

Arabesques of the Mind

Malek Bennabi and Utopian Civilization

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Abstract: Beginning from an observation made in Ernst Bloch's recently translated *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, this article reconstructs the affinities between the Algerian intellectual Malek Bennabi, and a tradition of "Left Aristotelian" utopianism. This paper argues that Bennabi's concept of civilization exhibits a similar Aristotelian notion of "matter without mechanism," productively imagining a deeper unity between organic and intellectual forms. Additionally, through his idiosyncratic understanding of Islam, Bennabi undermines the maintenance of firm borders between the scholarly traditions of both Europe and the Pan-Islamic world. Ultimately, Bennabi's theory of religiously inspired civilizational revival is revealed to share a common egalitarian foundation with utopian ideas commonly associated with the dialectical left, and thereby offers a new method to interpret twentieth-century philosophy.

Key Words: Philosophy, Comparative Literature, Religious Studies, Islam, Intellectual History.

provided that something of importance is achieved, I am indifferent to whether it is done in Germany or France, for I seek the good of mankind. I am neither a phil-Hellene nor philo-Roman but a *philanthropos*.

Leibniz

Rarely is the Frankfurt School, so often synonymous with the label «Western Marxism». considered to have much of a relationship with philosophical, literary, and intellectual traditions beyond Europe; for those with a deeper familiarity, perhaps the name of their house Sinologist, Karl Wittfogel, is known. Even for figures like Ernst Bloch

(1885-1977), known for his predilection towards intellectual heresies of all types, the standard constellation of his influences—the esoteric and alchemical writings of Paracelsus, the revolutionary theology of Thomas Müntzer, the mature *Naturphilosophie* of Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*—remain indisputably continental. In the recently translated *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, however, we see compelling evidence of Bloch's interest in the fineries of medieval Islam's once-thriving Scholastic, mystical and Neoplatonist schools of thought. Much more than a passing curiosity, Bloch ascribed great overall importance to Medieval Islamic thinkers from the Maghreb, Mashriq, and Central Asia. Diligent students of the Greek masters, figures like Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) are considered by him guardians of «an earlier, not-yet-finished view of matter without mechanism» (BLOCH 2019: 42). While an idea originally present in Aristotle himself, it was only perfected in the then-freer philosophical atmosphere of the medieval Middle East, when Islamic philosophers first recognized «all forms, even intellectual and organic ones are included within matter» (BLOCH 2019: 39). Like the schism of Hegel's students into political camps after his death, Bloch calls for the recognition of this Arabized «Aristotelian Left»—Avicenna, Averroes, Giordano Bruno—against the Aristotelian Right of the Church Doctors and their successors—Aquinas, Saint Albert. Separated along this essential axis: matter as either *dynamei-on* (merely the protean substrate of human action) or entelechy (matter as possessing an immanent, creative quality), Bloch asks if we can continue to relegate the «Orient» to an object of inferior status for the radical left.

Admittedly, other references to the universe of medieval Islamic philosophy are not so difficult to find peppered throughout Bloch's other work, if one pays attention. Those allusions, while not as systematic a treatment as *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Left*, do nonetheless point to his sustained interest in Islam as a utopian *topos* both foreign and familiar. The *Spirit of Utopia* pointedly criticizes «Greek-European arrogance», for originally failing to recognize the neighboring totality of the Orient, making foreign the great cities of Isfahan, Istanbul, Tunis, and Baghdad (BLOCH 2000: 169). Whereas *The Principle of Hope*, aggregates the «pantheistic-materialistic» philosophers of the Middle Ages—Islamic and Christian alike—into a single tradition, sharing a recognition of

matter's «self movement» evident in Arab Scholasticism and European Theosophy (BLOCH 1995:236). It seems as if Utopia is a big-tent.

