sociologist, writes of a 'modal personality'. The term 'modal' is derived from statistics and refers to the value or number that occurs most frequently in a given series. 'The national character or personality of a people thus consists of the sum total of modal personality traits found the national population' (p. 4). Patai's intention was to present an integrated account of the traits of the basic Arab personality, i.e. the verbal cognitive, and psychological traits as they 'are expressed consistently and consciously, as the term 'mind' would imply' (p. 5).

Patai's argument about what constitutes the Arab mind results from 'growing up in a common environment where individuals exhibit, beyond their individual differences, internalized common cultural values and behavior patterns as well as culturally structured motives and goals' (p. 5). Though Patai's title would convey the concern with 'thinking-related' modal traits as differentiated from personality-related traits, Abdennur believes that Patai's argument has been compromised by the mixture of 'thinking-related' patterns with personality dynamics. 'He further compromised his cognitive approach by attempting to provide explanations for some traits in anthropology and personality theory' (p. 5). He perceives the flaw in Patai's analysis by the fact that the latter 'traces the development of Arab modal traits by relying on an anthropological analysis or early child-rearing practices, traditional family organization, and the role of gender, the impact of the Arabic language, and the basic values pertaining to pre-Islamic heritages' (p. 5). For Abdennur, 'a true cognitive approach would focus on the functionality of the trait as part of a more generalized thinking pattern or behavior' (p. 5). This is where Patai falls short. In his explanation of Arab proclivity to

making emphatic statements of intention without seeking to realize them, he resorts to child-rearing practices in Arab society. Patai's 'child-rearing' explanation as a causal genesis ignores the functional causes such as the use of such statements for attitude demonstration and social discourse. Abdennur's in-depth explanation of such emphatic statements in Chapter 5 is an illustration of the approach undertaken that differentiates him from Patai and other socio-anthropologists attempting to 'read and explain' the Arab world.

Before moving to the core of Abdennur's approach, a few words about Mohammed Abed al-Jabri's *magnum opus* on the 'Arab mind' will be helpful. Over almost 20 years, al-Jabri gained acclaim for his four large volumes about the Arab mind (Al-Jabiri 1985, 1987, 1990, 2001). Al-Jabri tries to distinguish between Arab thought and Arab mind. Abdennur correctly observes that 'the distinction between thought as content and thought as the thinking instrument is an arbitrary once since both are inter-woven, just as language is both a medium for the communication of thinking and at the same time can structure thinking' (pp. 5–6). Al-Jabri's distinction between content and process is deliberate in order to identify thinking strategies that have shaped and influenced Arab thought, particular social and historical conditions. Abdennur's work takes into account Patai's and al-Jabri's works and systematically refutes their methods and conclusions in the second chapter of his book.

The focus of the book

Though the book is divided into fourteen parts, there are in fact three distinct ones. The first is Chapter 2 where Abdennur discusses the works of Patai and al-Jabiri; a second part consisting of Chapter 3 discusses the various cognitive and epistemic styles; and other chapters are devoted to the methodological development of the author's argument about the rational, epistemological orientation of the Arab mind. His research is based upon the established literature, on systematic observations he has made over several decades, and on empirical research conducted to compare the thinking styles of Arab and Western samples. The latter point may be a basis for criticisms to the extent that samples studied may or may not be 'representative'. The author has acknowledged to this reviewer that further research may be needed to validate or refute the conclusions, but he is fairly confident that further empirical research will likely substantiate his findings.

Abdennur does not confine his research solely to identifying the characteristics of the Arab mind, but 'also ventures to account for their implications of social and political issues and on certain normative behaviors' (p. 7). And given the political and cultural conflicts between Arab and Western societies, the book has focused on the differences between Arab and North American thinking. The book is quite interesting in showing the differences of styles in thinking patterns, which makes it quite relevant to the ongoing understanding or 'mutual misunderstanding' currently transpiring place between the two societies.

Abdennur's basic contribution is the cognitive-centred approach to the Arab mind as distinguished from the personality-centred one. 'It seeks to identify typical characteristics, styles, and orientations that pertain to thinking and which impact social expressions' (p. 7). It is also believed, and there are no empirical data to prove or disprove the proposition, that 'cognitively-centered traits of the Arab mind are assumed to have a relative stability, perseverance, and, unlike personality-centered traits, are not viewed as being easily modified by social change' (p. 7). Therefore, it

is a useful tool to predict behaviour. The importance of the approach is that it is independent from historical, socio-economic, and political causes. One may wonder whether it is possible to isolate thinking patterns from the environment in which it manifests itself. The author has acknowledged to this reviewer in one of the many discussions held that it could be a drawback and that further research would be necessary to test the impact of the political, socio-economic, and cultural impact on thinking patterns. It is clear for many that thinking patterns do have a direct bearing on the environment, yet the opposite could be also intuitively true, but without any available direct verification of that proposition. Hence, the postulate formulated by Abdennur relating to the independence of thinking patterns from the impact of the environment might be accepted until contrary information is made available.

Conceptions of the Arab mind

The author begins his analysis of the Arab mind by describing with some detail the views of such authors as Patai, al-Jabiri, and the Iraqi sociologist Ali al-Wardi (1913–1995). He justifies such an undertaking by 'the importance of each of these authors' contributions to the development and popularization of inquiries into an Arab "mind"' (p. 9). Abdennur does not dismiss their work even if he is critical of their methodologies and conclusions. He is content to voice his position regarding their findings since many before him have already challenged Patai, al-Jabiri, and al-Wardi.

It is useful, however, to list briefly the main ideas developed by such authors about the Arab mind in order to compare them with those of Abdennur. Starting with Patai, the latter has listed about fifteen distinguishing characteristics, of which only a few will be discussed due to space constraints. Also, the selected features are deemed to have been the foundation of stereotypes used in the West when describing Arabs.

Raphael Patai

First, there is the well-known emphatic expression of Arabs. Patai acknowledges the importance and the impact of the Arabic language as having a strong affective and unifying force despite political, geographic, and ethnic diversity. Here, it may be useful to point out that we have seen systematic attacks from various Arab quarters affiliated with Western institutions against the Arabic language as somehow not being conducive to scientific research. Of course, such is patently ridiculous – Arabic being perfectly suitable scientific usage; however, Arab nationalist institutions such as the Arab National Conference (ANC) and The Centre for Arab Unity Studies (CAUS) do take these attacks very seriously. The last annual meeting of the ANC dealt with the issue and is assertive in its final resolutions (ANC 2010). Another point can be made in this regard when universities and institutions of higher learning in the Gulf and in the Maghreb have altogether abandoned Arabic as the teaching language for English and French, respectively. Hence, Patai's emphasis on the role of the Arabic language has not been lost on those who work very hard to 'Westernize' Arabs and to contribute to their further fragmentation by making their national language redundant and to substitute colloquial Arabic mixed with anglicized or gallicized elements. Patai's attack on the Arabic language is not an objective per se. The beauty of the language, the tendency to use cadence and rhythm in writing and speaking are possible explanations for Arabs' inclination to rhetoric (*balaghah*), to exaggeration and hyperbole (*mubalaghah*), and to repetition. Added to these are forms of emphatic assertion in

relation to deeds and intentions, and the use of the superlatives in expression. So, 'when taken together, according to Patai, the above styles indicate that the Arabic language inclines the Arab mind toward emphatic expression' (p. 10). The subliminal message – or not so subliminal – is that it is difficult to take Arabs seriously at their word for what is expressed may be greater than what is actually intended.

The second characteristic described by Patai is the substitution of words for action. The emphatic tendency in expression leads him to believe that words uttered without action are the result of child-rearing practices and more specifically breast-feeding mothers who indulge their male infants, where the infant need only make a verbal demand of the mother's breast to have his desire satisfied at whatever time he chooses.

A third characteristic is poor time structure. Using a well-known, though disputed, hypothesis in linguistics, known as the Sapir–Whorf hypothesis (which asserts that the varying cultural concepts and categories inherent in different languages affect the cognitive classification of the experienced world in such a way that speakers of different languages think and behave differently because of it), Patai suggests that Arabic discourages the structuring of time into past, present, and future. Hence, punctuality is undermined as well as the sequential perception of time. As in many Semitic languages, the Arabic imperfect form can stand for present, future, and past, and this can endow Arab culture with a vague and indeterminate perception of time (p. 11). Abdennur expresses his disagreement with such statement:

> in my view, the conclusion that Arabic suffers from the confusion over sequence and time is unduly exaggerated. Presenting future tenses in terms of the past tense may have more to do with the rhetorical use of overassertion or *tawkeed* [i.e. the emphatic *modus energeticus*], expressed at the expense of grammar, than it does with any genuine confusion. The past is the surest and least equivocal of the three tenses.   (p. 11)

This point is further elaborated in an entire chapter devoted to it (Chapter 8).

The other characteristics listed by Patai are described by Abdennur without offering any direct comment. The subsequent chapters of his book address directly and in depth many of Patai's statements. The list of characteristics include the 'Bedouin component of the Arab personality', which comprises such values as kinship, loyalty, bravery, manliness, an aversion to physical work, and a great emphasis on honour and self-respect. Another characteristic is the Islamic component of the Arab personality as Islam permeates the totality of life. Others are derived from the Bedouin component of the Arab personality such as the need to save 'face' and avoid shame at all costs; and the juxtaposition of activity and passivity where a typical Bedouin's life alternates between periods of long passivity and spurts of activity. Patai, along with many Western scholars, has noted the pronounced Arab tendency to take a polarized view of the world devoid of nuances.

> Arab emotional life thus moves radically between such contrasting polarities as shame and honour; aggression and submission; vengefulness and forgiveness; competitiveness and mutual help; prevarication and honesty; pride and humility; rudeness and politeness; bursts of activity and lethargic passivity; self control and open aggression; and unity and divisiveness.   (p. 13)

More serious is Patai's observation that there is a connection between the polarized type of behaviour and the relative lack of correlation among the three functional planes of human existence: thoughts, words, and actions. Abdennur notes (p. 13) that Patai endorses the views of another Israeli scholar Yahoshofat Harkabi (1977) whose

position is that 'Arab thought processes are relatively more autonomous, that is, more independent from reality, than are the typical thought processes of the European person'. Therefore, Arab speech expresses ideal thoughts and hopes as actual facts in evidence. Again, Abdennur deals with this trait extensively in Chapter 4.

