

Principles of Knowledge Construction in Arab-Islamic Society According to the Thought of Malek Bennabi

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Abstract

A fundamental imperative of contemporary life is the urgent necessity to diversify knowledge across the various domains of daily existence, be they social, economic, or cultural. In this context, a question of considerable public interest emerges: what mechanisms enable individuals to internalize various forms of knowledge? Moreover, in light of the challenges obstructing cognitive acquisition, what solutions can be suggested to alleviate these difficulties and remove the barriers to learning?

This study initially endeavors to define the concept of knowledge while elucidating its fields of application and intrinsic characteristics. Emphasis is placed on the interdependence between knowledge and education through an examination of the theoretical perspectives of major figures such as Gustave Le Bon, as well as the eminent scholars Ibn Khaldoun and Abd El-Hamid Ibn Badis. By further integrating the contributions of contemporary sociologists like Anthony Giddens, the analysis highlights a consensus: the construction of knowledge imperatively rests upon human development. These thinkers converge on the necessity of education and pedagogy as levers for elevating levels of knowledge at both the individual and collective scales—a thesis extensively advocated by the thinker Malek Bennabi.

Keywords: Malek Bennabi, principles, knowledge, Arab society, Islamic society.

Introduction

In contemporary societies, knowledge has become the central axis for constructing education, behavior, and ethics. The individual serves as the cornerstone of this socio-cultural process, which facilitates social change and growth.

However, this social equation encounters a series of obstacles that impede progress and development. This observation is shared by numerous scholars and thinkers specializing in social and cognitive studies, social philosophy, and various other branches of the humanities and social sciences.

Among the contemporary thinkers who have produced works elucidating concepts of development, change, and Renaissance (*Nahda*) within Arab-Islamic societies is Malek Bennabi. He proposed a specific equation for the construction of knowledge, education, and culture by clarifying the fundamental pillars and principles of evolution and progress.

Bennabi also shed light on the primary causes of the backwardness of these societies. He attributed this stagnation, intellectual deficit, and "functional lethargy of the mind" to an inability to keep pace with developed and civilized nations. These advanced societies built their

foundations on continuous scientific and human knowledge, free from stagnation, negligence, or any rupture in permanent education and lifelong learning.

In this article, we shall outline a set of ideas and principles illustrating the significance of cognitive thought in civilizational development according to Malek Bennabi. We will also examine the rules of educational construction within Arab-Islamic societies and the imperative need to renew knowledge to align with the constant evolution of developed nations. Furthermore, we intend to demonstrate that contemporary society is summoned to engage in a dynamic of continuous learning, emphasizing the crucial role of knowledge in achieving progress and social change.

I. Knowledge and Education

Knowledge directly affects social relationships, especially when people interact with each other, before it has an effect on how groups interact with each other. Georges Gurvitch, a sociologist, wrote a groundbreaking book called *The Social Frameworks of Knowledge* in which he looks into the meaning of the phrase "sociology of knowledge" and the idea of the "knowledge society."

The thinker delineates that the study examines the functional correlations and interdependencies between diverse types of knowledge, their various configurations, and knowledge systems (cognitive hierarchies), juxtaposed with social frameworks. These frameworks include global societies, social classes, particular groupings, as well as diverse manifestations of sociability and social micro-elements (**Gurvitch, 1983, pp. 22-23**)

In this simplified study, the main focus is on partial social structures, and more specifically, global structures.

This is because knowledge plays a major role in each structure, along with civilizational works and other social complexities. This creates a primary balance between different orders.

Georges Gurvitch underscores the imperative of examining the interplay between the variable hierarchy of cognitive types and the function of knowledge, along with its representatives, in diverse societal frameworks.

He also supports the study of various forms of expression, generalization, and knowledge communication in relation to social actors (senders and receivers).

Finally, Gurvitch emphasizes the significance of examining particular instances of divergence or dissonance between social frameworks and knowledge.

The thinker observes that technical knowledge and political knowledge occupy a predominant position in contemporary societies. It is, therefore, unsurprising to find that "knowledge of the Other"—the perceptive knowledge of the external world—and even scientific and philosophical knowledge, find themselves largely "technicized" or "politicized." Consequently, the objection he attempted to address remains pertinent. (**Gurvitch, 1983, pp. 22-23**)

Furthermore, the thinker underlines that the masses, as social frameworks of knowledge, are particularly observable when embodied in social classes and global societies, or at least in large-scale groupings such as the State, political parties, and trade unions. Conversely, this presence is less pronounced within families, local communities, or factories.