Given Bloch's direct reference to this utopian physics, stretching from Hellenic antiquity to Arab scholasticism, one wonders why the left has paid comparatively little attention to more contemporary strands of Islamic/ist thought? While a return to the creative energies of the *Pax Islamica* always promises to be fruitful, there remains abundant material from the past century that remains almost totally neglected. Moreover, the incessant return to the courts of the Abbasids and Fatimids, or the Arabesques of Muslim Iberia, seems to always come dangerously close to reviving the old trope that the scholarly elan of Arab-Islamic letters was exhausted by the advent of modernity. In his introduction to *Modern Trends in Islam*, the Scottish Orientalist H.A.R. Gibb says that «from a religious angle» the faith of Islam «stayed put», decaying in the «molds created by the scholars, jurists, doctors, and mystics of the formative centuries», albeit still exhibiting «external evidences of vitality» in later centuries by the growth of the Gunpowder Empires (GIBB 1947: 1). With typical nuance, Bernard Lewis declares that by the early modern period, all Islamic «independent inquiry virtually came to an end» in favor of «the veneration of a corpus of approved knowledge» (LEWIS 2001: 79). It bears repeating that these assertions are not accurate as there were abundant developments of the intellectual, social, and political fabric during Islam's middle centuries: the rise of Islamic mysticism as popular religion, technological innovations like the development of artillery, instances of multi-confessional and multi-ethnic pluralism well-before its normalization in Europe. And moreover, have we now not simply obviated this species of regional-studies «expert» and their brand of learned chauvinism?

Reluctantly, however, I find myself having to qualify Gibb and Lewis's observations in a limited fashion, as their reference to a pervasive sense of socio-cultural stagnation, decline, and decay is not wholly reducible to just another orientalist imputation. In the rush to score blows against these harmful attitudes and arguments, we risk dismissing a theme (and yes, also a trope)—civilizational stagnation—that once spawned a tremendous amount of productive, even visionary, thinking among twentieth-century Arab intellectuals in the *Nahda* (Arab Enlightenment). Ironically, variations of the aforementioned Orientalist

arguments—which had not changed much from their popular elaborations in Ernest Renan or William Jones—had long been familiar to many *Nahda* (the Arab enlightenment of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century) luminaries, and served as the backdrop for their own interventions. For *Nahda* figures like Lebanon’s Shakib Arslan or Egypt’s Qasim Amin (keen observers of developments in European evolutionary and historiographic thought) the experience of Arabo-Islamic stagnation, its «disunity and decline» vis-à-vis the nations of Europe was even considered undeniable, proof positive for the pragmatic necessity of restoring the lands of Islam to a condition of «great civilization» (SHARABI 1970: 43).

Arslan, Amin, and others did not understand the notion of civilization in a conventional way. While today perhaps connoting the return of the Arabo-Islamic world to the imagined purity of past centuries, their concept of civilization carried futuristic aspirations for a distinct Islamic modernity. As Shakib Arslan mentions in his *Our Decline: Its Causes and Remedies*, the historical «march onward» will rely on an «understanding of the essentials of *īmān* (true faith)» (ARSLAN 2004: 120). In Arslan’s telling, Islam would return to its roots as a progressive religion by better becoming itself: abandoning the nostalgia for its middle ages that had arrested its progress and otherwise forced it to presently borrow expertise, resources, and governance from European powers.

In reference to both these traditions—the Aristotelian-Avicennian-Blochian tradition of utopian matter and the *Nahda* popularization of the concept of civilization—I argue for the relevance of the Algerian novelist, philosopher, and theologian, Malek Bennabi (1905-1973). With formidable erudition, Bennabi’s distinctive theories of civilization illustrate a significant detour in the path taken by post-*Nahda* Arab philosophy. While not necessarily antagonistic to the emergent nationalisms of the Middle East, his understanding of civilization (inherited from a broad spectrum of secular and religious *Nahda* thinkers) productively expands the conventional understanding of Arab letters in the twentieth-century. Bennabi, conversant in continental figures like Hegel, Nietzsche, and Toynbee as much as North Africa’s most esteemed figure, Ibn Khaldun, utilized the concept of civilization for distinctly Left Aristotelian ends, the expansion of matter to a philosophically utopian significance. A thoroughgoing observer of historical developments,

by the end of World War II Bennabi became convinced that unless a new civilization—with new matter—emerged in Algeria (and with it the Pan-Islamic world), it would persist in the mold of socio-cultural stagnation and decline.