Other traits relate to what Patai defines as Arabs' ambivalence towards the West. On the one hand, the Westernized Arabs are proud of their heritage and culture, and yet they lament their state of backwardness relative to the West. This leads to some extent to a duality within the Arab personality. In this respect, Patai uses the thesis advanced by al-Wardi when analysing the Iraqi personality. There appears to be a split within the Iraqi (and hence the Arab) consisting of two value systems competing for a person's loyalty: 'the ancient values of a sedentary population on the one hand and the values of the nomadic Bedouin on the other' (p. 14).

Patai also contends that conflict proneness and disunity have been part of the Arab personality since pre-Islamic days.

> The mythical dual descent and rivalry between *Qahtan*, the progenitor of southern Arabia's tribes, and *Adnan*, the ancestor of northern Arabia's tribes, testifies to the dichotomies of the Arab psyche. The readiness of Arabs to resort to verbal abuse and threats has resulted in the development of a unique tradition of poetry that includes both *hija* (deriding and abusing the rival) and *fakhr* (praise and promotion of one's self and group). These demonstrative verbal attacks of literature may, according to Patai, act to displace or avert plunging into violent conflict.   (p. 15)

Being conflict-prone has led to the development of mechanisms in Arab society for conflict resolution. This is the tradition of mediation. Another form is 'conferentiasis', when Arabs resolve inter-Arab conflicts by convening conferences based on the Bedouin prototype council known as the *majlis*.

Abdennur concludes this brief overview of Patai's seminal work with the following comment:

> It can be stated that Patai demonstrates a profound awareness of Arab cultural issues and of many of the subtle proclivities of the Arab mind. At the same time, however, his presentation of traits was carried out in aloof, analytic manner and carried implicitly negative evaluations of the features he identified.   (p. 16)

So Abdennur's task has been to take such traits and offer alternative explanations based on empirical research and noted observations. The final picture is quite different.

Mohammed Abed al-Jabri

Mohammed Abed al-Jabri addressed the epistemic tools of the Arab mind rather than the thinking processes. In his four books, he undertook the massive task of describing the intellectual products of all major Arab thinkers and schools of thought from the eighth to sixteenth centuries. His basic assumption was that one could find the epistemic traits of the Arab mind in the output or Arab thought. No attention was given to interpersonal communication or collective expressions. Hence, he identified three forms or systems of knowledge.

The first system lies in the field of expression or *bayan*. It originated in the explanation and interpretation of the Qur'anic verses in a linguistic demonstratively manner and became more standardized with the development of grammar (p. 17). In that field three epistemic pairs are identified: expression/meaning, origin/branch, and essence/

tangent. The second system of knowledge is the direct one or *'irfan*. It was transmitted into Arab culture from non-Arab origins in the eighth century by means of direct spiritual contact or participation and union with the object, and the resort to linking events through miraculous thinking and other occult pursuits such as astrology, alchemy, and magic. This is the legacy of Islamic mysticism or *Sufism*, and illuminationism that was well developed in Shi'ite and Isma'ili thought. The third system of knowledge is the proof knowledge or *burhan*. This was developed in Arab intellectual thought with the Arab translations of Greek philosophy.

Al-Jabri described these systems in detail, yet he believed that 'the Arab mind is not an essence, temperament, or mentality; rather it is the sum of the concepts, constructs, and other cognitive tools by means of which knowledge is produced within Arab thought' (p. 18). The three systems competed with each other and as:

> Sufism came to dominate the intellectual scene, and particularly among the Sunnis, al-Jabri sees the contest between the three systems having ended with the triumph of *'irfan*. The collective mind endorsed the irrational as traditional ritual, as religious devotion, and as surrender to fate.   (p. 19)

The latter position is worth noting as many Arab Islamic reformers seem to attribute the decline and even the degeneration of Arab thought to the direct knowledge system. In particular, Mohammad Shahrur whose compendium was reviewed in *Contemporary Arab Affairs* (vol. 2, no. 4) believes that the Arab mind has become analogical, i.e. reasoning by analogy, and therefore cannot be innovative and creative. Hence, the poor state of science and philosophy in the Arab world. One need not share such a pessimistic view of the Arab mind. In fact, Shahrur's contention is more relevant to the jurisprudential mind where imitation has become the rule since sometime in the 12th century and where innovation (*al-bid'ah*) has been banned. The extension to other fields is not warranted but may be because jurisprudence is the dominant field of expression of Islamic sciences, so that the temptation towards generalization is powerful indeed.

Yet, for all intents and purposes, Abdennur believes that al-Jabri's massive four volumes have failed to achieve what they set out to uncover. Four points are made in this respect. First, Abdennur believes that al-Jabri's work was guided by an implicit assumption that:

> The notion that the Arab mind as a collection of working epistemic tools can be extracted from written works of Arab writers during 800 years prior to the seventh century. It is problematic to generalize from intellectual products that are largely the result of the individual efforts of thinkers who are influenced by their own idiosyncrasies, by small group interaction, and by the charisma of mentors from the past or from Greek philosophy.   (p. 21)

The second point made is that the oral repertoire of very large numbers of traditional proverbs, homilies, and stories utilized by large numbers of Arabs is absent from al-Jabri's study. Such a repertoire 'contains constructs that point to certain underlying epistemic perspectives' (p. 21). By extension, one can add to such a repertoire the popular writing in newspapers, public speeches, ways of issue construction in political concerns, and the relative intensity of reactions to issues that can be quite revealing of the epistemic characteristics of the Arab mind, more than the classical written literature (p. 21).

The third point made is quite devastating. While acknowledging that al-Jabri has dedicated hundreds of pages to describing the ideas of philosophers and schools of theological and political thought, 'unfortunately, he [al-Jabri] undertook this massive task without first familiarizing himself with appropriate constructs and modalities from cognitive sciences and without developing his own model' (p. 22). Abdennur notes that long-established constructs such as abstract/concrete, deductive/inductive, and macro/micro are rarely called upon to qualify patterns of thinking. He further adds that *bayan*, *'irfan*, and *burhan* are neither systems of thought nor theoretical models (p. 22). In fact, they are only descriptions of dominant themes, reference points, or intellectual concerns. Al-Jabri seems to have confused approaches such as origin/branch, apparent meaning/latent meaning, and necessary/possible in the interpretation of Qur'anic verses with cognitive patterns. In fact, these are no more than classifications particular to some authors. 'These distinctions do not constitute universal constructs having universal application and, accordingly, they do not constitute useful epistemic qualifiers of intellectual activity' (p. 22).

The fourth point is even more damaging. Abdennur believes that the extensive scholarly work in presenting the products of Arab thinkers and the lack of abstract models or theory for establishing relationships among ideas 'fails to meet a major tenet of scientific inquiry, namely, parsimony: economy in expression and simplicity in explanation' (p. 22). And he concludes by noting that:

> after reading the four books of al-Jabri's critique, little remains in memory as to what constitutes the Arab mind despite the tremendous wealth of information he presents. Useful knowledge hardly constitutes descriptions and summaries of information units; rather, it is essentially the identification of relationships among such units. In conclusion, the 2,000-page project, in my view, is best regarded as a useful review and descriptive analysis of the writings of classical Arab thinkers   (p. 22–23)

Ali al-Wardi

Abdennur notes that almost two decades before Patai's inquiry into the Arab mind, the Iraqi sociologist at the University of Baghdad Ali al-Wardi in a series of several works (Al-Wardi 1954, 1958, 1965, 1969) set out to examine the features of the Iraqi personality and – by extension – that of Levantine Arabs. His contribution was the identification of one focal psychosocial condition as an explanation for the Iraqi personality and the Arabs in general. This condition is *izdiwaj*, or 'pairing' or 'doubling'. Abdennur prefers the term *thunayat al-shakhsiyah* or 'dual personality'.

Al-Wardi's explanation is based on the impact of geography or the physical environment.

> The proximity of the desert to the rural and agricultural areas in the Arab world has created clash between two value systems that are substantially different by virtue of their having evolved in two different environments that have disparate modes of living.   (p. 23)

It is worth reproducing *in extenso* the central thesis of al-Wardi as summarized by Abdennur:

> The nomadic inhabitants of the Arabian desert, the Bedouins, inhabited an open space that provides only grass, with the grass being dependent on scarce rain. Because it was continuously shifting, Bedouins could not divide and fence the grazing land and they

were accordingly forced to compete and fight for limited resources, including scarce well water. As courage and force became the crucial determinants of access to limited resources, the values and norms associated with them became prominent. Courage and the ability to assert one's status along the sword's edge were idealized. The patriarchal values of honour and self-respect reached their highest point among the Bedouins. … Manual work or crafts came to be called *mihnat*, which is derived from *mahanet* or humiliation. The scarcity and extreme unpredictability of resources also elevated the values of hospitality and generosity to extreme heights. The small tribal units had an impact, as they encouraged values of in-group solidarity and loyalty while condoning attacks upon and the material deprivation of other groups. …

The value system of agricultural and urban centers, in contrast to that of nomadic desert living, stresses productivity rather than acquisition by force. Hand work is thus valued and trading and selling are accepted ways of making a living. Rural and urbanized centers also had greater contact with religious institutions that preached the Islamic values of compassion, piety, and adherence to the Islamic code of moral conduct. In addition, rural and urbanized rural centers were targets of continuous ruthless measures and intimidation from existing governments in quest of produce and taxes. Such oppressive government practices may have been responsible for rural and urban dwellers resorting to flattery, connivance, and submissiveness in their behaviour, which contrasts radically with the proud, haughty, and defiant profile of the Bedouin. It may be added, based on al-Wardi's analysis, that the tyranny and oppressiveness of government agents may have reinforced the Bedouin values of pride and defiance as ideal aspirations of idea states in the psyche of rural people.   (pp. 23–24)

This extended paragraph encapsulates most of the Arab traits described by Patai without him offering an explanation of the functionality of the traits. To a large extent, al-Wardi's explanation provides the basis for Abdennur's analysis of the Arab mind by focusing on the functions of traits.

The duality suggested by al-Wardi's analysis is the result of the fact that many urban dwellers have Bedouin ancestry and thus have maintained many of the traits described in the above paragraph quotation. Hence, according to al-Wardi, two mutually contradictory sets of values – the Bedouin and the rural–urban – came to be maintained or juxtaposed. 'Being contradictory, however, they could only be enacted in a dual manner, in separate social contexts or separate temporal intervals' (p. 24). This juxtaposition would, according to al-Wardi, weaken social integration.