In correlation with these masses, awareness of the external world and political knowledge emerge prominently. Sometimes, you can also see scientific and technical knowledge.

Gurvitch, on the other hand, says that in these situations, other types of knowledge, such as

philosophical knowledge, knowledge of the "Other" and the "We," and even simple common sense, are clearly not welcome.

Islamic philosophers contend that articulating the relationship between the "Self" (the Ego) and the "Other" from a Quranic standpoint necessitates the prior establishment of a comprehensive Islamic worldview (Weltanschauung). This paradigm enables the definition of these two fundamental concepts, the construction of the interrelated network connecting them, and the identification of their diverse models of manifestation.. **(Al-Sayed, 2008, p. 39)**

This is achieved through human knowledge of the Divine Will, to the extent necessary for the fulfillment of the mission of stewardship on earth (*Khilafa*). It also involves an understanding of the purpose of the cosmic order, for existence was not created in vain nor left to chance; everything within it was created according to a precise measure to fulfill a specific role.

Furthermore, the group constitutes the natural environment for thought. As the researcher Amer Mesbah explains in his work *Sociology: Pioneers and Theories*, the sociological importance of the group lies in the fact that it represents the ideal milieu for the flourishing of thought, creativity, and positive social interaction, leading to psychological satisfaction and emotional harmony. On an intellectual level, the community is divinely commanded to invest in the quest for knowledge, specialization, and intellectual production, thereby establishing a direct and manifest link between science and the execution of the spirit of the "Divine Covenant" mentioned in the Quran. (Misbah, 2010, p. 367)

Conversely, education cannot be complete without the building of sound and positive knowledge. Although all social variables influence the educational process, sociologists generally define education as: "*That which transforms the qualities of man or that which results from this transformation, whether intentional or not*". **(Verbeul, 2011, p. 75)**

This concept takes on specificities according to fields (sciences, arts, or religion), levels (primary, secondary, university), and models (initial or continuous, specialized or supervised). According to sociologists, education is "*the action exercised on others to develop their personality.*" Similarly, for specialists in social relations, it is "*the means used by society to renew its conditions of existence.*" Etymologically, the Arabic term for education (*Raba*) conveys the meanings of growing, rising, and expanding, both in terms of mental and physical faculties as well as moral ones. **(Mustafa, 2005, p. 367)**

In his work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (or *Man and Societies*), Gustave Le Bon addresses the question of education, noting that a dominant idea of the era is that instruction possesses the power to transform men significantly, leading to their certain improvement or even the establishment of equality. Through repetition, this idea became an unshakable dogma, making any questioning of this principle as perilous as it once was to contest the power of lineage. **(Gustave, 2019, p. 63)**

We observe here that education and teaching play a simultaneously constructive and functional role. Teaching builds the sum of an individual's vital daily knowledge while accounting for their environment and various social influences. The realization of equality in this construction process occurs according to each individual's specific capacities; it is here that the transformation of men and the reform of what might be misaligned with societal specificities take place.

The construction of knowledge rests fundamentally on science and instruction. In this regard, it is pertinent to cite the eminent Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun. He asserts that *"the teaching of sciences is part of the arts (or crafts)"* (Çina'at). By "arts," Ibn Khaldun refers to the set of skills, knowledge, and techniques that an individual masters and exercises in daily life. He emphasizes that excellence in a science and its mastery can only be acquired through the attainment of an habitus, which allows one to grasp its principles and rules, understand its complexities, and derive branches from its foundations. As long as this habitus is not acquired, the mastery of the art remains incomplete. (Ibn Khaldoun A. A.-R., 2019, p. 466)

Researcher Mohamed Ettaher El Mansouri further explores this in his analysis of the *Muqaddima*: *"Know, O learner... that human thought possesses a specific nature... It is a perception, a movement of the soul in the middle cavity of the brain; it is sometimes the principle of ordered human acts, sometimes the principle of knowledge not yet acquired."*