«*The End of the Mediterranean Era*»: Malek Bennabi's Civilization

Malek Bennabi was born in 1905 in Constantine, a former garrison town in Algeria's mountainous east. Inhabited since the Christianization of Rome, Constantine's history served as a formative influence on Bennabi's thematic preoccupation with civilization. Strategically located and naturally well-defended by its terrain, the city had been an object of conquest for countless empires, dynasties, and nations. In his memoirs, Bennabi provides a vivid recollection of his early introduction to this sometimes tragic significance. In a fireside reminiscence, an elderly relative recounted to him the city's sacking by Bugeaud's army in 1837:

Once the city was taken, the families of Constantine had no other goal but to save their honor, above all the families that had young girls. They were forced to evacuate them toward the side of the river Rhummel where today stands the Kaouki mills and high above, the suspension bridge. While the French entered through the breach in the wall, the young women and their families departed their city using ropes [to descend into the ravine]. For some, the ropes gave way, and the virgins were precipitated into the abyss (QTD IN: COLE 2019: 17).

By Bennabi's birth, this period of dramatic violence had subsided, giving way to the gradual consolidation of Algeria's distinctive Francophone Apartheid, splitting the city's population into three groups: *Indigènes* of Arabo-Berber stock, Southern European Pied-Noir settlers, and Algeria's native population of Maghrebi Jews. Yet, the memory of the city's conquest remained ingrained in the psyche of its Muslim citizens, a reminder of their status as a defeated majority in their own nation. For the mid-career Bennabi, then a court intellectual of Nasserist Egypt, the original experience of Algeria took on a propaedeutic significance for the Pan-Islamic world, then amid a revolutionary ferment that promised to

begin undoing the damage of imperialism. In Algeria the «problem» of civilization was elucidated: it may have been defeated by French military might, but it was *conquered* by the potency of Gallic civilization; a complete archetypal universe of modernity in which religious, intellectual, technical, and social factors were subsumed in a single form.

In the preface to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, G.W.F Hegel famously proclaims that the «Owl of Minerva», the metaphorical «thought of the world», can only appear after reality has «completed its formative process» (Marxists.org: 2019). The discipline of philosophy can thus only make sense of a period's twilight, in which its essential socio-cultural foundations, now exposed, can no longer be «rejuvenated» (Marxists.org: 2019). Perhaps in an ode to Hegel's metaphor—which had likely become familiar to him as a consequence of his lengthy student years in *Front populaire* Paris—the son of Constantine offers a poetic update:

Sullen twilights, when the star declines at the setting of a civilization! In 1830, the hour of twilight had already struck in Algeria since a long time. As soon as this hour strikes, a people no longer have a history. The peoples who are asleep do not have a history but nightmares and dreams wherein prestigious figures of tyrants or legendary heroes file past (BENNABI 1997: 90).

Whereas Hegel connects the eclipsing of a world-historical epoch with conceptual maturity and ferment, Malek Bennabi considers the negative consequences of tarrying in the darkened space between death and rebirth. What if the owl never takes flight? To the vexation of many of his anti-colonial contemporaries, most with a Manichean conflation of colonizing powers with theological evil, Bennabi attributed this state of affairs—an elusive future and the anachronistic experience of the past as the present—to conditions established well-before the horrors of the French invasion. Algeria's decline was not exclusively the consequence of either impiety or imperialism, but the «problem» of its arrested civilizational «genesis» (BENNABI 1997: 649). According to Bennabi, Algeria had not transcended its medieval past, and thus its socio-cultural universe—religious symbols, popular movements, habits of thought and action—remained frozen. This «sullen twilight», from the end of the Almohad Dynasty (1130–1163) had lingered for centuries, not bringing the promised dawn, but subjecting intellectual, cultural, religious, and even technical life to

dream-like repetitions and distortions (BENNABI 1997: 90). The stagnation was evident everywhere, from the proliferation of superstitious folk beliefs throughout the populace, to the chicanery of the native «Béni-oui-oui» («sons of yes-yes») political class who collaborated with French authorities.