Al-Wardi has identified a set of 'dualities' so to speak. There is the duality between Islamic and Bedouin values; the duality between urban universalism and urban tribalism; the duality between the universalism of formal organizations and the particularism of family and locality ties; the duality afflicting Bedouins themselves where Bedouins would be pious and God fearing and engaging at the same time in looting raids whenever the opportunity arises; the duality resulting from extreme idealism; and the dualities produced by culture conflict (pp. 25–28).

Al-Wardi sought to present a rectified image of the Bedouin in response to Western writers such as De Lacy O'Leary (1920–1956). Contrary to the latter's portrayal of the Bedouin as having a narrow materialistic outlook and concern for immediate profit or utility, al-Wardi explains that the Bedouin does not seek money for its own sake as a security in possession, but rather as a token of manliness. He is a 'looter-giver' (pp. 28–29). The enquiry also reveals that the Bedouin is truthful and confrontational, detesting lies, manipulation, and deceit. These traits are signs of weakness and cowardice and unfit for courageous men. He is contemptuous of physical work and values acquisition by the sword. Bedouin culture does not have any enduring class or rank distinctions, hence a high degree of jealousy and rivalry for

leadership. These traits have been identified at some length in Ibn Khaldoun's opus *al-Muqadimah* (*Prolegomena*).

Cognitive and epistemic styles

Having dispensed with the review of the literature on the 'Arab mind', Abdennur proceeds to identify the features of the Arab mind based on the various theoretical categories of cognition. He distinguishes between the various cognitive styles. First, there is the fact that style is distinct from content. 'Cognitive styles represent consistencies in the form of *how* one thinks … as distinct from the *content* of thinking' (p. 32). Second, there is style as distinct from strategy. Where cognitive style is the sum of techniques that organize information and control behaviour, cognitive strategies in contrast are decision-making regularities in information processing dictated by specific institutions and problems. Third, style is distinct from ability. The latter implies the measurement of the level of accomplishment, whereas style implies the measurement of characteristic modes of operation in terms of performance. Abdennur lists further examples of differences between style and ability (p. 32). Fourth, cognitive styles function as controlling mechanisms influencing an individual's characteristic regulation and control of impulse. More than 20 cognitive styles have been identified by empirical research and are listed in the body of literature pertaining to it.

However, these cognitive styles have their limitation, so new approaches have been sought. In addition to cognitive styles, there are learning styles and the thinking styles. Abdennur notes that:

> as a general critique of these and other personality-centered approaches to thinking styles, it may be said that the main problem lies in the large number of styles that they propose and their tendency to blur distinctions between personality and cognitive variables.   (p. 36)

Hence, he favours a particular approach: the psycho-epistemic style.

The reason for his choice lies in the interaction of epistemology or the manner we come to know the world around us and the human psyche. Though the epistemic style is essentially cognitive, it is 'broader than cognitive style in that it integrates several cognitive styles. It is also simpler – there being only a small number of epistemic styles' (pp. 36–37). The literature has identified three styles: rationalism, empiricism, and metaphorism.

In the rationalist style, the 'individual uses a conceptual, logical, and ideational process as a major criterion for selectively attending to environmental stimuli and subsequent acquisition of knowledge' (p. 37). Hence, it is: more abstract than concrete; more oriented toward both analytical and integrative reasoning; strong in conceptual discrimination and in understanding of complex cognitive tasks; more flexible than constricted due to openness to discourse; high on emotional independence; high on autonomy; high on tough-mindedness and unbending; and scoring highly on syllogistic reasoning and deduction.

On the other hand, with empiricism, 'the individual relies on sense perceptions as the major criterion for selectively attending to environmental stimuli and the subsequent acquisition of knowledge' (p. 38). Hence, it is: more perceptual than conceptual; more concrete than abstract; high on compartmentalization; attentive to detail; more

interested in relations between data items than in in-depth analysis; low on tolerance for the unconventional; high on realistic experiences; more reflective than impulsive; more inductive than deductive in reasoning; more interested in 'doing' than in theorizing; and more compromising and accommodating than categorical.

The third style is metaphorism, where 'the individual employs the self-referential qualities of personal experience and intuition as the major criterion for selectively attending to environmental stimuli and the subsequent acquisition of knowledge' (p. 39). Metaphorism is low on compartmentalization; low on theory; high on symbolism; high on relying on intuition; high on conceptual integration; high on creative and synthesizing ability; and relying more on perceptual impressions than on factual information.

The epistemic orientation model used by Abdennur and others is based on several assumptions stressing that acquired knowledge is mainly a personal mental construction resulting from an interaction of epistemic styles and the confines of an educational field or environment. Moreover, thought, language, and content are inseparable partners. The epistemic style is the cognitive–affective guidance system that controls the 'selective attending' process in the person–environment geography. The final assumption is that 'a knowledge-based discipline, and an epistemic orientation of a culture can have powerful epistemic implications' (p. 40).

Having reviewed the various theoretical models and the literature on the subject-matter of thinking patterns and learning styles, all manifestations of the cognitive behaviour, Abdennur defines the scope of his research in terms of samples and in terms of research tools. The research is based upon Arab and Anglo-North American cultural samples.

The research instruments are the Knowledge Accessing Modes Inventory (KAMI). It assesses the relative preference for the three epistemic styles (rational, empirical, and metaphoric) by technical means we need not go into here. Another instrument is the Gregorc Style Delineator (GSD). It is designed to qualify two types of mediation strategies or 'styles': perception and ordering. Perception involves abstractness, which seeks to grasp, conceive, and mentally represent data concepts and subjective thought; and concreteness, which seeks to grasp and mentally represent data through the direct use of the physical senses. Ordering, on the other hand, involves sequence and randomness. Hence, four different strategies or channels of thought: first, there is the concrete sequential where the individual is concerned with the practical; second, the abstract sequential where he is concerned with abstract ideas, proof, and analysis, and is oriented to systematic research and quality of thinking; third, abstract random, where the individual is concerned with ideas but is not careful with detail, relies on creative insight in the search of proof, and person-oriented, emotional, and critical; and fourth, concrete random, where the individual is concerned with multiple solutions, is neither product-oriented nor person-oriented, and is intuitive, instinctive, impulsive, and independent (pp. 44–45).

Two samples were used: 540 Canadian Anglophone undergraduates in two Canadian universities were compared with 663 Arab-speaking undergraduates in two American universities in Lebanon in the Fall of 1998 using the described psycho-epistemic measures. The results were startling:

> the Arab sample had a higher proportion of individuals exhibiting a dominant rational style than the Canadian sample. The Arab sample was found to be more rational on all three scales: the Rational of KAMI, the Abstract Sequential of the GSD, and the two in

combination. Compared to the Arab sample, the Canadian sample had a higher number of subjects with a dominant empirical style.   (p. 46)

Other findings were quite interesting when comparing within the Arab sample those who had French as their language of instruction for mathematics and science with those who had studied such in English.

> The results prove interesting as they revealed no significant differences between these two 'linguistic' groups may indicate that the epistemic impact of the original cultural background (the Arab/Arabic in this case) is neither neutralized nor significantly altered by an additional language and by different educational traditions. This finding can be interpreted as an indication that once the background cultural epistemic orientation is established early in life, it becomes ingrained, perseverant, and resistant to subsequent peripheral epistemic influences.   (p. 46)

Features of the Arab mind

Having laid the groundwork for his analysis, namely a review of the literature on the various conceptions of the Arab mind, the different cognitive styles and instruments of research, and finally the results of his samples study, Abdennur enunciates his thesis. The findings of his study suggest that the rational style is the dominant style among Arabs and thus bears important implications in understanding the Arab mind.

The finding is consistent with Arab intellectual and political history. The intellectual products of the major Arab–Islamic thinkers who flourished in the ninth to the fourteenth centuries indicate a rational comprehensive orientation. Though the output of such thinkers may be helpful for identifying thinking approaches in Arab culture, 'it should be stressed that the specialized works of such thinkers cannot reveal much about the epistemology involved in collective thinking patterns' (p. 49). Philosophers are significantly influenced by the eclectic exposure and response to the work of their peers.

However, the rational epistemic orientation may be better illustrated by Arab political history. Whether religious dogma or secular ideology, both are similar in the fact that they are both matters of belief and not a matter of knowledge or proof. Both are goal oriented and both present an integrated picture of an ideal political and social life. They also relate to behaviour in the same manner as they proceed from universal assumptions that are integrated within a comprehensive system of thought and therefore operate as any abstract assumption. 'Universalized thinking transforms the epistemic style or religious assumptions from the metaphorical style to a rational style' (p. 51). Religious dogma and political ideology 'are essentially a group mind as distinguished from an individually-oriented moral, ethical, or spiritual conduct' (p. 51).

Abdennur presents the modal features of the Arab mind, similarly to Patai, though he offers different explanations. The Arab mind is global rather than holistic. At first sight, one may wonder what is the difference between 'global' and 'holistic' since they both seem to imply the same thing. Abdennur refers to the works of Alan Miller who stressed the need for making such distinction (Miller 1991). The analytic–holistic distinction is a generic principle used for organizing cognitive styles. The analytic processing is the breakdown of a system into its constituent parts, with each part studied as a separate entity in isolation from other parts or the whole. Hence, the terms 'analytic' and 'differentiated' are used as synonyms. Therefore, the terms 'holistic'

and 'global' are also used as synonyms and refer to immediate and undifferentiated comprehension, while synthetic and integrated are held to refer to differentiated, complex, and creative thinking involving the breakdown of elements into components and recombining them into meaningful wholes (p. 53).

Abdennur, however, maintains differently: he believes that:

> we need to distinguish between *holistic* and *global* cognition, which Miller lumped as synonymous. Holistic cognition can be understood to refer to direct and unified comprehension (predominantly through intuition) … whereas global cognition can refer to a more conceptual (less intuitive) and more abstract sketch of perceived reality or issue. (p. 53)

So, when the field study revealed that Arabs were lower on the intuitive dimension than Anglo-Canadians, and when added to observations of Arab verbal expression, 'we can conclude that globality and not holism is the typical characteristic of the Arab epistemic style' (p. 54). This means that the rational epistemic style activates a tendency to think comprehensively and abstractly. Hence, 'globality as a conceptual and abstract preliminary processing can explain the tendency toward sweeping generalizations and categorizations that is a salient feature of Arab daily verbal expressions' (p. 54).

