

The Concept Of Cultural Orientation And The Problem Of Adaptation According To Thinker Malek Bennabi: A Sociological Introduction

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Abstract:

Through the concept of cultural orientation, thinker Malek Bennabi was able to outline the key features of change in an analytical work focusing on the components that culture should be built upon, and how these components interact to form a general perception. This perception imposes its constraints on the individual, preparing them to engage in the circle of civilization, from which they have been separated since the post-Almohad period. Additionally, the major issue that hinders the realization of this perception into reality is the problem of adaptation, which represents a formidable barrier to any achievement of revival and to overcoming the state of dependency that has become an obstacle to any attempt at change.

Keywords: Culture, Society, Orientation, Adaptation.

Introduction:

It is insufficient to rely on a single perspective when addressing any intellectual issue, no matter how simple, whether it arises from theoretical or empirical needs. Moreover, when such an issue seeks to manifest itself in reality, it cannot be limited to dialectical meanings, which, although they contribute to stimulating thought, are inadequate in producing the moment that transitions into actual reality with its various demands. Malek Bennabi consistently justifies this methodological caution, attributing it to the idea of futility when scientific circles become engrossed in theorizing, focusing solely on it and indulging excessively in the desire for discourse, if we may use this expression. Thus, we cannot engage with serious issues that have a profound impact on real life except by tracing their reflections on lived reality. This reflection requires a predictive regulatory mechanism that defines what should and should not be done, and how we can begin to fill the knowledge gap by questioning the reality that will also activate the deductive mechanisms that produce logical models. This is an important approach in building any successful analytical model that accompanies the intellectual process both in theory and practice.

2. Negative and Positive Determination:

Malek Bennabi points out that any attempt to invest in the triad of civilization must go through stages, one of the most crucial being the mechanism of determination, which is divided into two directions: the first is negative, and the second is positive. This determination is only complete with both. The negative aspect separates us from the burdensome remnants of the past, filled with dead or deadly ideas, while the positive aspect connects us to the requirements of the future¹. These two moments are considered some of the most significant in civilizational terms, as they serve as foundational backdrops for what follows. Bennabi illustrated this concept with numerous examples from human civilizations to convey his thoughts on the aforementioned mechanisms.

It's important to note that analysis at this level can be macro-sociological, dealing with civilization in its entirety, or micro-sociological, focusing on its components at a more detailed level. This flexibility and adaptability in Bennabi's models allow them to be applied to any issue, no matter how simple or complex.

Following this stage is the phase of positive determination, which Bennabi summarized by saying, "The goal of positive determination is not to invent a new method... but rather to define its content with the essential elements that we consider necessary for the concept of culture."² This statement reflects a discourse that emphasizes purely behavioral representations that ontologically touch society, or in other words, the reproduction of societal behavioral systems in accordance with the requirements of culture, as detailed by Bennabi in his foundational book *The Conditions of the Renaissance*.

Before delving into the details of the concept, it is essential to define it at the outset; otherwise, the concept might accumulate a heavy cognitive burden that could exceed and diverge from the realistic contexts we want to use as the primary criterion for its definition. In reality, the concept of culture is a modern one, closely tied to Western civilization when it comes to the term itself. "The fact is that the idea of culture is a modern one that came to us from Europe, and the word given to it is, in itself, a true reflection of European genius."³ However, culture is a practice deeply rooted in human

knowledge throughout history. The Moroccan philosopher Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri attempted to localize this concept by drawing inspiration from the well-known Dreyfus affair, but this localization was burdened by interpretation and analysis, based on the political idea, which he often saw as a hidden factor directing the perceptions of political classes towards the radical intellectuals in society⁴. Whether consciously or not, he placed himself within a specific framework, or perhaps thought about the subject within a certain reference that imposed its inspiration on him, thus falling into what he warned against. However, our thinker Malek Bennabi managed to place it in a realistic context, expressing it as a theory of behavior capable of framing the social practices of individuals. This allows it to be an accurate and clear criterion that enables us to place the society under study in the appropriate position within the civilizational framework theorized by Malek Bennabi.

Examining culture and society in our reality might reveal conditions that can be described, at the very least, as reflecting what Bennabi called "the half-human." Thus, we face a series of problems related to the premises and contexts in which these premises evolve, leading to results that represent the general manifestation of cultural and social life. These requirements cannot, in any way, be separated from other social representations, which are among the most important, sensitive, and influential not only in the present but also in future orientations. "The formation of civilization as a social phenomenon occurs under the same conditions and circumstances that gave rise to the first civilization."⁵ Here, we can apply a comparative approach, allowing us to understand the distance by which we have fallen behind in the march of civilization, along with the ability to analyze the primary formative elements and how they fall short of providing that initial impetus, followed by the ability to sustain progress through the stages of spirit and intellect, which represent the peak of civilizational advancement from Malek Bennabi's perspective.