Bennabi's definition of civilization seems to branch from his original diagnosis of the cultural decline of Algeria. Civilization was a measure of the respective harmonization and vitality of socio-cultural factors subordinated to a religious idea. This emphasis on harmony remained consistent throughout his career, even after Algeria gained its hard-won independence, from *L'Afro Asiatisme* (1955):

In its simple definition, civilization is not a pile of different kinds of objects. Rather it is a harmonious whole of things and ideas in their various relationships, uses, peculiar means, and circumscribed places (BENNABI 1955: 79).

Or in the later *Le problèmes des idées dans le monde musulman* (1970):

[Civilization is] as a result of a living dynamic idea, which mobiles a pre-civilized society to enter history and construct a system of ideas according to its archetypes. So the society thereafter, develops an authentic cultural milieu which in return controls all the characteristics which distinguish that society from other cultures and civilizations (BENNABI 1970: 49).

For Bennabi, what separates one civilization from another is the degree to which its internal socio-cultural elements expressed the identity of a unified system, even in their moments of conflict or tension. In its experience of native stagnation and foreign occupation, Algeria had failed to create distinct archetypes and institutions under the aegis of its own civilizational principles, instead borrowing willy-nilly from foreign models. Additionally, the aforementioned definitions first establish Bennabi's affinity with the Left Aristotelians; civilization serving as a measure of the respective totality of "matter"—again, generously expanded to include culture among the physical and organic—within a given society.

I want to clarify that Bennabi's *idée fixe*, civilization, does not entail an endorsement of imperialism, colonization, or the like. Some commentators seem to have mistaken

Bennabi's predilection for undiplomatic moments of candor (he was an eternal enemy of Algeria's bumper-crop of charismatic preachers, mystical hucksters, and comprador elites) as a sign of a perhaps lukewarm embrace of Algerian independence. This reading is not supported by biographic or textual evidence. With great verve, Bennabi condemned the French presence in Algeria, and often at great personal expense (he was harried by authorities, rejected from work and educational opportunities both in France and French Algeria). Rather, as an eternal gadfly, Bennabi's participation and familiarity with the almost innumerable early independence organizations—from the secular-nationalist *Étoile Nord-Africaine* to the stalwartly confessional *Association des Oulémas Musulmans Algériens*—had, by dint of their failures, inured him to the sloganeering that so often overshadowed the unglamorous need for internal cultural reform. He presciently realized that unless Algeria's «psychoexistential complex» of social, intellectual, economic, and political conditions was addressed in an updated civilizational form, any future nationhood would have restricted horizons (BENNABI 1998: 509). Luckily, Algeria was supplied with a ready-trove of vital «matter» that could be productively applied to a future freed from mimetic servitude to Europe, Islam.

Like many of his *Nahda* forebears, Bennabi afforded particular importance to religion in his call for civilizational restoration. Often described as an «Islamist» philosopher, the idiosyncratic nature of his thought when compared to contemporaries like Sayyid Qutb—who once famously denounced Bennabi in person as an apostate—compels distinction-making. More than just a faith ahistorically professed by individuals, Islam represented the first triumph of an essentially *rational* system against the disintegrated barbarism of pre-Muslim history (*jāhilīyah*). Cyclically, a familiar (if not identical) dynamic had now prevailed in Bennabi's century:

With a religious idea and drawing to a close when the irresistible weight of the earth finally triumphs over both soul and reason [sic]. So long as the man is in a state of spiritual and intellectual receptivity corresponding to the progress and development of a civilization...but from the moment he loses his state of grace, the primitive instincts reappear little by little, bringing him back to the ancestral age (BENNABI 1997: 652).

Beyond the lyrical flourishes, Bennabi is pointing to his own era as a «close» of sorts, where the pre-modern Islam of the middle ages can no longer sustain the progressive growth of civilization, and otherwise fails to suppress the resurgence of atavistic beliefs, rituals, and ideas.