The Arab mind is emotional. Since the Arab mind as evidenced by the research tends to employ predominantly a rational epistemic style, 'then the high level of emotionality that is often attributed to Arabs may stem largely from their extensive deployment of abstract distinctions and categories' (pp. 55–56). Abdennur distinguishes between two types of emotionality. The first connotes inadequate thinking produced by a lack of objectivity and affective overreaction or wishful thinking and is usually rooted in poor education and in weak intellectual and methodological skills. The other type of emotionality is rooted in the rational epistemic style that encourages abstract thinking and therefore facilitates the taking of positions and the expression of attitude and effect. Good education and a command of scientific skills will refine this latter type of expression. An illustration of this proclivity is in the undiminished polemics and heated debates taking place among Arab scholars (p. 56).

The Arab mind is confrontational and polemical. Since the Arab mind is intellectually demonstrative and value expressive because of its rational epistemic orientation, accordingly it is intellectually confrontational, inviting controversy and discourse.

The Arab mind is radical. The Arab tendency to focus on the total picture tends to diminish concern with limited or partial solutions to problematic situations. A good example may be the approaches to the Arab–Israeli conflict where partial solutions suggested by the West are despised by Arabs who still view the conflict as arising wholly because the Arab Palestinians were dispossessed of their land, freedom, and rights and they cannot accept partial or limited land, rights, or freedom. Categorical thinking 'precludes compromised interventions such as those that aim "at harm reduction"' (p. 58).

Abdennur has a delightful section on swearing in Arab society. Radical thinking can be observed in swearing and cursing. When an Anglo-American swears at someone, the offensive attribute is confined to the targeted person who is deemed to be the sole originator or cause of the attribute. On the other hand, when an Arab swears, the offensive attribute and its causal origins are spread beyond the individual to include the person's parents, family, ancestry, clan, roots, foundations, or 'even the midwife that announced the individual's birth' (p. 58).

Analysing the swearing Abdennur identifies two cognitive tasks: the first is verbally expressing a hostile reaction directed at an identified offensive behaviour or person; and the second is locating a causal base for the offensive behaviour in order to locate and lay blame. 'The implied philosophical position in Arab cursing is that the cursed individual cannot be the only cause of his offensive behaviour' (p. 59). If so, that would be tantamount to flattery, which the curser is not willing to bestow upon the cursed. Furthermore, traits are inherited so the cursed has inherited the traits of the curse from parents or learned from an environment.

> Thus, in targeting the extensions of the individual (parents, family, clan, and so on), the Arab curser is not merely collectivizing the target; rather, he is locating the causal roots of the behaviour so that the contributors to the cursed behaviour will also share in the blame.   (p. 59)

The Arab mind is focused on the rights of society. This is a very important trait and fundamentally differentiates Arabs from Westerners. The West's concept of society is fundamentally utilitarian, an influence of the legacy of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British philosophers such as David Hume, John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Jeremy Bentham, and Herbert Spencer. There, the utilitarian conception views society as an aggregate of individuals where what is good for some individuals is cumulatively transformed into good for society. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had a famous quip that there was nothing such as 'society', but a plurality of individuals! Hence, the extreme individualism, sometimes referred to as social atomism, that characterizes Western society. Modern Western individualism is highly preoccupied with the individual's rights and freedoms, and sometimes at the expense of the rights of society, and even of the human species itself (p. 62).

The situation is quite different in Arab society, a fact that many Western observers fail to understand. As Abdennur puts it:

> the rational epistemic orientation of the Arab mind makes it sensitive to the rights of the social collectivity and the need for its protection from the self-centered behaviours of individuals and interest groups. Globalistic comprehensiveness and the resulting concern with the ultimate social collectivity thus puts the Arab mind in a direct clash with the Anglo-American conception of individual rights as they relate to the rights of society.   (p. 62)

Abdennur makes an interesting comment in the follow-up of the argument. He refers to the concept of 'a victimless crime' popularized in criminology. In essence, it refers to crimes that do not have a complaining victim such as criminal drug use, prostitution, and gambling. These crimes do not need to be penalized by criminal law. Abdennur vigorously argues against such a concept and contrasts it with the Arab and Islamic concern of social corruption or *fasad*. He is particularly critical of Western media – traditionally a guardian and agent of restraint – which has become an initiator, exhibitor, and propagator of many forms of hedonistic and idiosyncratic behaviours (p. 64). Arabs, on the other hand, are leery of such forms of liberalized self-expression because of the concern over its impact on society as a whole, and therefore would instead suppress such influences. Hence, we see the accusations by the West that Arabs are lacking democracy!

As noted above, a major feature of the rational epistemic orientation of the Arab mind is abstract categorical thinking. This type of thinking distinguishes between the right of freedom of thought and the right of freedom of self-expression. The former is

the freedom to express and communicate organized, scientific, philosophical, and intellectual ideas and views. The latter refers to the expression of new or improvised forms of social behaviours in sexual, artistic, and literary activity. In the West, the social atomistic perspective tends to blur the distinction between the two freedoms.

The Arab mind is active in the defence of culture. Again, the rational epistemic orientation of the Arab mind is capable of lending abstraction and integration to the components of Arab cultural heritage, thus helping it endure the onslaught of global culture (p. 66). It is worth noting that the Arab Renaissance Project (ARP) makes cultural renewal a strategic objective. This cultural renewal is a bridge between the cultural heritage of which the Arabs are extremely proud and the requirements of contemporariness.

The Arab mind allows for intellectual holds on behaviour or *mamsak*. Abdennur notes that an 'individual with a dominant rational style invests interest and affect in abstract ideas' (p. 66). For instance, a verse of poetry conveying a piece of wisdom or a proverb for that cause for an Arab mentally captures a large spectrum of experience or is a confirmation of a dogmatic view. On the other hand, a person with an empirical orientation does not make such strong investments in ideas or abstracted views and symbols, and accordingly is not strongly moved by them (p. 66). Abdennur illustrates these views by anecdotes where the quotation of a proverb has led to a cut of 50% in the cost of repairing his car that has suffered significant damage. The garage owner related to the meaning of the proverb since it had a hold or *mamsak*. He managed to make a wide qualitative leap into a non-utilitarian behaviour.

The Arab mind is both retentive and extravagant in information giving. The rational epistemic style usually seeks to place information units pertaining to human behaviour in their broader context. Hence, the Arab is reluctant to allow a piece of information to float freely without the contexts, whether it is social–situational, moral, or political. And since with the rational epistemic style figure and ground need to be integrated in order to achieve comprehensiveness in meaning, the Arab mind:

> is forced to be extravagant in information giving when figure and ground are well aligned and clear. Conversely, when information units cannot be placed in their proper ground, the Arab mind is retentive and resists giving discrete information.   (p. 68)

The Arab mind seeks to integrate ultimate values with political administration. Again here, the rational epistemic mind focuses on wide, all-encompassing entities and categories. This leads to two distinct processes: first, value implications become more explicit; and second, the expression of attitude and affect become easier. For the Arab mind, the implications for political administration are far reaching. The latter cannot be perceived in a value-free context like a purely managerial or accounting firm. 'The political administration or the state constitutes, beyond its administrative functions, the embodiment of the enduring values in a society' (p. 70). Such assessment may run against the perceived notion of Arabs despising their governmental institutions. But it was not always so, especially in the context of an Islamic state as embodiment of religious duty. This in fact should be understood as a refusal to separate ultimate social values from political administration.

Abdennur provides a contrast with Western societies where the gap between values and political administration widens in the pluralistic democracies. The reason is the private ownership of mass media where social norms, which need to be guided by social values, are subordinated to the needs and agendas of interest groups and

lobbies. Thus, 'when a large number of social norms become stipulated as good or bad, independent of what is held universally good for society as a whole, a situation of moral contingency arises that the Arab mind finds threatening' (p. 71). It is in this context that one must understand the rejection or the questioning of the separation of state from religion. It is not a rejection of secularized laws administering the countries' affairs 'but rather a fear of separating from the state the fundamental moral values that are embodied in religion' (p. 71).

The values of abstraction in honour, the body, arms, revenge, and memory have been much maligned in the West and in Westernized Arab media and non-governmental organizations funded by Western institutions. A central value in the Arab psyche is honour. Adherence to a code of honour means a strong commitment to an idealized part of the self that is projected socially and contains ideals values pertaining to self-respect, moral principle, pride, and courage. It is a self-monitoring agency that serves social control. Therefore, an honourable man in Arab society will find it 'beneath his dignity' to renege on a promise or commit a petty crime or engage in any deviant behaviour. Abdennur explains later in the book how words come into play to prevent a person making a promise he well knows he cannot or will not keep and, therefore, lose self-respect. Abdennur does not suggest that Arabs are more honourable than others; 'rather the point is that they are more likely than many other groups to resort to the value system of honour' (p. 72).

The physical body of an Arab can become abstracted and symbolizes a part of honour. Hence, an attack on the body is an attack on honour. And if an affront requires a drastic response, one would require drastic instruments to carry out the response, or a weapon in other words. An Arab may acquire a firearm not only for the purpose of sport hunting, or protection of property, or self-protection, but also for the protection of honour (p. 73). Finally, given the abstract and symbolic nature of honour, an injury to such honour is experienced through a temporal abstraction. Abstraction keeps injury and the desire for revenge fresh in the memory. When interpersonal conflicts evolve from disputes to breaches in values such as the betrayal of kinship, friendship, or partnership, they become difficult to forgive and forget. 'Humiliations perpetrated on Arab populations by foreign powers may be construed highly symbolically under the honour system and accordingly are less likely to be forgotten and more likely to be avenged when opportunity arises' (p. 74).

For abstraction and allegiance, there is an association between a rational epistemic style and allegiance. It is observed in strong attachments to culture, places, and the individuals from one's own past.

When abstraction fails, narration as a substitute for conceptual integration. Abdennur notes that the Arab quest for a comprehensive picture persists even when adequate conceptual skills are unavailable (p. 75). It is the fate of many self-appointed 'intellectuals' who fail to master analytic and integrated thinking and substitute such need with a chronological account of the topic. They also fail to provide solutions to the problems they submit. The Arab media is full of master diagnosticians who cannot or dare not commit themselves to a solution for which they would be held responsible.

The Arab mind affirms two-dimensional thought. This is one of the most important features of the rational epistemic orientation of the Arab mind and which distinguishes it from Western thinking. Abdennur contends that the West's pattern of thinking is one-dimensional, which has significant implications for society.