This reflexive nature, which distinguishes man from the animal kingdom, allows for the conception of premises and the deduction of conclusions. Subsequently, the art of logic (formal logic) describes the functioning of this theoretical thought to distinguish truth from falsehood. While rectitude is intrinsic to thought, errors can arise from a poor perception of terms. Logic thus intervenes as a technical tool. (Ibn Khaldoun A. A.-R., 2023, p. 701)

Finally, Nawaf al-Jarrah underscores that all faculties are "corporeal" in nature, whether they reside in the body or the brain. Since all things corporeal are sensible, they require learning. This is why, in every science or craft, referencing renowned masters is a constant tradition. (Ibn Khaldoun A. E., 2009, p. 319)

The learning of these "arts" forges a strong personality, creating a correlation between skill and the **strength of commitment**, which is linked to leadership and decision-making. Education, therefore, is the means by which man reinserts himself into the movement of the world as a responsible being. (Al-Ashi, 2024, p. 80)

II. Knowledge as the Foundation of Civilizational Thought in Malek Bennabi's Work

This study focuses on the contributions of the thinker and scholar Malek Bennabi within the field of analyzing the causes of decadence in Arab-Muslim societies. Bennabi scrutinized this phenomenon by examining the various stages of societal incapacity and decline, while simultaneously proposing a project for a contemporary **Renaissance (Nahda)** and civilizational reconstruction. He identified several imperative elements necessary to realize this renewal:

A. Awareness of the Dual Laws of History

History occupies a central and primordial position in Bennabi's project, as evidenced by his analyses of the Arab-Muslim reality. In his reading of history, he focused on its **dynamic dimension**—that is, investigating the roots of historical phenomena associated with the rise and fall of civilizations. On this basis, history only gains significance when it becomes a field of inquiry and investigation from which one can extract the laws that illuminate our understanding of the present and the future.

For Bennabi, history serves as a diagnostic mirror revealing the civilizational trajectory of nations. It addresses a fundamental question—at once historical and prospective—which can be formulated as follows: What are the laws that govern the ascension and collapse of civilizations?. (Boudakzdam, 2015, p. 270)

In this perspective, it is essential to adopt the vision of the philosopher who probes the roots of events, their hidden causes, and their causal linkages. Thus, this vision transcends mere factual narration to achieve analysis and interpretation, aiming to grasp the essence and significance of historical facts. It is here that the philosopher's approach diverges radically from that of the historian, who often settles for a descriptive and arid narration of chronological events.

Malek Bennabi contends that the process of revising the historical trajectory of Islamic civilization necessitates a critical study of previous "Renaissance" (Nahda) experiences, evaluating both their successes and failures. This approach ultimately leads to a precise identification of the Muslim nation's position within the civilizational cycle.

Bennabi expresses this idea as follows: "Social observation demonstrates that history possesses a cycle and a sequence: at times, it records for a nation great feats and illustrious glories; at others, it wraps it in its shroud, abandoning it to a profound slumber. If we take this observation into account, it becomes our duty to locate our place within the cycle of history, to understand our conditions, and to identify both the factors of decadence assailing us and the causes of progress dwelling within us. Once our position in this cycle is determined, it becomes easier to recognize the levers of renaissance or the reasons for decline in our lives."

After diagnosing the phenomenon and analyzing the data of the civilizational alternative, Bennabi insisted on the imperative of gaining an awareness of the laws of history. He advocated for the use of rigorous scientific methods in historical study—methods characterized by a causal and logical reading of phenomena, as well as a "Sunnanic" interpretation (grounded in immutable divine/natural laws) of events. (Boudakzdam, 2015, p. 272)

B. The Religious Idea

The "Religious Idea" is intrinsically linked to the first principle: the awareness of the laws of history (*Sunan*). Indeed, an understanding of these laws reveals the axial role of religion in the rise of civilizations. Due to its vital importance within the equation of civilizational construction, Bennabi elevated it to an independent point of departure in his analytical framework.

For Malek Bennabi, the religious idea functions as a detonator (or catalyst) that releases latent and productive energies. It transforms the human soul into an active force, capable of altering the course of history and exerting a tangible influence on both the human and cosmic environments.