What is further remarkable about Bennabi's would-be Islamism is the degree to which it rejects the typical conclusions of Muslim conservatives, who typically emphasized Islam as a fixed spiritual order above human events. His notion of civilization is neither a purely earthly, nor is it the expression of an unmediated religious force from beyond. It is instead the «harmonious whole» of a synthesis between religious inspiration and secular life (BENNABI 1970: 46). Even for early Islamic reformers like Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, activities and initiatives on earth remained limited by «a concealing veil, and hidden without a name or sign», and thus providential developments for any people were ultimately the result of divine favor, and by extension their absence a sign of infidelity. This ahistoricity bothered Bennabi, as he stressed that a basic Quranic understanding taught otherwise: «Verily, God will not change the condition of men till they change what is in themselves» (BENNABI 1997: 21).

It is no surprise then, that Bennabi's distance from the religious establishment of his age likely inspired his belief that the prospect of a renewed Islamic Civilization—a balance between the pragmatic and possible—in the Middle East would prove difficult. To say that Bennabi was frustrated at the prevailing conditions of Islam in the Middle East and the Maghreb would be an understatement. To the chagrin of his era's Arabist establishment, who imagined that the center of Islamic life would remain in the Middle East, Bennabi saw the fortunes of Islam intimately bound with rising Asia, where contact and conflict with European modernity could be better managed, and where Islam could encounter virgin soil to develop a more «practical and technical» humanity. In no uncertain terms, he called for a geographic «transfer», the end of Islam's «Mediterranean era», as one possible solution to the civilization problem (BENNABI 1987:101). Whereas the Islam of the «Arab-Berber *emir*» or the Turkish Pasha had remained in a «diffused state», utterly «dogmatic and imprisoned», the new spiritual climate of Asia might finally spark the awaited Muslim modernity, the «new civilization» of progress, reason, and harmony reversing the

experience of decline (BENNABI 1987:101). Not one to shy from speculation, Bennabi pointed to the instructive example of the «ripened subjectivity» of intellectuals like Rabindranath Tagore or Muhammad Iqbal—sophisticated inheritors of the «mysticism» of the Asian continent—as a model for the coming Muslim *novus homo* (new man)(BENNABI 1987:102).

By the standards of his time, this was not a totally unprecedented belief. Early *Nahda* intellectuals also saw an authentic cultural milieu in nations like Indonesia and China, but most powerfully in Meiji Japan, especially after its victory in the Russo-Japanese War. In another judgement of al-Afghani—always occupied with the humiliations endured by the colonized in places like Iran and India, Japan was a rare exception—a fellow Asiatic nation that had defied the imperialists and could serve as a model for the world's Muslims.

In Bennabi's case this interest would take on a more systematic consideration. In Japan he saw an example of a «medieval, traditional» Tokugawa Shogunate attaining civilizational parity with Europeans in the course of less than a century (BENNABI 1987:93). Japan had not only defeated a European power in pitched combat, it had asserted itself as a cultural equal, a place granted significance beyond mere curiosity. The Meiji reforms had «methodically» addressed its technical and cultural gaps in realizing «there is no power with ignorance and no weakness with knowledge», but more importantly had advanced within the confines of a defined civilizational-religious totality (BENNABI 1987: 1). This stood in stark contrast to the Pan-Islamic world, which had succumbed to a destructive course of pure imitation (*taqlīd*) irrespective of its cultural heritage.

«*Monstrous Cartesianopolis*»: Towards the Muslim Utopia

Immune to the tendency of some mid-century Arab intellectuals to affirm the «moral» superiority of the Pan-Islamic nations over Europe, Bennabi was a severe critic of the prevailing nostrums of his day. Neither *Ummah* (the global Muslim community) unity, renewed acts of piety, or the surrender to fate were satisfactory solutions to the Muslim civilization problem. A keen reader of Nietzsche in French translation (*Islam in History*

begins its second chapter with an epigraph from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*), he concluded that the embrace of the aforementioned principles constituted a slave morality—when the conditions and experience of powerlessness are exalted. If the century’s Muslim was poor and backward, then he was in an undeniable crisis, not in possession of a romantic primitivism. His religion had failed to become a «catalyser of social values», determined by its broadly «dynamic and expansive state», and instead remained «individualistic», unable to promote its «historical mission on earth» (BENNABI 1987: 10). His religion, and by extension his civilization, was thus in a present state of stagnation and nothingness, in which time passed indifferently from one day to another.