3- Elements of the Concept of Culture:

The idea of cultural orientation is one of the creative concepts in the thought of Malek Bennabi. Orientation involves avoiding any waste of effort, which represents the essence of human energy the energy of minds and hands along with time, which is the fundamental value through which any attempt at revival and change flows. Matthew Arnold views culture as "the study of perfection, which aims to lead to harmonious perfection by developing all aspects of our humanity and to general perfection by improving all parts of society."⁶ Malek Bennabi emphasizes the idea of religious impetus, stating, "This system, when activated, directs the course of history towards the desired goal, and in this lies fundamentally the idea of directing humanity driven by a religious impulse."⁷

The essential elements necessary for culture are closely tied to positive determination and are established by Malek Bennabi as foundational elements with the power to deeply influence social life. He identified them as follows:

- Moral Constitution
- Aesthetic Taste
- Practical Logic
- Industry (in the sense used by Ibn Khaldun)

3-1 Moral Orientation:

Our thinker emphasizes that the focus on the moral aspect is not about the philosophy of ethics, but rather on the social forces it generates, which have been a reason or one of the reasons that many nations have etched their names into the memory of civilization. The behavioral aspect we refer to here is not limited to individual or personal dictates, as understood in psychology, but is instead related to the network of social relationships. The stronger these relationships are, and the more they align with the philosophy of duty rather than the philosophy of rights, the more they possess the power to create a society worthy of revival and civilization.

It is crucial to highlight the significant and vast difference between the depth of civilization and its external manifestations. Our thinker, Malek Bennabi, provided numerous examples of the profound and substantial differences between the fundamental elements of civilization where the religious idea plays a fundamental role and the manifestations of these elements after they combine to create that captivating appearance. We must be cautious of the reactionary belief that the history of civilization's external face began the moment we paid attention to it, giving our attention to its temporary appearance rather than its essence. "This is the situation of our youth in their view of things," Bennabi notes⁸.

Thus, Western civilization had its antecedents and its foundations that led to the results which have caused a sense of awe in our world. We can only benefit from it by thoroughly examining its foundations and extracting what is suitable and compatible with our own references. On the other hand, simply imitating the external aspects of civilization is one of the easiest and most futile endeavors, and superficiality has never been a path to laying the deep foundation of any idea, let alone establishing a comprehensive intellectual system capable of effecting change and influence.

3-2 Aesthetic Taste:

When our thinker refers to aesthetic taste, he is not merely focusing on the aesthetic dimension itself, but rather on the impression that the image of beauty leaves on social life. A distorted image can negatively affect individuals, making it necessary to work on reshaping and improving any distorted images that may offend public taste.⁹ "Human beings are

essentially cultural creatures," and the colonizer of that time had realized this, making it a priority to entrench and normalize these distorted images. Thus, the struggle here is a comprehensive one, focusing on every detail, leaving nothing to chance.

Aesthetic taste, or aesthetic orientation, is a continual requirement, as it elevates the general sensibilities of individuals. Distorting the general appearance inevitably impacts people negatively, and this distortion originates from a purely ontological aspect related to the tangible and perceptible image, which, in Malek Bennabi's thought, represents the world of things. This world of things automatically influences the systems of people and ideas.

The situation today is reminiscent of the past; public surroundings still suffer from systematic distortion, which creates a barrier between behavioral culture as a civilizational product and individuals as one of the essential components of civilization and revival. Reflecting on our thinker's words: "Today, we are losing our sense of beauty, even though it was once present in our culture; if it were still there, we would use it to solve partial problems that collectively form an aspect of human life." Often, the issue goes beyond mere aesthetics to encompass an appearance that carries a particular ideological load, creating a state of social alienation. This is akin to what happened with Mustafa Kemal when he imposed Western-style hats to replace traditional fezzes or turbans, which represent forms of authentic heritage. In this context, clothing either teaches us truths or obscures them, just as it reflects culture, material conditions, and social status¹⁰.

