
Book Review: *The Sociology of Identity: The Dialectics of Consciousness, Deconstruction and Reconstruction*

The Sociology of Identity: The Dialectics of Consciousness, Deconstruction and Reconstruction by Abdulghani Imad, 2nd edn (Beirut: Center for Arab Unity Studies, 2019). 304 pp. US\$13.00. ISBN 9789953828763)

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The fact the first edition of the book is out of stock and a second edition has been published reflects the importance of the topics discussed within it. The book tackles the problem of identity and different approaches used to explore it within critical sociology. This has become an academic and scientific specialization taught in several universities. The question of identity has a critical role to play in mapping definitions of human ontology. Questions of identity were the focus of philosophical deliberation before they were the focus of sociological research. This book focuses on ways to understand identity in various settings, especially in a modern globalized world that is increasingly undergoing fragmentation and varying speeds of development. There is an examination of how the duality of identity is manifested in many Third World countries and in the Arab world, with disastrous consequences. The book explores how the most important dynamic changes that have occurred in the definition of identity are represented by the reorganization of a system of priorities, at the level of sectarian and religious loyalties. Also, references to ethnic and nationalistic affiliations and the basic symbolic building blocks of the term “identity” are examined. This is made apparent in the analysis of the speech of activists from diverging cultures which undermines once stable beliefs, in ways unseen before, leading to unexpected outcomes.

The book considers the radical changes in the current definition of identity, which are based on developments related to the concept of “power,” where identity-building is now sourced from the culture of the use of heavy weapons being used in soft wars. This is the case in the formation of definitions, thoughts, symbols, and values.

FIRST: CHANGES IN IDENTITY AND ITS STRATEGY

In his previous book, *Identity and Knowledge, Society and Religion* (2017), Abd Al-Ghani Imad decodes Arab society, which he also explored in his first book, *The Sociology of Culture: Concepts and Problematiques from Modernity to Globalization* (2006). This, his latest book, *Sociology of Identity: Discussion on Awareness, Fragmentation and Reestablishment*, completes the trilogy. The author’s research has affected a generation of researchers and students, and his work has immense scientific and academic implications. It gives a good understanding of all theoretical sociological terms and debates. The author reviews the work of epistemological critical theorists, employing analytical approaches and concepts to impart a key understanding of Arab societies. Other writers in this field include Anwar Abd Al-Malk, Mohamed Abid Al-Jabri, Abdullah Al-Arwi, and Mohamed Arkoun. Nonetheless, what distinguishes the work of Imad is the direct connection he makes between theoretical sociology and practical sociology. He explores the relationship between the macro- and micro-aspects of identity in sociological discourse rather than navigating the problems of identity and culture which Arab society faces, wherein common ground is often fragmented by the ever-changing sociological focus used in analysis.

Imad’s new book comprises eleven chapters. The first two discuss theoretical literature relating to sociological identity and culture from a critical perspective. This is integrated with discussion, in the third, which deals with dynamic blocks of identity.

In the fourth chapter, the topic of “religion, religiosity, and minorities” is placed under the microscope. There is a discussion of how this topic gives rise to the dynamics of “certainty vs. anxiety” and “unity vs. division.” In this important chapter, the book reveals the active dynamics in religious movements and religiosity and their relationship to rituals of creative identity, especially from the perspective of specific groups and minorities.

The fifth chapter presents a theoretical framework to debate awareness, knowledge, and action, thus establishing a paradigm that affects “unity and

division,” “inclusion and exclusion,” and “loyalty and affiliation.” The sixth chapter deliberates challenges in identity from differentiating affiliation and strategies arising from such movements. Also, it discusses the mechanics of emerging identities and the approaches used in creating meaning and definitions for “imagined groups.” Imad describes such groups as real entities, evolving through a new understanding of “historical narration” and explores their role in creating “collective memory” for their identities.

The analysis in the seventh chapter focuses on the repercussions affecting culture as it is a basic building block of identity in all its forms. The author discusses recent models that shed a light on new forms of identity at the frontier of globalization. He begins with an analysis of Stewart Hall’s dynamic definition of identity and develops the discussion with Richard Jenkin’s understanding of identity as an outcome of social relations. Additionally, he uses Bernard Badi’s idea of shifting worlds and perceptions of them. In the eighth chapter, the author uses a micro-level perspective to analyze concepts and approaches to communicative fields and constituents, considering media, info-media, and web connections. Thus, Imad attempts to redefine communities and individuals through the comprehensive process of their formation, their networking, and its effects.

