Book Review: *Petition for a Manifesto for Rooting and Liberating Arab Sociology*

Reviewed by Ziad Hafez.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

The book is a hallmark in Arab sociology as it calls for a new Arab epistemology, quite in line to what this reviewer has been calling for in *Contemporary Arab Affairs* (Hafez 2014). The book's title immediately alerts the Arab reader that something new, even shocking is coming before his eyes. The author's use of the work "*mishkat*" (lantern) is a key to what to expect in the book. It is a word used in the Holy Quran in the chapter entitled "The Light" (*Al Noor*). In that chapter, there is a metaphor where the message of Islam in the Quran is light shining from a lantern. The contrast between the modesty of the vessel and the power of the message of Islam embodied in the light of the lantern is the metaphor used also by the author. It did give a headache to the reviewer to find a proper translation to the word used

in the book's title. He opted for a more pedestrian interpretation in the word "petition" as the next word used is *mithaq* (covenant or pact, or manifesto in this case) as the next best alternative to the literal translation, but still capturing the author's intention.

The use of the word *mishkat* reveals the author's intention of rooting his call for an Arab sociology by embracing the Islamic content of Arab culture. It is very different from the disembodied call for separation of the religious and the profane as advocated by Western sociologists (33–34). The author reinforces his intention by his use of the word *ta'sseel*, which in the Arabic language has several meanings and connotations. One meaning is "rooting" or creating the roots for an Arab sociology. Another meaning is "the search for authenticity" in Arab sociology. A third meaning relates to "origins." The author has indicated a preference for "indigenization" rather than the etymological source of "originating." In fact, such connotations are not exclusive of each other but refer to various nuances. On the other hand, they do support the author's dissatisfaction with the current state of Arab sociology. This is an example of the richness of Arabic as the nuances between words describing the same idea or phenomenon reflect the Arab mind's ability to seize the abstraction and concreteness at the same time (Abdennur 2014). It makes the translator's job much more difficult as such uniqueness is hardly found in other languages.

BOOK DESCRIPTION

The book is relatively short, fewer than three hundred pages, including an extensive bibliography, which is a value added to an extremely valuable book or rather essay. In fact, the book is a collection of essays written over a long period, revealing the evolution of the author's thinking. He did try to commit to a chronology, even though one can read separately and independently each chapter, an essay in itself revolving about the central argument stated in the introduction. Each chapter is in fact an attempt at reinforcing the original argument, which is the establishment of an Arab sociology. However, a drawback acknowledged by the author himself is that some overlapping (significant from the reviewer's perspective) did take place (5), which the reader can skip if he wants. Yet, this does have some impact on the forcefulness of the argument developed by the author as the repetition diminishes the attention.

The author's introduction (5–25) is really an executive summary of the contents as well as an explanation of the book's motivation. The casual reader

may be content with the introduction but will miss many interesting points provided by the author within the various chapters.

In Part I, the author attempts to describe the reality of Arab sociology and the legitimacy of rooting it in Arab culture. Three chapters, or essays for that matter, address the possibility of rooting Arab sociology in Arab culture (chapter 1, 32–52), the presentation of a methodology for such rooting and rigor it requires (chapter 2, 53–80), and the rules and cultural traditions followed in every Arab society (chapter 3, 85–110).

In Part II, the author explains the role of an Islamic perspective to knowledge and the hosting of Arab sociology. Again, three chapters/essays are devoted to such purpose. In chapter 1 (117–43), the author addresses the role of cultural symbols and the increased longevity of human life from the perspective of reason (*'akl*) and imitation (*taqleed*). In chapter 2 (148–66), the author develops an Arab theory of human symbols and its contribution to the rooting of Arab sociology. In chapter 3 (169–95), the author asserts the legitimacy of the Islamic framework for social sciences.

In Part III, the author devotes two chapters to explaining the birth and evolution of the sociology of cultural symbols. In chapter 1 (201–39), the author presents the fundamental elements he discovered relative to the sociology of symbols. In chapter 2 (245–58), he presents what he believes is his contribution to that field, which the third dimension for the human being as a requirement for the rooting of Arab sociology. The author uses the analytical tools he has developed to "explain and understand various features of the Arab nation and at its forefront the Arab Spring" (6).