Yet, in this condition was a certain kind of pessimistic hopefulness. Turning again to his understanding of the cyclical nature of civilization, Bennabi points to the instructive example of the past. Whenever «a cycle commences» there are «neither science nor scholars, neither industries nor technicians, neither arts nor artists, nor any indication of a marked progress», only the experience of humanity in concourse with itself (BENNABI 1997: 650). To explain a bit further, Bennabi argued that civilizations and their catalyzing religious ideas have always occurred in environments of bleakness or misery. The occasion of decline and stagnation may in some sense signal a productive end of one religious-civilizational era in favor of another. Bennabi drew great solace in this regard from the scriptural history of the Quran, in which the arrival of divine revelation (and with it Islam’s later centuries of civilizational strength) occurred at just the moment when Arabian Paganism had lost its legitimacy.

This cyclical theory of civilization, while brought to a conceptual edge in Bennabi’s work is not wholly unprecedented in the *Nahda*. There were earlier intellectuals who similarly believed in the immanent qualities of the Islamic faith to inspire a wholly new civilization. Escaping the moldering rule of the Ottomans in fin-de-siècle Aleppo, the Pan-Arabist philosopher and journalist, al-Kawakibi (1855–1902), left for Cairo to publish his argument for a restored Islamic society, *Tabai al-Istibdad* (The Nature of Despotism). While Kawakibi’s oppressors were the then-Turkish rulers of Syria, his ideas proved highly influential to later intellectuals who did not want to jettison the influence of religion in their visions of modernity. Despite today’s negative associations of the descriptor «Islamic»

when applied to government, Kawakibi's vision bore little resemblance to today's fevered image of a restored seventh-century Caliphate. Ruled by a council of imams, his state was a modernist utopia that would, paradoxically, restore the order of early Islam by a decisive turn to egalitarian politics. Perhaps the first example of Islamic Socialism, a tradition that would play a major, if understated role in the proceeding century, the new Islamic State would recognize that Islam had first established the labor theory of value. God, in the Quran, had stipulated «for mankind a law based on the principle that wealth is a value of labor» (EL-HUSRY 1962: 101). And so, the future Muslim government would abolish the accumulation of all fortunes, dividing tracts of land equally to all the «children of Adam and Eve» (EL-HUSRY 1962: 101). Accordingly, this would reverse the established injustice of the Ottoman Middle East, where:

Men have divided amongst themselves the hardships of life in an unjust manner. Men of politics, religion, and their dependents whose total number does not exceed 1% of the human race, enjoy half or more of what human labor produces, and spend it all on luxury and extravagance (QTD. IN EL-HUSRY 1962: 97).

Plumbing the depths of religion for revolutionary metaphors is by now more permissible, at least evinced by the following from Roland Boer's ambitious study of Judeo-Christian themes and Marxism, *In the Veil of Tears*:

Eve's independent decision, the wily wisdom of the serpent, the surprising blessing which Cain extracts in the midst of his curse, the continual grumbling of the Israelites against Moses, Aaron and even Yahweh, the rebellion of Korah and company, the protests of Job, the uncompromising message of Jesus – all these and more are glimpses within biblical myths of an irrepressible desire for and anticipation of a better world (BOER 2014: 85).

As compelling as Boer's reconstructions are, it is disappointing that there are scant references to that same «cunning of myth» in the cultural universe of Islam (BOER 2014: 85). This I take to be one of the principal factors that recommend Bennabi as an intellectual of serious interest to a more theologically flexible Left: Islam's horizon of the radical and utopian, its figuration of the «better world» remains untapped (BOER 2014: 85). And for his part, Bennabi proves a ready guide to that unmapped place. Originally crediting al-

Kawakibi with «an Islam that already organized itself for defence and renaissance», his whole body of work can be understood as a meditation on the immanent features of Islam's religious utopianism, its own «anticipations» of the world to come (BENNABI 1987: 5). This leads to fruitful moments, like when the Islamist author of *Conditions of the Renaissance* sounds like the Feuerbachian atheist, Ernst Bloch:

To say it in a word: The Muslim world is being reborn. Let us add: The Algerian people in particular must be reborn. Has it the necessary possibilities and the means to achieve this imperative? This is the fundamental question...for a people like the Algerian, emerging from nothingness and still too numb with a full century-old sleep, it is first of all a question of knowing if it has at its disposal the necessary lever to rouse its destiny (BENNABI 1997: 649).