The ninth chapter develops the idea of the fragmentation of the concept of identity racism and extremism. The author goes into an in-depth analysis of the dynamics between the group and its “others,” critically examining how investments in hatred are occurring. By studying the manifestations of identity racism and viewing it as both a conscious and subconscious pattern, he breaks down certain kinds of dogmatic mentality which are based on possessing absolute truth. He develops his analysis in the tenth chapter, where he raises the issue of social integration problems and the formation of “solid identity” through various explanatory approaches from social sciences.

The eleventh chapter explores suggested approaches to understand and study Arab identity in its modern incarnation, which Imad refers to as a disputed identity that is witnessing dynamic changes in a process of forming, dividing, and rebuilding.

SECOND: SOLID IDENTITIES AND SOFT IDENTITIES

The author directs his analysis to the study of dynamic interactions that produce strict identities and forms of extremism. Such subjectivities are aroused by dominant nationalistic discourses in certain countries and the

propagation of extremist nationalistic identity. These kinds of contexts were created by matching geopolitical dimensions with ethnic nationalistic culture. This has resulted in the drawing of new political identity maps around the globe; forged by the victors of war, especially the victors of the World War I. Since then, legitimate identities were formed by dominant entities and their triumphant ideologies which enforced their vision on others in order to establish power relations, systems of inclusion and exclusion, relations of dominance and subordination, and a justification of all of these. At the same time there has been an establishment of nationalistic identities of nations while certain entities were divided against their will. These identities were built on opposing submissiveness, exclusion and inclusion in a world system trying to subdue and disintegrate them.

In the domain of resistance identity, a variety of subjectivities have emerged according to Imad. Some have manifested in the form of confined soft identities remaining silent but careful to reproduce, maintaining populist or patriotic poses with a touch of liberatory nationalism as was the case in many independence movements that occurred in Latin America, Africa, and the Arab world.

In general, resistance identities are based on local cultural inheritance that is deeply rooted, striving against all attempts of deprivation, and which, through globalization, have gained special dynamics leading to a distorted process in their modern formation. Additionally, this led to a global system of brutality and excessive acts of exclusion and dominance in the colonial age. Due to the unprecedented spread of capitalist materialism, its design of liberalistic culture around human rights, and the engineering of the fate of peoples on route to globalism, resistance identity has been centered around a “solid core” in its cultural structure. Examples of this are the emergence of religious fundamentalism and resurgence of ethnic identities that flourished after the fall of the Soviet Union along with collective ideologies. This has characterized an alignment with the rise of a new world order with one side being a singular pole and the other being economically, politically, and culturally global.

The author reflects on how the historical moment that created conservative and extremist “solid identities,” which was influenced by religious and ethnic revivals worldwide, was like a tilting point in the process of the global system of brutality and its relentless pursuit to maintain dominance and restrict identity and patriotism. It is a point at which the new world system shirked the rules it set at the beginning of the previous century, which established the definition of what a country is. Nations based on the interests

of the victorious manifested by separating the state's logic with the dreams of its nation. The former failed to deliver on promises of establishing common ground and making new alliances based on "individualistic" identities that were the foundation of modern liberalist logic.

The author has provided indicators of the dynamics that have been synthesized by globalization. On the one hand, they destroyed all promises, while on the other they established a new logic and a modern format for a globalized world system. Since the turn of the century, we have witnessed its features whereby it divided countries and redrew maps in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. Its worst features were manifested in the invasions of Iraq, Afghanistan, Chechnya, and in undermining indigenous rights by determining the fate of most countries in the world. Perhaps the fate of the Palestinian nation represents the climax of this catastrophic turn of events, which has had many repercussions, including certain strategies of combating so-called terrorism. Maintaining the new world system's stability, without stopping the causes of such "terrorism" or differentiating it from the right of peoples to resist or decide their fate, is discussed in book.