Each chapter in each part has its own bibliography, which is extensive and covers Arab and international sources in Arabic as well as English and French.

PURPOSE OF THE BOOK

The reason why the author felt compelled to write these essays is his dissatisfaction with the current state of sociology in general, and Arab sociology in particular, as taught in Arab universities as well as in international ones. The author calls for an Islamization of social sciences (23) and acknowledges at the same time that it will receive a significant opposition by Arab sociologists. He provides an extensive discussion of this issue in chapter 3 of Part II. The refusal of such sociologists to consider that approach is a result of the captive mind as described by the Malaysian sociologist Sayed Farid Alatas (Alatas 1974, 2006, 57).

PROPOSED THEMES

The phrase "indigenization of Arab sociology" means for the author the establishment of a body of knowledge and thought that address a set of issues (Dhaouadi 2020). One relates to what he calls the "substance of Arab societies." Another is the importance of the cultural system in such societies in terms of cultural values and norms, religious beliefs, and epistemological perspectives. Such a system is necessary for the understanding and explanation of behavior of individuals and groups in Arab societies. The current state of Arab sociology is quite weak in his opinion and Arab sociologists have not contributed significantly to the body of thought in terms of innovating concepts and research tools and methods. Therefore, it is imperative to make a change in that respect.

The author believes that contemporary sociology does not embrace what he calls "total cultural influence" in human behavior (38–42). Such culture should be based upon pure science as well as upon the body of cultural symbols and beliefs. The latter manifests itself in the example of the complete cultural tradition of circumcision (biology and culture are in play in this case) of all Muslim boys in Arab societies. In fact, contemporary sociology does not endorse that concept stressing the conformity of all members to a particular cultural norm. Instead, it views deviance as a common feature in all cultures of societies regardless of the behaviors in question. The concept of total cultural influence is therefore critical for Arab sociologists to take a critical stand of contemporary sociology.

In terms of sociology as one branch of social sciences, the author argues for the return to the foundations laid by Ibn Khaldun (1337–1407). Ibn Khaldun was more than the father of the concept of (*'asabiyya*) or solidarity based on unity of the group and its consciousness, to which most modern Arab sociologists have reduced his contributions. More importantly, according to the author, Ibn Khaldun has succeeded in the confluence of reason (*'akl*) and transmission (*naql*). The author correctly believes that Ibn Khaldun has succeeded in merging the two to produce knowledge and especially about the evolution of societies. The empirical observations he made did not contradict the teachings of the Quran about human behavior as individuals and as groups.

By reverting to Ibn Khaldun, the author operates his own version of the fusion of pure science with social sciences. Religion is a source of knowledge as well as customs, habits, legends, which all constitute the body of culture.

He argues for the existence of the cultural man or *Homo culturus* as there is the *Homo oeconomicus* for economists, or *Homo politicus* (204). Culture is a major source of explaining human behavior, even though the latter may have its imprint on culture. The author indicates that culture is a key in understanding behavior at the micro-level as well as at the macro-level.

CHALLENGES TO ARAB SOCIOLOGISTS

The author has identified two sets of challenges facing Arab sociologists. The first is the adoption of a unifying epistemology as advocated by Wallerstein. The latter called for a unified system of knowledge between pure sciences and social sciences. He acknowledges the difficulty in achieving such an objective because it requires significant changes in cognition and structures of research centers. Hence, the call for an interdisciplinary approach in the development of knowledge. This means that the narrow focus in fields such as biology, psychology, sociology, chemistry, and physics must be unified to become collective working groups (47). This is not likely to happen before mid-century in the best of estimates (47). The second challenge facing Arab sociologists resides in developing a new body of thought and a new paradigm as far as the study of cultural symbols is concerned. Language, thought, knowledge, religion, laws, myths, cultural values, and norms constitute the body of cultural symbols. Such symbols are what he calls transcendental (48) since they prevent their objectification in established sociological thought. He believes that such transcendental approach is new and is predicated on three concepts.

