

The Critical Engagement with Modern Knowledge in the Writings of Malek Bennabi

Badrane Benlahcene*

Abstract

This paper explores the intellectual contributions of Malek Bennabi, focusing on his engagement with modern knowledge, and its implications for addressing the challenges faced by Muslim civilization. It examines Bennabi's critical perspective on the interpretations of history, the social sciences, Western Centrism, and the modernity discourse, and how his approach reflects both a creative openness to diverse fields of knowledge and a critical stance to their worldviews, concepts, methodologies, and end products. The paper finds that by integrating modern knowledge advancements while maintaining a critique of their underlying assumptions, Bennabi aimed to lay the groundwork for social and civilizational renewal within the Muslim Ummah. His work advocates for a balanced approach, combining critical dialogue between modern Western knowledge and Islamic worldview, heritage, and teachings, to overcome stagnation and activate the civilizational potential of Muslim societies in the modern era.

Keywords: Bennabi, critical engagement, modern knowledge, intellectual, civilizational project

Introduction

Malek Bennabi's thought represents a significant intellectual contribution to understanding and addressing the challenges of Islamic civilizational revival. His work delves deeply into the realities of the Islamic community, analyzing the root causes of its intellectual and social crises and the factors behind its stagnation¹. Bennabi's ideas draw upon a rich intellectual tradition, notably influenced by the Khaldunian school, yet they remain open to contemporary knowledge, especially from the West.² Through this critical openness, Bennabi developed a civilizational perspective aimed at addressing issues of renaissance and development, uniquely blending the authenticity of Islamic sources and heritage with the insights of modern thought.³ This study seeks to examine how Bennabi critically engaged with contemporary knowledge and adapted it to support the efforts for the Muslim Renaissance, highlighting his role in guiding knowledge toward a vision compatible with the revival of the Muslim Ummah.

The research centers on exploring Bennabi's approach to engaging with contemporary, particularly Western, knowledge. Essential questions arise regarding the nature of this critical openness: What defines Bennabi's method of engaging with modern knowledge? How did he assimilate Western intellectual concepts and tools, adapting them to develop a civilizational vision that reflects Islamic identity while supporting the broader revival? And to what extent can Bennabi's ideas address challenges such as stagnation and dependency in Islamic societies, especially in the face of contemporary intellectual and civilizational transformations?

To answer these questions, the study aims to analyze Bennabi's approach to critical openness toward modern knowledge, illustrate specific examples of how he engaged with contemporary terms, concepts, and intellectual tools, and show how he incorporated these elements into his civilizational framework. Additionally, it examines his critique of Western discourse and Eurocentrism, exploring how he adapted aspects of this knowledge to align with the cultural and civilizational contexts of Islamic societies.

* Badrane Benlahcene, Research Associate Professor, Ibn Khaldon Center for humanities and Social Sciences, Qatar University, Qatar. Email: bbenlahcene@qu.edu.qa.

¹ Malek Bennabi (1986), *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, Trans by: 'Umar Kāmil Mīsqāwī wa-'Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, Damascus: Dār al-Fīkr, from the introduction of Dr. Abdulaziz Al-Khaldi to the book, p. 7.

² Ibid, p. 8; Badrane Benlahcene (2022), *Rāhinīyat fikr Malek Bennabi*, Algiers: al-Aṣālah lil-Nashr. P. 5.

³ Hasan Bin Hasan (2023), "Kayfa nqrā Mālik ibn Nabī," in Badrane Benlahcene and Ibrahim Zain and Fathi Ahmed (eds), *al-Nahḍah al-ḥaḍārīyah fī fikr Malek Bennabi*, Doha: HBKU Press, p. 283.