Bennabi describes the religious idea as the driver of the "most profound and grandiose changes of the soul, occurring throughout historical stages during the apogee of a religious idea." It is from this postulate that one can interpret the trajectory of human civilizations—oscillating between ascension and regression—based on the degree of human interaction with the religious idea.

C. The Psyche (The Psychological Factor)

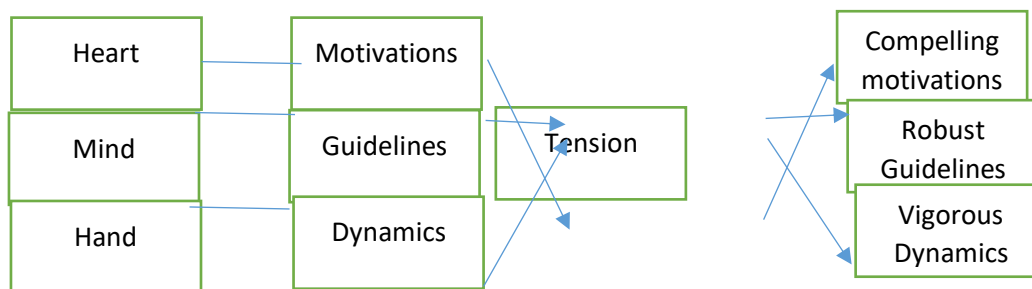
According to Bennabi, the psyche constitutes the fundamental and essential element of the transformational process. For him, the "building of man" is the absolute priority of any endeavor toward renewal. He asserts that the transformation of the individual is the inaugural act of social life and the psychological precondition for all social change.

Building on this premise, Bennabi argues that the construction of the human soul enables the liberation of latent energies, directing them toward efficiency and activity. The source of this impulse is the **tension** generated by the religious idea. To achieve this interaction, Bennabi advocates, as a primary step, the anchoring of "Quranic Truth" within the consciousness of every Muslim. Man is simultaneously the starting point, the means, and the ultimate end of the work of renewal: it is through him that the network of social relations is woven, the specific culture of the Islamic nation is embodied, and the civilizational edifice is erected.

Bennabi bases his theory on the concept of **tension** within socio-cultural construction. Indeed, when (vital/positive) tension permeates a society, it is transmuted into effective energy, generating strength and activity. It also becomes the benchmark for measuring the efficacy of different societies.

Here, Bennabi arrives at another characteristic of his functional definition of civilization: it is a form of social efficacy linked to production, where the aforementioned tension acts as a catalyst (or energy charger), according to the following schema: **(Lahrach, 2006, p. 83)**

Figure No. 01: Representation of the process of social tension generation.



According to Bennabi, all social energy inevitably emanates from the impulses of the heart, the justifications and orientations of the mind, and the movements of the physical organs. Efficacy is most potent when it manifests within an environment capable of generating the strongest motivations, the most accurate orientations, and the most active movements. **(Lahrach, 2006, p. 84)**

III. Knowledge as the Foundation of Pedagogical and Civilizational Renewal

Pedagogical renewal maintains an intimate relationship with **epistemology**. The latter, as the critical study of science, analyzes scientific principles, hypotheses, and results to determine their origins, limits, scope, objective value, methods, and validity. For some thinkers, epistemology is synonymous with a "worldview" (*Weltanschauung*). Human beings, in a state of constant evolution, perpetually seek to construct a comprehensive vision of the world that harmonizes with their needs and convictions.

It is here that the point of convergence lies: epistemology, through its dual critical and cognitive nature, contributes to the formulation of educational theories or the "pedagogy of renewal." Consequently, pedagogical renewal is employed as an essential mechanism for achieving social regeneration. **(Taleb, 2015, p. 21)**

There exists an intrinsic link between the philosophy of education and pedagogical renewal. If pedagogical renewal is defined as an organized educational action—contingent upon an executable strategy and clear objectives aimed at improving the quality of the educational act—it must imperatively rely on an explicit philosophy. This philosophy must guide change by

grounding itself in the original and fundamental structures of society, rather than its ephemeral or accidental conditions.

The philosophy of education is a disciplinary field primarily concerned with educational phenomena from a philosophical perspective. While the human sciences study, for instance, the nature and development of education, the philosophy of education interrogates its finalities (teleology) through a diversity of inquiries regarding its methods and ultimate aims.