Indeed, the one-dimensional thinking in contemporary culture was first described by Herbert Marcuse in his famous book *The One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Abdennur

does a magnificent job in summarizing in a most readable manner the ideas of Marcuse which were originally written in a highly complex and intractable style. In essence, if there is ever a possibility of reducing a philosopher's thought to few sentences, the one-dimensionality enunciated by Marcuse refers to the transformation of thought patterns and behaviours resulting from the 'extensive operationalization and quantification of concepts of relationships'. In other words, 'technology creates an overwhelming empiricism in the use of concepts, with the result that the meaning of a concept becomes restricted to its particular operations and functions' (p. 77). This goes against the very concept of a concept! 'The concept is always greater than its immediate or particular designation' (p. 77). Abdennur points out that the differentiation between a concept and its observable representations is dialectical. The movement between the two is essential for reflection and evaluation. Marcuse is quite critical of the reliance on concrete or operational concepts. They are not sufficient to describe facts. The observable fact is part of a concept that denotes and organizes facts. It has therefore a strong element of subjectivity. Thus, 'cognition is both objective and subjective and that is made possible by the abstract concept' (p. 78). Furthermore, Marcuse asserts that:

> objective truth cannot be adequately depicted by a concrete instance, that is, without the subjective aspect of the concept that is always greater than its particular given and entails a level of negation. Dialectical negation is the basis of critical thinking and the capacity of the mind to negate, reject, and evaluate the factual given.   (p. 78)

Finally, the abstract concept contains the element of potentiality and the perception of the extension of the future.

What has happened in the West is the dominance of concrete thinking and total administration where the opposition between thought and reality is weakened as negation gives way to adaptation. With freedom of choice, one entity may be rejected and another chosen as ideal or more favourable. However, 'with one-dimensional thinking the only choice available is between multiple entities that are provided by the same system. As a result, hypothetical considerations become discouraged, and analysis and explanation as well. Only value-neutral description becomes acceptable' (p. 79). Hence, the trend of 'political correctness' or 'conventional wisdom' dominates political and social thinking.

The political implication of one-dimensional thinking is devastating. It 'paves the way to a state of capitulation and being totally contained by the system. … Loss of freedom is the ultimate price in one-dimensional consciousness' (p. 79). On the other hand, all abstract concepts, ideals, ideologies, dogmas, and divinely idealized personalities engage those who appeal to them in two-dimensional thinking. However, such thinking according to Marcuse creates an 'unhappy consciousness'. Western society has managed to conquer such 'unhappiness' by relinquishing two-dimensional thinking and adopting one-dimensional thinking. On the other hand, the Arab mind still insists on remaining idealistic and unhappy!

These are the features of the Arab mind. It is rational epistemic in orientation and clings to a two-dimensional thinking pattern. But this is not the whole story. The rational epistemic orientation does not account for all the typical characteristics of the Arab mind. There is another feature that interacts with rational orientation and results and is a source of a unique and potentially creative ability. It is the deployment of the mechanism of isolation in thinking patterns.

The isolation mechanism

Isolation is a 'differentiating process that allows the perception and experience of components behaviour or a sentiment in their purer form' (p. 85). It is different from the splitting mechanism, which is a psychodynamic mechanism observed in people suffering from schizophrenia and from other personality disorders. 'Art for art's sake' is an example of the isolation mechanism. The individual retains the control and the ability of linking the components, whereas with the splitting mechanism the individual fails to maintain the link or the ambivalence between positive and negative attitudes.

There are many forms of isolation. It can be spatial or temporal. When spatial, there is a separation of an idea from the emotion that was originally connected with it as in the case of obsessive brooding that characterizes compulsive behaviour. The withdrawal into an 'isolated' world allows conscious expression of thoughts without the interference of their emotional component. The same applies to artistic expression and 'art for art's sake' is an example where the artist is concerned with the aesthetic dimension of a work of art and manages to 'isolate' the moral or political implications of it. Again in scientific research, when a new line of research is appreciated for its scientific value in 'isolation' from its moral or political implications. On the other hand, temporal isolation is demonstrated in cases of delayed reaction as in mourning and grieving.

The isolation mechanism in the Arab mind is displayed in the isolation between 'intention' and 'action'. Patai observed that feature of the Arab personality without analysing the thought pattern. He simply offered the explanation of the breast-feeding tradition. Abdennur uses the isolation mechanism to explain the phenomenon. He asks what gives the verbal utterance of a promise or threat the substantiation that allows it to be on par with the actual deed to the extent it can replace it? His answer is that:

> the Arab mind invests a great deal of affect in the verbal commitment and this intensifies its subjective experience. Intense affect actually lends an objective status to the verbal utterance of a promise or threat, thus rendering it more real than a mere verbalization of lie.   (p. 86)

The conditioned substitution of words for action in Patai, or a promise to become a substitute for the actual fulfilment, requires, according to Abdennur, repetition and affective exaggeration of the verbal component to take place.

> Repetition and emotional over-assertion (*tawkeed*) objectify the verbal commitment and so render the intention capable of being a substitute for the actual deed. And it is only now, once objectification of the intention has taken place, that isolation becomes possible: isolation can only take place after both components (the intention and its realization) have become differentiated and objectified.   (p. 86)

Abdennur goes deeper in his explanation of Arab behaviour through the dissection of the 'promise', which in Arab culture is a declarative verbal commitment to render a form of needed assistance to another individual or group. Abdennur identifies the element of 'time' as a vital component of the substance of the service to be rendered. A short time of delivery of the promise is necessary to preserve the psycho-moral impact of the service to be rendered. The Arab saying '*khayru al-birr 'ajilahu*', or 'the best of deeds are those that are delivered promptly' is an illustration of the importance of time. On the other hand, Abdennur notes that in traditional society and religion, promise time is a long or infinite interval. This is due to the fact that things used to

move rather slowly. Modern economics is a function of time leading to the well-known adage that 'time is money'. In religion, the promise of reward in the future is not linked to a specific time interval. It is undetermined. In present times, the technological advancement of society has significantly structured time, the present as well as the future. Deadlines for buying or selling bids, delivery deadlines or credit payments have strong built-in incentives (penalties and/or bonuses) to respect such deadlines. For the Arab mind, time has become an imperative that needs to be specified.

The isolation mechanism explains the three planes of thought, words, and action. There is a high degree of autonomy in the expression of each of these planes within the Arab mind. However, critics such as Patai, Harkabi, or Morroe Berger (Berger 1964) believe that the Arabs' infatuation with ideal forms may be partially responsible for the widening discrepancy between ideology and verbal presentations, on one the hand, and actions, on the other hand. There is no absolute break between the ideal and reality, and they seem to view this proclivity for plain autonomy as socially dysfunctional. Abdennur points out that the high level of the isolation mechanism exhibited in the Arab mind may compromise practical accommodation with reality, yet it does have many redeeming values at the strategic and theoretical levels that critics seem to have missed:

> ultimate vision, ultimate strategies, ultimate values, and ideals can only be conceptualized in relative isolation from impinging 'facts'. The concrete and pragmatic perspective blurs vision and thwarts creative thought that requires a level of isolation from objective constraints and contingencies. Furthermore, when isolated and abstract thoughts converge on reality, they may generate a stronger commitment and radicalism than would reality-friendly pragmatism.   (p. 92)

The dynamic operation of isolation can also be identified in other cognitive domains. The isolation between the negative statement and its target increases the cognitive latitude and affective intensity of expression. Grand statements targeting social groups do allow the distinction between 'bias' and 'prejudice' (p. 93). The same applies to the distinction between small quantities and large ones that allows for socially meaningful differentiations and conversions. This is particularly true when dealing with money where 'rounding' occurs. The Arab mind is more comfortable with lump sum 'wholes' than 'loose' sums, especially when the rounded figure is insignificant. 'The rounding of money and the avoidance of arithmetic calculations in regard to small sums has as its goal the creation or protection of quality relationships' (p. 95). Abdennur provides several personal anecdotes illustrating that point that need not be reproduced in this review.

As to the differentiation between 'big' and 'small' and especially in terms of aggression, the isolation serves to protect harmless aggression from being repressed and therefore allows what Abdennur defines as healthy catharsis for accumulated aggression (p. 100). Finally, isolation is useful to keep the divine and the mundane separate, which the author deems a positive contribution of the Arab–Islamic tradition in an age where self-centredness and consumerism dominate society in the West.

The spell of Arabic

For Patai, the beauty (or the spell) of the Arabic language, its cadence and rhythm, exerts a unique affective unifying impact on those who speak it as a mother tongue. Since a language is a medium of transmission of thought in any culture, it tends to

impose its own epistemic structures. Furthermore, the structure of a language can condition thinking and thereby influence the way the world is seen. Abdennur lists a series of field researches into the epistemic features of several languages. Arabic has been found to be a language that is:

> highly categorical, which is consistent with a rational epistemic style. The Arabic language was also found to have an explicit counterfactual reasoning (the if–then, reasoning) that is attributable to discrete grammatical differences between languages. … The hypothetical reasoning that is inherent to the conditional (if–then) is indicative of a highly abstract mode of reasoning that is necessary for scientific thinking and for transcending factual or discrete conditions.   (p. 104)

The ease of spelling, the phonetic differentiation, the brevity and parsimony of expression, the congruence of meaning and sound, precision of concepts, and the capacity for derivation of new terms are major features of the Arabic language that confirm the rational epistemic orientation of the Arab mind. Abdennur suggests that language structure can inspire and catalyse creative thinking. It also has implications for the analysis of a feature of the Arab personality: conflict avoidance. 'The deepseated personality variable of conflict avoidance is responsible for the social clustering and differential associations that include the *hawthala* process as people cluster within marginal associations to avoid conflict that may emerge from socially- and politically challenging activities' (p. 107). By '*hawthala*', Abdennur is coining a new term derived from the original word *huthala* meaning a gathering of dregs of being. It is defined:

> as the differential associations of individuals who have in common the qualities of lack of challenge, fear of conflict, quest for safety, and enjoyment of being non-threatening and marginal. Accordingly, they cluster together passively (like dregs) on socially superficial and politically unchallenging activities.   (p. 107)

It is an illustration of the capacity of deriving new words and the ability to provide tools in understanding social behaviour.