Bennabi's assessment of the «nothingness» of present Algerian society, metaphorically expressed throughout his work as «Post-Almohad Man»—colonized, despoiled, backward—indicates a faithfulness in the dialectical confirmation of the past in the coming of the future. Algeria was on the precipice of its impending cycle of civilizational expansion; would this finally manifest the qualitatively distinct Islamic modernity, or would old continental mistakes be made anew?

Returning explicitly to the commonalities between the Avicennian Left and Malek Bennabi, they seem to both share a realization that the most ambitious visions of the future are often catalyzed by the unwelcome experience of the present; misery giving shape and urgency to the imagination. *The Principle of Hope* provides a persuasive illustration of this idea. Gesturing to the «disaster character of the Possible» lurking as the opposite of its «hope character», Bloch argues for the «changeability» latent in any given «situation» of the present, its conditions, prevailing norms, relationships of power (BLOCH 1995: 233). All that is concrete, including the matter of socio-cultural reality, is «capable of change»: at every moment presenting an illusory finality and one-sidedness waiting to crumble (BLOCH 1995: 233). Consequently, what we understand as the permanence of our respective time is in fact evidence for what Bloch calls the «redeemability» of the possible (BLOCH 1995: 233). The future promises the realization of the latent content of the past, reflected in the atomic structure of the universe itself, «not a mere mechanical lump» but

rather the «possibility-substrate of the dialectical process» (QTD IN. KOLAKOWSKI 1976: 439). Or as Leszek Kołakowski put it in his summary of Bloch: «the world has an immanent purposiveness, whereby it evolves, out of incomplete forms, complete ones. These forms are both natural and normative» (KOLAKOWSKI 1976: 433).

The question of civilizational form or character was of paramount importance to Bennabi. Again, in reference to its present nothingness, it had the unique opportunity to avoid the pitfalls of the European civilizational cycle that had fashioned imperialism, both world wars, and the then-looming specter of atomic annihilation. Its formlessness was a utopian opportunity. For all the seemingly passive references to cyclical renewal, rebirth, and renaissance, Bennabi was not content to leave civilizational development to the unfurling of providence alone. This was a matter of practical concern too, as the «civilization that had invented Malthusianism», Europe, again seemed on the brink of another great culling (BENNABI 1987: 67). The Cold War, with its threat of nuclear annihilation, now betokened a return to the prehistoric «troglodyte age» that would signal the monstrous conclusion of the European «Cartesianopolis», that had traded «numbers for moral concepts» (BENNABI 1987: 71).

A witness to the horrors of the century—Algeria had surrendered a generation of men to foreign wars—Bennabi understood the need to learn from the mistakes of Europe’s perilous and unguided industrial expansion. His words on the conflagration presented by World War I are particularly memorable (mirroring Rosa Luxemburg’s «underconsumption» argument in *The Accumulation of Capital*). During the zenith of colonialism in the nineteenth century, Europe came to «acclimatise» to social relations that «became numerical», the hyper-exploitation of its colonies originally made acceptable the «automatism» that came to dominate the character of European civilization (BENNABI 1987: 70). The free-wheeling degradation of human beings, first honed on distant backwaters, had first abolished all «moral calculations or metaphysical estimates», eventually paving the way for the «insatiable avidity and voracity» exhibited on the battlefields of Verdun and the Somme (BENNABI 1987: 66).

By contrast, a restored Islamic Civilization stood to correct the murderous excesses of the past cycle of industrial domination, imperial expansion, and warfare—in effect realizing the

aspirations of Europe's own countervailing tradition of utopianism. In this sense, its arrested modernity might prove a strength, a chance to actually realize the global politics of fraternal warmth and cooperation. By the early 1970s, Bennabi had fully embraced this principle, questioning the limited vision of Algeria's development agenda: post-ideological and technocratic, buoyed by the export of fossil fuels:

The present economic panorama of the world provides us with a fairly accurate picture of the situation of Muslim countries as we examine the process of their development in comparison of other countries during the last twenty-five years. After the Second World War , some of them such as Indonesia were obviously the favorites of the race thanks to their incredibly ample natural resources. Yet today they are far behind many other countries which started their development under the most unfavorable circumstances...in other words one should never stop repeating that there is no question of means. Rather, it is a question of methods and, therefore, of ideas (BENNABI 1970: 74).