Through Malek Bennabi's ideas on education, we observe a manifest convergence with the principles of Imam Abd El-Hamid Ibn Badis, particularly concerning the call to knowledge. The Islamic heritage exalts human reason and insists on liberating the mind from the shackles of blind imitation (Taqlid) and stagnation. It advocates for a shift toward reflection, research, and meditation on the Quran, while simultaneously mastering material causes to achieve the existential purpose of the Muslim. **(Bensmina, 2014, p. 201)**

The efforts of Ben Badis culminated in the mobilization of youth across all ages to seek instruction within Algerian-Arabic schools, anchoring within them a devotion to the Arabic language, Islam, and constructive ethical values. For him, the educator is, first and foremost, a reformer. He maintained that the educational field could not be restored without a return to structural instruction—in both substance and form—inspired by Prophetic pedagogy. Ben Badis asserted that we learn to transcend our weaknesses through the liberation of reason, the illumination of thought, and the purification of the soul (*Tazkiya*). Consequently, the various stages of learning are phases of a continuous struggle (*Jihad*) to refine the spirit, strengthen its faculties, and rectify one's vision of the universe and life.

IV. Educational Renewal in Arab-Muslim Society

"Through Bourdieu's study of education and **cultural reproduction**, Anthony Giddens asserts that this subject perhaps constitutes the optimal means to link numerous themes addressed by contemporary theories on the educational project. The concept of cultural reproduction refers to the mechanisms and methods by which schools and educational institutions—in cooperation with other social institutions—contribute to the transmission of social and economic inequalities from one generation to the next. This concept draws our attention to how schools, through their hidden curriculum, influence the teaching of values, attitudes, and *habitus*." **(Giddens, 2005, p. 560)**

The school institution thus consolidates the diversity of cultural values acquired from an early age. Once children leave school, these values exert a decisive impact by limiting opportunities for some while opening vast horizons for others.

Furthermore, Pierre Bourdieu addressed the subject of reproduction strategies and social change. He maintains that the reproduction of a social group or institution is ensured through the processes of transmitting their capital (heritage). This concept of social reproduction, borrowed from biology, allows us to conceptualize the permanence of groups or institutions despite the physical disappearance of the individuals who compose them. **(Boubaker, 2017, p. 125)**

Gustave Le Bon addresses the issue of "modern education" as opposed to practical education. He asserts that the history of modern education perfectly illustrates his postulate: no reform is easy unless it is preceded by a change in public opinion. Le Bon attempts to demonstrate that the education provided to university students remains purely theoretical and bookish. By relying

exclusively on textbooks, this education produces results as sterile as those of traditional education. (Gustave, 2016, p. 95)

It is, therefore, imperative to emphasize that contemporary education and instruction must rely on the applied rather than the theoretical aspect. This practical approach focuses on the mobilization of intellectual and physical competencies and faculties for the sake of innovation, aiming to meet emerging needs and serve the developmental processes of society.

Regarding the renewal of Arab-Muslim society, scholars of civilizational studies explain that the management of change depends on the degree of receptivity across all social structures. The interaction between these mechanisms is so finely balanced that it is difficult to isolate them or quantify the influence of one over the other, except for the purposes of methodological clarification. (Alwan, 2008, p. 41)

Conclusion

The question of knowledge transcends the boundaries of theoretical study; it is essential to approach these themes from empirical perspectives that demand measurement and experimentation to achieve clear and comprehensive results. Arab-Muslim societies have long suffered, both during their formative phases and throughout their periods of convalescence following various social upheavals. Consequently, the construction of a new and contemporary body of knowledge has become a vital necessity for achieving progress and development.

We have presented here a synthesis of the ideas of Malek Bennabi, who proposed the necessary solutions for development through the "building of man" according to religious theory and Islamic education. We have also examined diverse perspectives from the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Gustave Le Bon regarding the reproduction of knowledge, education, and culture.

To build an integrated Arab society within a contemporary Muslim world, it is imperative to track global transformations and expose the obstacles hindering the analytical and research efforts of thinkers. Only through this approach can the necessary propositions be formulated to unravel the complex problems that still impede the rise of Arab-Muslim societies.

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