This research underscores the importance of Bennabi's intellectual project as a valuable reference point, providing a critical approach to overcoming the challenges of dependency and stagnation within the Islamic world. Bennabi's thought remains relevant in developing a nuanced cultural dialogue that can integrate modern knowledge with Islamic values, ultimately supporting the broader project of civilizational revival. By reviving Bennabi's theoretical framework, this study seeks to inspire researchers and thinkers, encouraging them to contribute to a revival that fosters Islamic civilization in a way that resonates with both traditional values and contemporary progress.

This research employs a critical analytical approach, examining Bennabi's texts and analyzing examples of his engagement with contemporary concepts and methodologies to demonstrate how he utilized them to construct his civilizational vision. A comparative method further supports this analysis, exploring intersections and differences between Bennabi's perspective and the foundations of Western thought. Together, these methods provide a deeper understanding of Bennabi's intellectual project and illustrate its potential for influencing the direction of Islamic revival in a modern context.

Literature Review on Bennabi's Engagement with Western Thought

Researchers have explored Bennabi's critique and adaptation of Western modern knowledge and concepts to propose a robust civilizational framework for Muslim societies. Kouider's analysis of Bennabi's work emphasizes Bennabi's view that Western civilization, though it has achieved global status, is marked by intrinsic moral and cultural crises that affect humanity globally, including the Muslim world. Thus, Muslims should critically study Western civilization to understand both its virtues and its failings.¹

In his critical review, Benlahcene addresses Bennabi's engagement with the philosophy of history and its Eurocentric tendencies. According to Benlahcene, Bennabi saw this school as wrongly positioning European history as the ultimate culmination of human progress.²

El-Mesawi's study delves into Bennabi's critical engagement with the philosophical underpinnings of modern Western thought. El-Mesawi notes that Bennabi questioned the foundational assumptions of Western civilization, identifying epistemological and moral issues that he believed undermined its universal applicability. Bennabi's work demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of cross-cultural dynamics and reveals his awareness of the shared aspects of human history that are often overlooked in Western narratives (El-Mesawi, 2014).³

Mortazawi and Bin Ismail analyze Bennabi's views on studying Western civilization to address contemporary human and Islamic challenges. This study suggests that Bennabi saw Western civilization not merely as a model to be emulated but as a paradigm that required critical examination to understand its contributions and limitations in relation to Islamic civilization.⁴

In their work, Subhani, Noon, and Ahmed discuss Bennabi's pluralistic perspective on civilization, which integrates moral, ethical, and spiritual elements alongside material development. They note that Bennabi's conceptualization of civilization diverges from that of many Western scholars by acknowledging the importance of values that transcend mere technological advancement.⁵

¹ Ashour Ben Kouider (2016), "Critique of the Universality of Western Civilization in Malek Bennabi's Thought," *Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, No. 26, pp. 375-382.

² Badrane Benlahcene (2016), "Rethinking the Philosophy of History's Paradigm in Studying Civilization: An Analysis of Malek Bennabi's Critical Review," *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*. Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 01-17.

³ Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (2014), "Malek Bennabi's Response to Western Modernity: Contextualizing the *Qur'anic Phenomenon*," in Mohamed. E. El-Mesawi (ed.), *The Qur'an, Modernity and Globalization: Studies in Commemoration of Malek Bennabi*, Gombak: IIUM Press, pp. 1-22.

⁴ Kholeh Mortaza Mortazawi & Idris Bin Ismail (2020), "Western Civilization in the Islamic Thought of Malek Bennabi," *Journal of Critical Reviews*, Vol. 7, No. 16, pp. 3416-3426.

⁵ Zulfurnain Haider Subhani, Hazizan Md Noon, & Younus Ahmed (2020), "Bennabi's Thoughts on Civilization: Analyzing from a Pluralistic Perspective," *Journal of Al-Tamaddun*, Vol. 15, No.1, pp. 169-181.