The first concept is that it is an Arab and Islamic contribution because of the author's own identity and because it is supported by Islamic perception of cultural symbols (48). In this respect, American sociologist Neil Smelser acknowledged in an interview with the author that he never thought about the transcendental value of cultural symbols (Dhaouadi 2002).

The second concept is the elaboration of another one, namely, the underdevelopment of the "Other." It means that most developing nations are not just underdeveloped economically and socially but are also the subject of assault to their language and culture (49). Such underdevelopment has significant repercussions on the psyche of the people as well as on their identity. Nonetheless, the body of literature in the West addressing the global problems of the South are particularly silent about such aspect of underdevelopment.

The third concept is that of cultural symbols that the author has developed since the early 1990s. It is the backbone of the book under review and yet is still the subject of further research. He asserts the strong relationship between cultural symbols and the underdevelopment of the "Other." In his view, it is the intellectual and theoretical framework for understanding the nature of the underdevelopment of the "Other."

THE THEOREM

Based on the above remarks, the author develops his theorem about human behavior. Humankind has five characteristics that distinguish it from other living creatures. The first characteristic is a biological fact where its growth is slower than that of other creatures. The second is also a biological characteristic where the lifespan is longer than that of most living creatures. The third is biological and Quranic in the preeminence of humankind over other creatures. The author cites the relevant Quranic verses confirming the preeminence of man as the receptor of the divine spirit (*rooh ilahiya*) as well as God's "successor" (*khalifa*) on earth. The fourth characteristic is intrinsic to humankind and distinguishes it from other creatures, which is what he calls the third dimension or the cultural symbols. The fifth characteristic is the concept of identity, which has in its turn three dimensions: body (biology), the spirit or source of life (*Quran*), and the cultural symbols.

The theorem attempts at answering the following questions: Is there a relationship between these characteristics and, if so, how important is the role of cultural symbols? He answers that there is a direct relationship between the first two characteristics. The slowness in growth of the human body when compared with other creatures necessarily leads to a longer life span. As to the characteristic related to identity, which is tridimensional, there is a relationship with the first characteristic, that is, the human body. Moreover, as to the preeminence of humankind over other creatures, there is a direct relationship between the third dimension or cultural symbols and identity.

HUMAN SYMBOLS AND THE THIRD DIMENSION

The third dimension has a central role in defining human identity. It also "explains" (252–53) the first two biological characteristics for the slow growth of the human body also includes the development of human symbols that include

cultural symbols. Other creatures have a more rapid growth of their body but no development of cultural symbols because of a shorter life span. The author explains in the second chapter of Part III why he introduced the concept of human symbols. He did so to avoid any confusion with current writings indicating that other creatures than humankind have "culture" (247) even though one can interchange human with cultural! Having clarified this nuance the author asserts that the third dimension is an appropriate intellectual framework explaining human behavior. It underscores the direct relationship with identity and therefore the preeminence of humankind over other species.

The author argues that the concept of third dimension is not only essential to the establishment of a new Arab sociology but also to the understanding of many Arab concepts and phenomena. The third dimension explains the existence of an Arab nation despite Western writings about Arab countries as distinct and separate entities unrelated to each other. This is the direct influence of European colonialism. He demonstrates that through the third dimension not only are Arab societies related to each other but also they share many essential commonalities (256). The disparities among Arab countries in terms of political systems and regimes in place, and in terms of wealth (some are rich in oil and gas, others are poor in that respect) are not strong enough to overcome the commonalities of language, religion, history, and, most importantly, a common vision for the future (263). The commonalities embodied in the third dimension have existed for fourteen centuries and are likely to be around for a long time (264).

In the final analysis, the book does provide an interesting approach to Arab sociology. The author is right in insisting upon grounding Arab sociology in Arab tradition, religion, language, myths, and whatever one considers as a cultural symbol. The book may need some rewriting to make it crispier and avoid the all too abundant overlapping among the various essays. However, it will be a landmark book in Arab sociology quite in line with the changes taking place in international sociology as he correctly points out. ■

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