3-3 Practical Logic:

Here, the focus is not on logic as established by Aristotle, but on the logic of action. Malek Bennabi argues that our problem has never been related to ideas themselves; the intellectual wealth produced by Islamic civilization makes it far from intellectual poverty. The real issue lies in the principle of action. Any idea only comes to life when it is put into practical application, and it fades away when it remains confined to thought alone. He believes that our dilemma begins when we are required to transition from intellectual logic to the logic of action. In other words, intellectual energy that does not lead to practical application is wasted energy and effort that goes unutilized. This is a characteristic of the post-civilization individual, who has reached a state of decay in social relationships, rendering them incapable of action and unable to reintegrate into the civilizational cycle.

"Our problem is not the logic of ideas, but the logic of action and movement. The Muslim does not think to act, but rather to make abstract statements," Bennabi notes. The state of social sterility, as our thinker calls it, results from individuals who are incapable of engaging in any effort that leads to change¹¹. We are well aware of the vast difference between ourselves and the Western individual in terms of the effectiveness of their work and the ineffectiveness in which we find ourselves mired.

3-4 Industry:

Our thinker draws inspiration from Ibn Khaldun's concept of industry, viewing it as a productive action that benefits society. If individuals possess a certain level of craftsmanship, it indicates their involvement in the civilizational process. The instinctive behavior in an individual, the behavior resulting from their experience, and the behavior learned from others are the main axes for shaping an individual's conduct, with the last being the most influential¹². The relationships that develop in the industrial sector are a manifestation of this idea.

Malek Bennabi borrowed the idea of industry from the early stages of Western development, where the concept of work was of paramount importance. We can refer to Max Weber's foundational work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, which emphasized the idea of salvation being attainable only by those capable of work and production. Socially, this work was embodied through individuals' involvement in factories, where participation was contingent upon the skill that enabled an individual to be influential and effective in society.

Even Karl Marx, who opposed conservative thought with his radical ideas, focused on the concept of work, but within the framework of shared ownership of the means of production, while warning against alienation resulting from the dominance of the capitalist class. The difference here lies in the premises leading to the professional practice of craft by individuals, rather than the craft itself. Industry is not merely a characteristic of advanced societies but a hallmark of any civilized society.

This highlights the vast gap between knowledge and its practical embodiment, which is achieved through the ability to apply the skills acquired in universities, for example. Universities generally award degrees while the actual skill can only be acquired through life experience. This points to the significant flaw in the network of social relationships that hinders the natural interaction between various social systems. The integration of these systems is challenging for individuals. "Our hopes will be disappointed if we rely solely on the knowledge we learn in formal and informal schools in addressing our issues."¹³

4- Adaptation Between Yesterday and Today:

Despite the epistemological foundations of a social and cultural nature, and the important methodological observations our thinker made about political practice at the time focusing on purely organizational aspects and referencing the Qur'anic principle of causality as a critical component he ultimately summarized our civilizational problem in the psychological state of the "Man of Scarcity." This state reflects a superficial, reductionist reaction, atomistic in thought, incapable of seeing the whole picture of reality. This person is lost in the pages of the past, alienated in the present, and estranged from the future. The "Man of Scarcity" has become unable to take on the challenge of change, increasingly inclined to accept things as they are, or in other words, to adapt to them based on the premises each individual is founded upon. Ideologies then exert their influence, leading this person to craft justifications that absolve the mind from the task of thinking and the limbs from the duty of action.

The problem of adaptation is a barrier between a person and their goals. It is a reaction to the miserable state of affairs and the shameful condition of backwardness. Yesterday mirrors today, as we continue to flounder in problems of superficiality and imaginary battles. The varying reactions among individuals are evidence of their conflict and the clashing of their efforts, regardless of the value of these efforts. You see those enamored with Western culture and its allure, those who believe that solving our crises lies in returning to language and learning grammar and morphology, those who consider women's liberation a decisive factor in progress and development, those who believe that victory in the economic struggle heralds the return of civilization, and those who have resigned themselves to the status quo, barely making a sound. All these are scattered efforts that collide with one another.

The notion of a person who holds the keys to solving all the nation's problems at once is a prevalent idea in the imagination of our simple society. Thus, efforts are dispersed, and talents are wasted to no avail. Added to this is the pervasive mistrust that now dominates society at every level, evolving into a state of rampant individualism where a person no longer even trusts themselves. There is also an elitist mindset that excels in imposing its views and ideas, alongside a state of social emptiness that has brought our society close to sterility, leaving it incapable of fulfilling even the most basic life requirements.