Here, some digression may be helpful. The above remarks constitute – in the opinion of this reviewer – a straightforward rebuttal of critics who denigrate the Arab mind as incapable of seizing abstractions or thinking abstractly. In particular, there is the celebrated criticism of the French thinker Ernest Renan (d. 1892), who in a famous lecture at the Collège de France, Paris, in the late 1880s denied any possibility for the Semitic mind to grasp abstractions or think abstractly. Luminaries of the first Arab Renaissance such as Muhammad Abduh and later on in the late twentieth century Georges Corm provided a cultural rebuttal to Renan's racist pronouncements that provided the foundation and justification for colonial rule in the Arab world and much of Africa (Corm 2002). Abdennur provides a solid epistemic rebuttal of such theses by cataloguing field research on languages and their epistemic orientation. Arabic as a medium of transmission of thought for the Arab mind confirms its rational epistemic orientation. The implications are tremendous since there is a systematic assault on Arabic as a language for teaching in general and in the sciences in particular. Arabic should stay and be the only language of teaching in the Arab world including and especially in the sciences. The issue is a highly charged political matter where ruling elites in many parts of the Arab world have already succumbed to the dictates of the outside and are abandoning a long-established tradition of teaching in Arabic.

Abdennur makes an attempt to explain the widely acclaimed capability of Arabic to arouse and charm its listeners. He proposes what he calls a subatomic model of concepts (p. 112), starting with the three basic concepts of epistemic styles: rational, empirical, and metaphorical. The differences among them are determined by the different dynamics of their components such as connotations and denotations (p. 113). It assumes that each type of concept structures the cognitive process in a certain way that provokes a response in energy arousal and expenditure. Hence:

> it may be that the charming impact of Arabic can be explained by the skillful employment of concepts in contexts that are dominated by different conceptual types, and the resultant surplus energy that is expended further augments the affective impact of Arabic oratory.   (p. 127)

This is also an explanation for why Arabic constitutes a unifying force in the Arab world, hence the assault on it and the attempts to eliminate it from teaching!

From two- to multidimensional thinking

The works of Marcuse and Ayn Rand (Rand 1967) affirm that only the abstract concept is capable of reliable communication, of organized cognition, and of the constituting the base for higher-order thinking. Two-dimensional thinking begins at the level of the abstract concept, and three-dimensional thinking requires further cognitive space for the holding and interplay of an additional dimension, as well as additional affective differentiation and expression. Based on his observations, Abdennur postulates that, 'both abilities – for two-dimensional and for multi-dimensional expression – have a relatively higher expression among Arabs' (p. 130). Two-dimensional thinking can move toward three or more dimensions under the influence of isolation and conscious ambivalence (p. 132). Multidimensional thinking presupposes cognitive and affective space already prevalent in the Arab personality organizing system.

So when addressing Patai's observation that Arabs do not relate thought, words, and action, Abdennur states that these three planes of autonomous expression of thought, speech, and action are a manifestation of three-dimensional thinking. The autonomy of thought is made possible by the mechanism of isolation. It allows freedom to engage in hypothetical thinking necessary for creative thinking; it allows for idea thinking, which needs a level of disentanglement from immediate practical constraints; it allows time and space for thought to move freely and to become abstracted and idealized (p. 134). Abdennur cites the behaviour of dissimulation or *taqiyyah* as an example of the institutionalization of plane autonomy. It stems from 'a long standing tradition in Arab history that exemplifies the autonomous, ritualized, and institutionalized development of the three planes of speech, thought, and action' (p. 135). The strategy of dissimulation pursued by minority religious groups to preserve the beliefs and the physical safety of their members is an illustration: at the level of speech they would either avoid making utterances in public revealing their beliefs or they would employ a repertoire of the dominant group with a level of affective detachment or they would employ certain accepted utterances that on face value are not offensive to the dominant group. At the level of thought, the members will keep the interpretations of their texts to themselves and will not make them public and may even restrict these among their members to their own elite. On the plane of action, members will behave in a supportive manner toward one another but without

flamboyance (p. 135). In the end, the practice of *taqiyyah* transformed the three planes of speech, thought, and action into three separate socio-cognitive realms or dimensions.

According to circumstances the Arab will consciously experience anger, fear, and contempt and becomes a practitioner of three-dimensional thinking in his own mind. These are manifestations of a multidimensional thought process. Analysis has shown, according to Abdennur, that hostility is generated by the activation of anger and fear. Contempt is an additional factor that is not only a source of aggression, but also more of 'a catalyst of synergistic contributor that was responsible for the drastic augmentation of hostility and its brutal expression' (p. 136). Contempt is essentially an abstract sentiment. It is a quality attributed to the adversary who has failed to live up or has negated certain abstract values and principles. It transforms the essence of the other into an abstract symbol and therefore calls for the destruction of the symbol including the individual who embodies it. This also leads to the neutralization of the sentiment of guilt that the perpetrator may otherwise experience. For Abdennur, 'contempt is the most effective guilt neutralizing technique' (p. 135).

The Arab mind has the exceptional proclivity to combine the three emotions of fear, anger, and contempt and place the latter at the helm. 'The relatively high tendency for expression of negative value judgments by Arabs … would ensure a preponderance of contempt in the Arab mind' (p. 137). Abdennur also speculates that in 'that in the Arab case, a quantum leap of aggression in not only the result of the combination of these three emotions, but also the result of their articulated differences and relative independence' (p. 137). Since these three have their own space and autonomy of movement, they acquire momentum and when converge to a specific target provokes a sizeable leap in aggression.

Three-dimensionality is also expressed in a unique form of thinking involving the negation of mutually negating entities. It happens when the Arab mind creates an abstract category that neutralizes direct aggression and provides new means of expression (p. 145). Abdennur cites the anecdotes of Lebanese describing the Civil War when one party addresses an opposing party in terms that the latter is willing to accept as he does not feel personally threatened or attacked. This happens when a critic attacks both warring parties so neither party feels singled out in the attack.

Arab literature in general and poetry in particular offers three forms of expression, an illustration of the three-dimensionality of thinking. These are slander or *hija*, praise or *madh*, and self-praise or *fakhr* (pp. 149–150). Direct aggression is neutralized through the creation of a new form of expression (*hija*). Hence, a verbal attack or slander of an opponent, a person or a group can be expressed through the addition of an aesthetic literary dimension.

Abdennur expands his argument to address the question that many in the West are not able to understand – the martyrdom/suicide syndrome. In fact:

> with the Arab tendency to evaluate and abstract, with the richness of the Arabic language in polemic vocabulary and expressions, with the abundance of well-defined social groups that are also in some level of conflict with one another, and given the unique psychic space where all dimensions can expand freely, the Arab mind has a remarkable access to the whole spectrum of sentiments and affect pertaining to opposition and hostility.   (p. 155)

Hence, a pointed question is posed: is martyrdom–suicide three-dimensional? His answer is: 'the remarkable psychological space afforded by the Arab mind encourages

three-dimensional thinking that can go further than the two-dimensionality in the augmentation of resolve and the radicalization of options' (p. 155). And consciousness contributes to the resolve followed by a radical act. 'It is cultivated over a lengthy period of time and involves a process of discourse that addresses multiple consider-ations and interpretations of personal calling, the significance of the mission, and the adversary' (p. 155). This means that a gradual development of multidimensional consciousness takes place in the direction of the ultimate act such as martyrdom and results in the overcoming or the transcendence of strong emotions. Abdennur notes that potential martyrs are 'always calm, composed, conscious, and serene' (p. 156).

Creative and socially redeeming aspects of the Arab mind

Abdennur makes the interesting and quite important observation that Arab intellectu-als, reformers, and modernizers have mostly focused on problems that impede progress. In most cases, they have endorsed Western models as the ideal and grown impatient with the slow pace of progress in Arab societies, and have therefore devel-oped an obsessive preoccupation with searching and diagnosing social ills. This has led to ignore certain traditional ways of thinking, doing, and behaving, even though they are socially healthy and viable. 'What appears to have been neglected most was a positive analysis of these cultural forms and the consideration of their potential contribution to contemporary social institutions both Arab and Western' (p. 157).

Abdennur lists some features such as the act of gloating or *shamatah*. It is prima-rily an aesthetic contemplation. Beyond the obvious negative dimension of gloating over one's misfortunes, *shamatah* isolates and protects the individual's consciousness from related moral intimidation. 'Although some cathartic release of aggression is achieved through *shamatah*, the release is achieved via contemplative consciousness and in conjunction with non-aggressive sentiments belonging to irony, drama, or humour' (p. 158). Unlike shame, *shamatah* is not concerned with others' reaction toward the individual, only with their consciousness. However, *shamath* can contrib-ute to the promotion of pro-social behaviour through the process of objectifying the consciousness of others. In other words, it may lead individuals to behave in a certain way to ward off the *shamatah* that failure or lack of diligence may provoke. 'Thus, the almost paranoid apprehension of the contemplative consciousness of others can constitute a motivation to act in prudent and pro-social ways, allowing *shamatah* to become a form of social control' (p. 159).

Another feature that may have positive implications, although it was judged a negative value by Patai and others, is the 'grand statement', which is defined as a cate-gorical and extreme statement about individuals and groups that conveys an explicit value or attitude. The value of a grand statement lies in the fact that 'the freedom of expression afforded by the Arab mind asserts subjectivity, promotes subject 'fitness', counters the intimidation of the overwhelming world of consequence, fosters creativ-ity, and alleviates morbidity and boredom' (p. 162).

Hishmah, or modesty, protects the individual from the dangers of exhibitionism, which is associated in most cultures with the contrary beliefs of self-indulgence, infi-delity, social flamboyance, and little investment in honour. In his experience as a criminologist, Abdennur has found that a pronounced or latent form of exhibitionism in every form of human degeneracy ranging from deceit, to debauchery, to paedo-philia, to serial killing (p. 166). 'The affirmation of *hishmah* in Islam may provide not only support for certain pro-social norms associated with modesty, but also a degree

of protection from the potential ravages that exhibitionism may catalyze or bring about' (p. 166).

Another feature usually ignored by Arab intellectuals and reformists who have endorsed the Western paradigm is the objectification of the subjective. Abstract thinking, isolation at several levels, quantity/quality conversions, multidimensionality, categorical and grand statements are attempts at supremacy of the subject. Such attempts can be demonstrated in the Arab strategy of affirming or objectifying the status of subjective conditions in order to reinforce their status in relation to contending objective conditions. They may take many forms: emphasis or over-assertion; objectification of future intention or act by past-tense presentation because the past is a *fait accompli* and not subject to wavering or avoidance of commitment; objectification for the sake of consciousness; objectification of attitude by means of outbidding or *muzayadah* that plagues politicians' behaviour; objectification by transferring neutral consciousness to dialectical consciousness as in the case when a leader of a group in disagreement with his constituency removes himself from the centre stage to mark his disagreement; the objectification of contemplative consciousness such as *shamatah*; and the objectification through symbolization such as wearing a moustache as a symbol of manliness.