Resistance identities were established in weaker domains due to the divisions caused by the old-world system that was designed by the victors early in the previous century. Based on its impact, national liberation movements, demanding the right to determine their people's fate, emerged everywhere: Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Arab world. Some succeeded in creating independent national entities, but they remained trapped, drained, and wounded. Their experiments in establishing a nation were continuously weakened and attacked. Entrapment was focused on the weakest most fragile spots and the viciousness of the international system was clear for all to see. There was an intent to cultivate solid identities opposing these movements, identities that are racist, extremist, and even lethal. The fallout of these machinations are still apparent, and catastrophically playing out in Iraq, Syria, and several other locations in the Arab world. According to the author, this has resulted in a sectarian "conscious identity" that has led to the explosion of extremism and ethnic essentialism. The politicization of this state of affairs has created a barrier that blocks rational thinking and keeps peoples entrapped. Fragmented identities in the Arab world dismantled a unified identity and became the driver of the collective mind affecting its core. Many entities, institutions, and countries fell into the trap of sectarian identity, which feeds on extremist religious and ethnic ideologies that demonize the other and this fits well within the new Western vision.

THIRD: THE FIELD OF ARAB IDENTITY: THE DIALECTIC OF FRAGMENTATION AND RECONSTRUCTION

The book delves deep into Arab identity introducing a sociological reading, specialized in identifying problems with reference to relevant literature. The analysis provides important insights into matters of identity in the realm of Arab culture which has been characterized by a major transformation affecting its foundation since the 1980s. Being affected by major factors, this transformation shifted priorities that had prevailed through during the Arab renaissance (*Nabda*) and the intellectual production at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The author discusses matters of heritage, contemporary thought, Sharia law, state, development, and justice among other topics and demonstrates what set the main axis in Arab thought. Approaches to identity remained a branch of research in heritage and contemporary issues, connected to Arab or Islamic doctrinal ideologies which aimed to create political change. Rather, what happened, with the failure of grand ideological experiments worldwide, was the establishment of a new global system with a strange polar reference, on one side, and the massive information explosion in globalized telecommunication, on the other. This has been referenced by Francis Fukuyama's theories on "the end of history," "the end of ideologies," and Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations," leading to a new dialectic identity on a global level, and especially in the Arab region.

Using this point of entry, the author proposes some hypotheses starting from the claim that certain inputs helped in shaping new identities in the Arab world based on "religion" as a central unit of analysis. This led to the distortion of truth and the triggering of affiliation to sectarian and divisive identities, built on failed nationalistic unities in all its forms in Arab countries. Nonetheless, some of these failed attempts of unity rather added to the fragmentation of uniting nationalistic feeling whenever a risk of losing power presented itself. This led to policies being purposefully extremist and sectarian, deepening concerns over legitimacy in certain countries, and drawing their communities into bloody conflicts that still continue.

The author develops his analysis of the deep transitions that affected the structure of the Arab countries and their communities, which were worsened by globalization, deepening the crisis of legitimacy in the Arab world. This crisis was exacerbated by failed development projects and the immersion of most systems in dependency and successive failures. A legitimacy that was granted based on liberalism, nationalism, and independence was accompanied

by the transformation of corruption into a rooted culture and what became systematic theft.

The author disassembles the tools used by Arab authoritarian regimes to dominate the resources of their country. These tools created policies that led to social disasters and marginalization. The worst disaster the author sites is the dependency of Arab authoritarian regimes on the tool of oppression, which installed violence as a continuous structural feature. Imad discusses how they is used it to differentiate and discriminate between constituents of community (tribalism, sectarianism, and ethnicity) and empowered them over each other. Imad indicates how Arab authoritarian regimes purposefully employed these affiliations in their conflicts to install dominance and remain in power. He also demonstrates how these regimes resort to vicious oppressive policies implemented by their security services, based, in most instances, on racism or racist alliances. This has contributed to reviving issues of minorities, sects, and ethnic delineations, thus deepening the crisis of legitimacy for such regimes.

The book explains the dynamics of division that are bred in a fragile dependent country, regardless of the expansion of its security and tools of oppression. In such countries, just as they masked their illegitimacy by oppressing ethnic minorities or sects extending outside the borders or even using military elites within its security forces to defend its threatened interests, forces of change and resistance took cover in common incubators and affiliations. This created a mutual feeding into conflict that took on the character of identity and religion, benefiting and empowering the most extremist forces on either side, at the cost of real change political transformation.