While possessing little in the way infrastructure, technology, and even a vibrant socio-cultural universe, Algeria's «nothingness» was in a certain sense an asset, a civilizational *tabula rasa* to expand the permitted definitions of modernity—anchored in an Islamicized terrain of themes, norms, and images. This accords with Bennabi's understanding of religion itself, never content to merely proclaim «the sacred values», but always pragmatically validating themselves against the «spirit of the age». This should be distinguished from the misunderstanding of Bennabi as a proponent of cultural autarkism or conservatism, as «Muslim countries have before them the [foreign] lessons of high politics capable of generating miracles» just as much as «the most sublime lessons of Islamic culture» (BENNABI 1987: 92).

Conclusion

According to the Egyptian-French political economist Samir Amin, the «Bandung Project»—the fateful meeting of independent African and Asian countries in Indonesia—responded to a central question: “was a national capitalist outcome possible in the third

world» (AMIN 1994: 92)? And if achieved, could that outcome ultimately lead to the desired «socialist replacement» of that provisional order? (AMIN 1994: 106) The case of Algeria provides a resounding no. Once described as the secular «Mecca» of third-world revolution, the lofty aspirations of its founding were hastily abandoned in the wake of Cold War maneuvering. Once sanguine about the Bandung Conference's prospects, the Bennabi of *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World* looks back at that period with unconcealed regret. Tasked with developing an «economic strategy» coequal to the continents of Africa and Asia, the Bandung participants had instead exclusively focused on training a native class of elites, administrators, and engineers, who in turn monopolized most infrastructural and technical improvements (BENNABI 1970: 76). As Amin concludes in his analysis of the experience of the wider Middle East in the Bandung period, the later turn to hyper-developmentalism widened «social polarization» by catering exclusively to the «consumption needs» of those «privileged classes» (AMIN 1994: 155) Whereas the question of socialist replacement was once an agenda item, the capture of economic growth and development by the comprador classes ensured that a sliver of peripheral middle-classes would permanently oppose major egalitarian reform in favor of an inflated standard of living.

No stranger to disappointment, Bennabi's conclusion to *The Question of Ideas in the Muslim World* points to the missed opportunity presented by the Bandung Conference and its atmosphere of civilizational optimism. Its chief task was not to secure the blessings of economic growth, but to truly «make history», to «open up new paths» in response to the «developmental problems of a society in need of reconstruction» in countries like Algeria. There is abundant reason to believe that this vision was in essence utopian, predicated on the confirmation of a vision of humanity as-yet undiscovered in Islamic civilization. In Jameson's essay «Ernst Bloch and the Future», Jameson distinguishes Bloch's mode of «ontological astonishment» from Lukács' dismissal of the «nihilistic» energies represented in modern art (JAMESON 1974: 133). For Bloch, «horror» or «despair» are «infinitely precious» as they connect us to «the future latent in ourselves and in things» (JAMESON 1974: 133). Likewise, Malek Bennabi points to the presence of decayed cultural archetypes in the Arabo-Islamic world, now virtually «fossilized» and harmful as sources of a future

civilizational rebirth. From as early as *The Conditions of the Renaissance* in 1949, Bennabi points to the «rise of the religious idea», the moment in which man originally «looks beyond his terrestrial horizon», as a model for the advent of an Islamic modernity (BENNABI 1997: 651). Turning again to Quranic exegesis, Bennabi points to the lesson presented by the original advent of Islam: «there was nothing on the eve of the Qu'ran except the futile unfolding of the daily twenty-four hours» (BENNABI 1997: 651). In a few centuries, that nothingness became the vibrant capitals of «Damascus, Cordova, and Samarkand». Now with the painful experience of additional eons, the future would prove ever brighter (BENNABI 1997: 651).

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