Arab hospitality is viewed by Abdennur as an antidepressant. Hospitality is a cardinal value and virtue in Arab culture.

> What makes Arab hospitality particularly therapeutic are not only the enthusiastic reception and generosity in providing food … rather, what is particularly uplifting in Arab hospitality is the abundance of affect and polemics that go beyond the passive exchange of gossip and anecdotes and thus charge the psyche of guests out feelings of passivity, marginality and neutrality.   (pp. 173–174)

Finally, patience, or *al-sabr*, is a central value in Arab societies that are heirs to the Islamic heritage. Patience is mentioned 90 times in the Qur'an. Abdennur asserts that:

> the cultivation of attitudes that are consistent with the value of *al-sabr* can promote several mental health virtues; these include lowering the overreaction to time-pressure related needs; enduring tension of a delay or frustration of needs; reducing the resentment and ill dispositions that accompany frustration; lowering the overreaction to anxiety and threats to a sense of security; and cultivating steadfastness and reflectivity.   (pp. 174–175)

Intellectual retreat through duality and dichotomous thinking

Abdennur subsequently tries to address the problem of intellectual retreat in the Arab world. Given the remarkable cognitive capabilities and achievements of the Arab mind, he states that 'it is rather surprising to find that there have been departures from this higher order dialectical thinking in certain periods and locations' (p. 178). Such departures or intellectual retreats occur under conditions of social disorganization and take the types of two major types of thinking: the dual and the dichotomous. There is also a departure in the isolation mechanism, the use of which ensures subsequent unity; and there is also a tendency to resort to splitting, which precludes arriving at unity and integration. In duality, two sets of values are set to coexist separately and are enacted under specific conditions. So when one is established at the forefront, the other recedes, thus preventing the continuous dialectical relationship so necessary for

unity and integration. On the other hand, in dichotomous thinking there are two poles. When one pole is considered a model, like either the Western or the Arab, the other is held to be a failure or a deviation. When not enough consciousness is given to either pole, the dialectical relationship recedes and hence the failure of synthesis and to reach a higher level.

As indicated above, the Arab–West dichotomy is an example of dichotomous thinking where the 'West is treated as a single intellectual tradition that implicitly refers to the scientific method and the endorsement of this method's positive and secular tenets which have impacted Western societies' (p. 197). Reality is of course otherwise where in the West there have been different endorsements of the scientific method and different epistemological traditions. On the other hand, the 'Arab' pole has been lumped into Islamic theology. Abdennur points out that:

> it may be pertinent to the issue of liberal Islamic theology to note that the mechanism of isolation, if creatively deployed, may handle the contradictions between scientific thought and religious dicta. By minimizing their convergence, isolation can minimize their clashes and can spare the scholars the task of resorting to theological rationalizations and reconcile the two.   (p. 198)

Other forms of dual and dichotomous thinking reside in the false problems of modernity and backwardness, in thinking and creativity. Again here, social disorganization prevents the dialectical intercourse and the achieving of a synthesis at a higher plane.

Conspiracy thinking

Many authors have noted among Arabs a pronounced tendency for conspiracy thinking to explain complex political developments in the Arab world. Abdennur states that 'Arab affinity to conspiracy thinking may be rooted in the rational epistemic orientation' (p. 207). It appeals to the Arab mind because it integrates several factors into a unified picture, which facilitates the emergence of the expression of three cognitive–affective needs: the location of blame, the taking of a position, and the expression of emotion (pp. 207–208).

There are twelve identified characteristics to conspiracy thinking. First, grave events cannot have simple or obvious explanations. Second, the real causal agency is a conspiring mind. Third, it relies on interpretation and conjecture. Fourth, it seeks to locate responsibility and blame. Fifth, new evidence is incorporated in the theory rather than used for its verification. Sixth, there is a presumption of knowledge and license for filling gaps. Seventh, it relies on attribute thinking where the thought process is essentially focused on the intentions of the alleged conspirators. Eighth, it uses conversion rather than diversion in causal identification. It is the need to locate blame for a certain event or plight in one of a few causal factors instead of multiple variables. Ninth, the conspirators are always omnipotent. Tenth, conspiracy thinking is a form of circular thinking. Eleventh, conspiracy thinking can become obsessive. And finally, by exaggerating the power of the conspirator and the weakness of the victim of the intrigue, conspiracy thinking implicitly commends waiting passively until power is substantially acquired or until the right opportunity arises for counter action (pp. 208–212).

Conspiracy thinking has several methodological weaknesses such as: the unjustified modification or biased selection of information; attributive thinking that exaggerates

the importance of personality variables and undermines external variables; the reluctance to use available information for verification of the theory; the uneven attribution of power to the conspirators and the powerlessness of the 'victims'; and the tautological linking between conspiracy scheming and any action expressed by the scheming group. Yet, Abdennur indicates that for all these methodological failures in thinking, they still can be replaced and averted by more rigorous and objective analysis.

The counterpart of conspiracy thinking is conspiracy denial. It operates exactly in the opposite direction of conspiracy thinking. Instead for looking for hidden causes, it accepts political happenings at face value. While conspiracy thinking, despite its methodological flaws, acknowledges problematic conditions and seeks to explain them, conspiracy denial refuses to acknowledge them. While conspiracy thinking seeks an integrated explanation and the location of responsibility of individuals, conspiracy denial resists both explanations and the attribution of responsibility to particular individuals. Conspiracy denial exaggerates the power of the mass man and undermines the versatility of the powerful.

> Conspiracy denial is neither an overcoming of the ill-reputed conspiracy construction nor an adherence to the tenets of rational and objective thinking; rather, it is another thinking approach that is replete with its own erroneous assumptions, which, in the right circumstances, can result in negative social and political consequences.   (p. 214)

Abdennur concludes that if 'conspiracy thinking can be seen as typically Arab, conspiracy denial can be seen as typically North American' (p. 215). It is consistent with the pragmatic approach that adheres to piecemeal action, and therefore has a vested interest in matter-of-fact common sense and in the repudiation of social theorizing. It is the basic feature of pragmatic and liberal traditions and provides a functional support for the modern capitalistic system.

Cultural retreat

Abdennur's thesis is that the Arab mind has a rational epistemic orientation. It uses the mechanism of isolation for cognitive differentiation especially in asserting the subjective in relation to the objective. The temporal isolation of intention from action, and thought from implementation frees to some extent verbal and affective expression from external constraints, and therefore enables to a large extent the subjective expression. Other forms of isolation such as spatial also contribute to the enabling of affective expression. The Arab mind is also characterized by two-dimensional thinking that appeals to ideals, moral evaluation, and attitude taking. And when it unites these three dimensions it further promotes cognitive differentiation and increased affective expression. Thus, one can observe a constant bid for the affirmation of the subjective realm. However, 'a significant question imposes itself …: what lies behind and what propels this quest for the assertion of subjectivity?' (p. 224).

Abdennur relies on his training as a psychologist. He takes into consideration the dialectics of the psyche, and especially the mechanism of reaction formation. Hence, 'the Arab subjective assertion can be understood as a reaction formation against a strong opposite state: the state of subjective passivity, subjective contingency, and the surrender to material condition' (p. 225). Accordingly, in the Arab case:

> when a state of subjectivity – as dominance of abstract values, as grand designs and ideals, and as collective identity – is weakened (due to various external and structural

factors), the movement to the other side is not a gradual or limited retreat but a radical retreat or collapse of the subject affirming state.   (p. 225)

The Arab psyche has little room for concepts of cultural decline or advancement. Either there is a regression or an upsurge. When Arabs look at the 400 years of stagnation under Ottoman rule, they perceive it as a period of regression or *inhitat*, which implies sinking, drop, descent, or even degeneration. On the other hand, overcoming cultural regression is not achieved by gradual progression but by rebirth or a leap into a glorious age. Hence, the introductory remarks to this review about the Arab Renaissance Project (ARP) should be understood from Abdennur's psychological analysis of the Arab psyche.

  Culture is essentially the sum total of interpersonal and personal–institutional relationships; as the norms that directly regulate them; as the values that guide them; and as the abstract symbols pointing to the dominant themes and ultimate concerns of the collective entity. These behaviours can be subjected to qualitative analysis, which means that 'culture expressed in time and place can be ranked as high or low with respect to certain criteria of vibrancy and health, or of decay and retreat' (p. 225). There is an abundant literature on the concept of cultural decline in the history of thought. In particular, Abdennur and this reviewer refer to the analysis of Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) who held well before modern and contemporary analysts certain criteria for qualifying cultural ascendancy and decline.

> The contemporary manifestations of cultural health that are consistent with their views would be the presence of a creative leading minority with which the majority identifies, a sense of social unity and cohesion, consciousness of issues, intensity and importance given to political and intellectual issues, intellectual and artistic creativity, and presence of will and psychological capacity for strong conflict and change. The state of cultural decline involves the weakening of the above with the preponderance of self-serving behaviours such as consumerism, political corruption, hedonism, and expedient utilitarianism.   (p. 226)

One may also add Ibn Khaldun's remark that exhibitionism tends to accompany the stage of cultural retreat. It seems to this reviewer that such a description fits not only Arab society, but also large segments of Western society!

  Abdennur acknowledges that answering the question of Arab cultural retreat and stagnation over the last 400 years is complex, involves multiple factors and their interaction, and is beyond the scope of his work, yet he seeks to identify certain variables that are particularly useful in predicting cultural retreat in Arab societies. In particular, it is necessary to identify the social conditions that can cause or catalyse such retreat in a culture 'capable of intense abstraction, sublime ideals, and multi-dimensional and complex thinking' (p. 227). To this end, he suggests two variables that have enough impact to be the major determinants and causal factors of retreat and cultural collapse: first, the small size of the political entity; and second, the dominance of utilitarian norms, where the latter is taken at the normative level without regard for the conditions that may promote it, such as socio-economic conditions, war and conflict, and the personality of leaders. These are sufficient conditions, but not necessary ones. Lebanon has been used by Abdennur as an example of an Arab country where the two variables deformalize and corrupt political administration, in the way they de-intellectualize political parties, in the way they induce the mimicking of foreign cultures, and in their compromise and failure to defend cultural sovereignty. Lebanon illustrates the

quintessential sectarian system where collapsed public institutions and sectarian political parties coexist with a vibrant private sector and ideological parties.