In such breeding grounds of incitement, instinct is mobilized and recruited, and narratives and factional historical imagination are created, as are killer identities, where, moreover, ideological dogmatic discourses of identity are nourished. Based on the author's description, these boundaries exaggerate all kinds of fake identity awareness (ideological, political, and sectarian) that are hitherto buried and hidden. Soon enough they reveal themselves, crudely and unabashed, under the banner of viciousness and brutality that conflicting sides are dependent on, in addition to diversified foreign and regional interference. These bloody conflicts in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon revealed facts on the ingresses of ideological identities with militant forces across borders, whereby their affiliation transcends frontiers to reach the realms of an imaginative identity (sectarian or ideological) from one

perspective, while at the same time they represent an auxiliary power to the country merged with or parallel to it. Many rushed in to fight from various locations and from different nationalities under the banner of these factions and militias with names revealing ethnic and sectarian identity.

FOURTH: SOCIOLOGICAL PRIORITY RATHER THAN IDEOLOGY

The author refuses to tolerate naïve cultural interpretations of identity that consider it as a purely ideological or historical outcome with its makers being ideological entities, set apart from economical, sociological, and political realities. The issue, as revealed in the book, is related to social frameworks that move and nourish social actors, the ideas they present, and the environment they interact with as well as the content of these ideas, their approved methods, and the challenges faced. For these reasons, the historical, political, economic, and cultural contextual analysis for any group has special importance. Based on the interactions that occur in reality, individuals interact with ideas that act as solutions to real challenges. Such answers might be utopian, extremist, reformatory, revolutionary, or even progressive, but, overall, there is more than one answer and there are many ways to express “identity.”

The author reconsiders sociological analysis for approaches to identity and purports that ideology, even if it employs religious inheritance as symbolic capital, with what it holds as excessive historical value, that is the inheritance of texts written hundreds of years ago, did not gain energy and agency to transform into a lethal ideologies except within a socio-political framework. Therefore, the real constituents of violence and extremism are in the reality that human beings live in, as do thinkers and actors. It is a reality that bestows oppression, tyranny and marginalization into socio-political inputs which create aggressiveness, extremism, and violence as a natural occurrence. This conclusion is highly important as it presents us with an equation: participation and inclusion generate moderation; exclusion feeds militancy and extremism. Depending on the type and intensity of its inputs (oppression, exclusion, attempts at integration, and participation) there will result in an output (extremism, moderation, or counter-violence).

The book forces us to face the untold in the ideological “instrumental” politicized identity of the mind. The author has succeeded in disentangling broad areas of fragile commonalities and universalities that were broken and changed into lethal fictional narratives in the shadow of international and regional affiliations. Thus, he reveals conflicts and interests in their state of

formation, based on the logic that uses these basic identity formations, in a world that has completely defied singular polarity. There is no doubt that these are shocking conclusions, yet they are the miserable sociological reality of the Arab world that reflect its horrible divided dialectics. At the same time, they affirm the controversial irony of the existential need for an unified Arab identity.

In the second edition of the book, some important additions strengthen the hypothesis provided, especially in relation to “place” as a condition of earning identity. Moreover, it has a role in defining the dimensions of the conflict, specifically at the stage of rising sectarian “identity fields.” The idea is that fields related to “place” represented in various countries or “vital areas” is a space symbolizing meaning and a historical and cultural world establishing memory and framed by its dimensions. This is because from a place, the “soul of the place” is born bearing properties of identity and collective memory which is something that the book dwells upon demonstrating its role in common experiments of the human collective. It is where, moreover, the seeds of identity and the awareness of itself and others are built. Hence, obtaining the “soul of the place” and an affiliation towards it is the gate to earning identity. On the other hand, the loss of the “soul of the place” and the affiliation towards it, is the first step towards a feeling of alienation and, exile.

This is an important book, not only in the topics it discusses but also in the analytical model it follows. It digs holes in prevailing hypotheses in an attempt to establish a critical, analytical, scientific introduction that allows us to approach problems of Arab identity which the author disentangles. Imad unlocks new cognitive horizons amidst the broken catastrophic scene which exploded into extremist and expanded identities, fragmenting each other into sects and ethnicities prevailing with “herd consciousness” that, in most instances, has no place in the mind. ■

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