We cannot reach a unified and coherent idea because civilization is about coordinating efforts, exchanging and integrating experiences, and working to combine all these ideas to achieve the aesthetic image associated with civilization. Otherwise, this conflict, division, and fragmentation will dissipate creative effort and serious work, leading to the dominance of meaninglessness and the philosophy of rights, pursued by those obsessed with obtaining their rights without understanding or recognizing their responsibilities to society. This results in a culture of opportunism that undermines all attempts at reform and correction.

The failure to establish a society of institutions has automatically led to the formation of a society based on tribalism, which closely resembles the initial stage of decline that our society experienced after the Almohad era. In this state, individuals boast only of the tribe or group to which they belong, presenting a humiliating image of a society once distinguished by its spirit of solidarity and cooperation. The absence of a serious project that organizes efforts and channels energies results in us living in a vicious cycle, squandering every creative idea and meaningful effort.

Serious work is in dire need of organization as a guiding framework, a framework founded on creative ideas that are the product of minds and talents driving them toward realization, lifting them from the depths of abstraction where ideas, like objects, have accumulated. The current era has thus become characterized by chaos, and it is futile for society to wait for magical solutions or the arrival of a legendary hero. A reality built on logical causes will never produce outcomes that contradict its premises. The miracle happens when a person exhausts their talents in pursuit of effort and action, not in isolation from their peers, but through the synergy of efforts and the integration of visions. Only then can the religious idea activate the triad of civilization once again, in souls that aspire to progress and advancement.

Conclusion:

In this paper, we sought to analyze the elements related to the concept of culture, focusing on the ideas and perceptions of Malek Bennabi. Through his methodological expertise, knowledge, and critical insight, Bennabi was able to offer a unique interpretation and focused analysis of culture as one of the most important social determinants upon which the idea of civilization is built. We explored the mechanisms that first allow culture, as a theory of knowledge, to become a theory of behavior, and secondly, the obstacles that prevent its societal activation, rendering it futile and perpetuating the susceptibility to colonization in its new manifestation what we might call the susceptibility to dependency or backwardness.

We also examined how the problem of adaptation can hinder every engine of revival and nullify every creative attempt at civilization, resulting in the emergence of the "Man of Scarcity" and the "Half-Man" a person who only does half the work, walks half the path, and thinks only half a thought becoming a hallmark of the current era. The only way to restore balance is through the unification of efforts and the elimination of the dominance of conflicting messages and methodologies. This can be achieved by reviving the spirit of consensus through bringing perspectives closer together and

focusing on commonalities that unite rather than divide. In doing so, the prevailing state of futility can be overcome, paving the way for the restoration of social awareness, which creates the harmony and organization in efforts and ideas necessary to prevent the dissipation of psychological and social energy among the members of a single society.

Footnotes :

*Human, Soil, and Time, *with the necessity of the religious idea, which acts as the catalyst for these three elements.*

1. Malek Bennabi, *The Conditions of the Renaissance*, 16th edition, Dar Al-Fikr, Damascus, 2017, p. 86.
2. Malek Bennabi, *Ibid.*, p. 87.
3. Malek Bennabi, *The Problem of Culture*, 5th edition, Dar Al-Fikr, Damascus, 2000, p. 25.
4. Mohamed Abed Al-Jabri, *Intellectuals in Arab Civilization: The Ordeal of Ibn Hanbal and the Calamity of Ibn Rushd*, 2nd edition, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, Lebanon, 1995, p. 23.
5. Malek Bennabi, *The Conditions of the Renaissance*, previously cited, p. 28.
6. Haralambos & Holborn, *Sociology: Culture and Identity*, translated by Hatem Hameed Mohsen, 1st edition, Dar Kiwan for Printing and Publishing, Damascus, 2010, p. 40.
7. Malek Bennabi, *The Conditions of the Renaissance*, previously cited, p. 84.
8. Malek Bennabi, *The Conditions of the Renaissance*, previously cited, p. 95.
9. Denis Cosh, *The Concept of Culture in Social Sciences*, translated by Monir Al-Saidaani, 1st edition, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 2007, p. 9.
10. Abdullah Al-Ghathami, *Television Culture - The Fall of the Elite and the Rise of the Popular*, 2nd edition, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, 2005, p. 99.
11. Malek Bennabi, *The Conditions of the Renaissance*, previously cited, p. 103.
12. Abdel Ghani Imad, *Sociology of Culture: Concepts and Issues...From Modernity to Globalization*, 1st edition, Center for Arab Unity Studies, Beirut, 2006, p. 25.
13. Malek Bennabi, *The Conditions of the Renaissance*, previously cited, p. 104.

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