Abdennur provides an interesting deconstruction of non-ideological political parties in Lebanon (pp. 236–238). He suggests a dozen of hypotheses he believes define the characteristics of such parties, but which would require testing in further field research. They are small entities emerging under anomic conditions. They have a charismatic leader with non-dogmatic sectarianism. They have commonsensical and intellectually simple philosophies that have not been subjected to any profound analysis. Therefore, their strategic thinking is compromised. Emotional sentiments dominate and replace ideological assumptions. They resort to unpredictable tactics because of their cognitively simplistic and emotionally charged attitudes. Therefore, they drag their constituents and the country into unnecessary conflicts. Since they discourage a culture of intellectual discourse, such parties induce their members to rely on sophisticated common sense, quick-wit, and on 'smart' but shallow statements. Consequently, to such 'common sense and wit' an aggrandized and highly narcissistic self-image prevails. Their anti-intellectualism assumes the functional role of facilitating the exclusive reliance on emotional sentiments in the maintenance of solidarity. Indeed, the last legislative elections of 2009 were a vivid illustration of that point! And when ideology is absent the ensuing concrete perspective can result in the development of a closed cognitive thinking. It may be seen as an obsessive preoccupation with certain local or regional leaders as a source of all evil intentions and danger. And finally, given the inherent anti-intellectual orientation of such parties, they are unlikely to learn from past mistakes.

The consequence of having utilitarian norms dominating political behaviour, resorting to pragmatic political administration, and lacking strong ideological commitment may be helpful only for a while. Yet, they do more often than not precipitate cultural collapse in Arab societies. Reform can therefore be achieved only by radical leaps rather than by piecemeal measures.

Western and Arab epistemic orientations and issues and challenges to Arabs

Abdennur makes an important point distinguishing him from traditional Orientalists and Arab reformers. Embarking from a clear assumption of superiority and ideological bias Orientalism aimed – according to many of its critics – at particularizing and segmenting subjects of inquiry into manageable parts 'with an air of dominance and adventurousness, and a measure of paranoia' (p. 263). Abdennur's book starts instead from a cognitive-centred approach. It seeks to identify the cultural features that are source of social health and creativity in Arab societies. Western epistemic orientations have been a source of misreading of the Arab world. Abdennur analyses their shortcomings.

Abdennur believes that empiricism and utilitarianism developed by British schools of thought 'constitute the central perspectives in North American thinking and are the intellectual prerequisites for American Pragmatism' (p. 264). Pragmatism has become the only test for the truth of whatever proposition is being advanced. It is a method that bases the determination of falsity or truth of a proposition on whether or not it fulfils a human purpose or satisfies a biological and emotional need. Knowledge is therefore essentially instrumental. Bertrand Russell and others believe that pragmatists confuse the pursuit of truth with the pursuit of pleasure. Hence, 'with the denial of a rational measure to truth, the sole criterion becomes success. Pragmatic thinking

is thus a method of getting results regardless of the means employed' (p. 264). For others, pragmatism is not merely an academic philosophy. 'It represents the epistemological and ideological outlook of the dominant social class in America' (p. 264). Hence, the trend of anti-intellectualism in the United States and perhaps an explanation of how George W. Bush could get elected twice!

The German mind has a rational epistemic orientation, like the Arab mind. Abdennur refers to the works of Johan Galtung who used paradigm analysis, description and proposition production, and theory formation (Galtung 1981). Germanic culture ranked the highest in paradigm analysis and theorizing and in reliance on deduction. These qualities are found in Gallic thought, but to a lesser extent. The Japanese intellectual style was seen as being 'at the periphery of the Saxonic'. Galtung found a basic contradiction in Western civilization, namely between Germanic and Anglo-Saxon. The former is rational, theoretical, and deductive, while at the same time seeking empirical verification. The latter is empirical, proposition oriented, yet seeking experimental verification.

Hence, the Arab mind and Germanic culture possess the same qualities. Abdennur has a clear admiration for the Germanic culture.

> With the Germanic culture being the only culture that has combined both comprehensive theory and rigorous empiricism, I would argue that of all cultures, Western or otherwise, it is in the Teutonic–Germanic that the highest point of epistemic and intellectual development has been attained.   (p. 266)

Abdennur believes that the major impediment for the Arab mind to develop in the direction of the Germanic is 'the slow development of high quality Arab educational and scientific institutions and the continued demise of Germanic culture' (p. 266). He believes that the two World Wars have defeated the epistemic approach of German culture. Here, one may ponder at the success Germany is achieving in the economic arena, whereas its European and American partners are stagnating if not regressing. He seems to lament that 'the dominant epistemic orientation of today's world is Saxonic and Asian empiricism' (p. 266).

These observations have clear educational implications for the Arab mind. While there is an abundance of literature tearing apart the current educational infrastructure and method of teaching in Arab countries, yet proposals for reform are centred in the opinion of this reviewer around an empirical epistemic orientation, in the name of pragmatism, utilitarianism, and 'relevance' to current and projected needs. On the other hand, Abdennur has a clear set of recommendations for teaching strategy for social science courses such as sociology, social psychology, management, and organizational behaviour. In a nutshell, his recommendations emphasize the principles of the rational epistemic orientation described at length in the book and reproduced in this review. Thus, new information needs to be placed within a broader context, which means there is a need to establish a contextual ground before a new concept is introduced. New concepts would need to be explained by referring to other similar concepts including their Arabic equivalent. He urges keeping under control the passion for immediate example giving. He prefers the introduction of the example after a level of abstract understanding has been achieved. He suggests to link and pair similar and opposite concepts during explanations and in tests. Finally, concepts being explained must be related to macro-perspectives such as issues related to Arab society and Arab culture. Macro-perspectives are necessary because they can create context, provoke interest, and establish value relatedness.

Abdennur is quite critical of North American methods of teaching. His North American colleagues have lamented that extreme concreteness among students was a desperate call for a 'down-to-earth' inductive approach. He states:

> My assessment is that the rigorous inductive approach they followed was not successful, because it was not matched with underlying epistemic styles of students. There was a flight to concreteness because students were not taught in high school the basic abstraction skills that are necessary for academic performance. Extreme concreteness was actually a cry for reinstatement of the rational epistemic approach and not for its replacement.   (p. 268)

He also offers a curriculum for training in abstract and critical reasoning for Arab undergraduates to be enrolled in a 'future elite Arab university'! Such curriculum would include a course dealing with the fundamentals in formal reasoning such as definitions, arguments, explanations, evaluation, categorical reasoning, validity/truth, deduction/induction, necessary/sufficient, and reasoning fallacies. Another course would be in cognitive training in personal and social competence, and in intensive theory courses including the history and development of basic theory in the students' field of specialization. These courses should be taught early in life if optimal mastery is to be achieved (p. 269).

In his penultimate chapter, Abdennur offers some glimpses of his own preferences and idiosyncrasies. His section on Arab music is one. He perceives it as a victim of what he calls 'collapse anxiety'. He laments the fact that Arab music has not fared as well as the decorative arts. 'Abstract music as pure instrumental music independent of language and language referents is virtually non-existent in the Arab musical repertoire' (p. 274). Pure instrumental music is just a prelude to songs and instrumental improvisations or *taqseem* in instruments are contingent upon the players' own skills and moods rather than a uniform written score. The culprit would be 'words'.

> Words, and particularly Arabic words, have their own musical tones and can help in the construction of a song's melody. However, by having behaviour referents, words tend to particularize and concretize music by imposing certain themes pertaining to love, sex, social occasions, and specific emotional states. Words can achieve a tyrannical dominance over pure tone and melody.   (p. 274–275)

As to why non-representational arts were allowed full freedom through abstract expression while musical expression was kept attached to language-based songs or *tarab* is an intriguing question. One clue might be in 'the Arab insistence on integrating ultimate values with political administration'. Separating such values from state administration is highly threatening for the Arab mind. If and when it occurs, 'there is an experience of the threat of impending chaos: the prospect of nihilism and collapse. It appears that language in music is made to assume the same function as moral laws in politics' (p. 275). It is the *logos* that needs to be attached to pure tones to reduce the fear of total chaos. Abdennur believes that the insistence on linking moral values and the state has redeeming social functions, yet in music it has resulted in cultural disaster. This reviewer believes that this point is likely to be heatedly debated among musicians, musicologists, and other culture specialists.

Abdennur has also expressed his reservations toward the theatre as a form of art. 'I believe that the Arab sense of the dramatic and its unique integration in everyday life is threatened – and that this threat is inherent in the theatrical and exhibitionistic

styles of expression being promoted by contemporary culture' (p. 277). The dramatic sense in Arab culture, which makes it unique, is characterized by its spontaneous focus on real-life issues and its use of two dynamic strategies, the first being isolation context autonomy, and the second the objectification of uncertain hypothetical conditions. 'The theater was seen as alienating the dramatic and offering instead a dose of potentially pathological and dangerous sentiment of exhibitionism' (p. 277). He is quite harsh over stage actors and producers. 'They pose a serious threat to the development of new and creative forms of dramatic expression' (p. 277). The rise of the theatre in the Arab world is the product of uncritical acceptance and mimicking of Western theatrical models. This is certainly food for thought for those concerned by the direction taken in Arab culture by such 'imported' means of expressions where everything plays a 'role', while in genuine life, things, and people merely assume *functions*.

In his parting sections, Abdennur is highly critical of the Benthamian cultural heritage of cognitive simplicity, concrete utilitarianism, and social atomism. This heritage has merged with the one-dimensional culture of the technological society leading to the emergence and development of an anti-intellectual and concretely oriented tradition that has marginalized political parties based on an integrated social perspective or belief system. Abdennur believes that ideology is not coming to an end. In fact, 'ideology may soon become highly needed as societies become ever more pluralized and complex' (p. 291). Neither pure problem-solving approaches nor single-cause advocacy may be effective. There is a need to maintain continuity, universality, and radicalism in intervention. This is what ideology brings to the table. It fuses passions and energies and channels them into politics.

This book has proven a genuine challenge to summarize. Each section in each chapter merits significant discussion and debate. Some arbitrariness has been factored into the selection of the points discussed. Many have yet been left aside due to considerations of space, but they do constitute a solid foundation for new discussions. This reviewer must confess that Abdennur has been quite instrumental in clarifying issues sensed intuitively at first. The battleground in Arab culture is clearly the school and the university where minds are shaped. The future of Arab society is to reconcile itself with its mind and its rational epistemic orientation, and herein lies the pivotal role of Abdennur's research for future educational programmes and curricula. It is the path towards a new Arab epistemic system of knowledge requisite for another Arab renaissance.

Ziad Hafez
Email: Zhafez@gmail.com

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