Jamil explores how Bennabi harmonized his dual heritage -both Western and Muslim- to create a unique intellectual synthesis by integrating Islamic thought with Western intellectual traditions. Jamil's study shows that this synthesis allowed Bennabi to present a model of cultural engagement.¹

This literature highlights Bennabi's unique critical engagement with Western civilization and thought. However, there is a need to build upon the existing research, moving beyond merely acknowledging Bennabi's engagement with civilization and thought to address his specific critical engagement with modern Western knowledge as he developed his approach to civilization. This nuanced focus represents the central issue to be discussed in this paper.

Bennabi's Critical Engagement with Schools Interpreting History

In his book *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah* (The Conditions of Renaissance), Bennabi critically reviewed the approaches of most schools that addressed the interpretation of historical movement and the forces behind major changes in history, spanning from Thucydides to twentieth-century schools. However, he also turned to psychological schools to analyze the psychological impact that religious thought has on humans, guiding them into the process of civilization. However, he appears to have recognized the limitations of his initial historical interpretation, noting: "However, this historical interpretation seemed insufficient to readers of the first edition of this book. Consequently, some - especially students - requested a more in-depth analysis of the subject for the second edition."²

Therefore, he deemed it necessary to reassess the subject based on historical evidence and psychological analysis. He argued that this dual approach, incorporating both historical perspective and psychological insights, better positions him to delve deeper into the study of civilization. Rather than viewing civilization as a linear sequence of events, this methodology aids in uncovering the underlying laws governing it.³ Exploring the role of religious thought in shaping civilizational values cannot rely solely on historical research; it also requires delving into the depths of the human psyche and understanding the transformations it undergoes due to the influence of religious factors.⁴ Psychology is the most suited discipline to reveal these inner dimensions of the human psyche. Thus, Bennabi examined historians' approaches to the topic before turning to psychoanalysis as a new field of knowledge, especially focusing on Freud's school. He went beyond merely accepting Freud's contributions, critiquing them, and suggesting that Freud's concepts and terminology require adjustments to align with his view of Islam's role in the human psyche, where it acts as a force for refinement, not repression.

Bennabi noted that most historians, starting with Thucydides, concentrated on compiling historical facts rather than providing a rational interpretation within a coherent framework. However, with Guizot, who was influenced by Enlightenment ideas, historical inquiry began to take on a more scientific approach. Despite this, Bennabi criticized Guizot, pointing out that a Cartesian restraint prevented him from systematically developing his own ideas.⁵

Bennabi regarded the 19th century as a pivotal time when "the first interpretations of social reality began to emerge within the specific framework of civilization."⁶ He examined various intellectual movements that arose in the 19th and 20th centuries, including Marxism and the philosophies of thinkers like Schopenhauer and Hegel. His analysis reveals a continuous engagement with and understanding of the intellectual trends of his era on this topic.

¹ Jamaliah Jamil (2023), "Intellectual Resurgence for Contemporary Muslim Societies Adopting Malek Bennabi's Social Change Paradigm," *Dialogia*, Vol. 21, No. 2, pp. 325-341.

² Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, p. 61.

³ *Ibid*, p. 61.

⁴ Badrane Benlahcene (2023), "Civilizing Role of the "Religious Idea" in Malek Bennabi's Thought." *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, Vol 13, No. 1, pp. 10-11.

⁵ Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, p. 62.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 62.

Bennabi argued that Marx and his followers may have found justifications for applying “the logic of dialectical materialism within the specific social conditions of Europe during the Victorian era,” but this approach falls short in explaining transformations in other civilizations and under different contexts. He asserted that “this theory does not address the core issue behind the breakdown of social relations and the decline of civilizations that occurred without any changes in the nature of needs and means of production.”¹ He noted, for instance, that the civilizations of pre-Columbian America and ancient Rome did not disappear due to a lack of industrial resources or needs.

Moreover, Bennabi pointed out that Marxism’s methodology lacks the ability to apply its findings universally to other civilizations, as it is built upon “an analysis grounded in the supposed inevitability of materialism, or a mechanistic, unplanned process of civilization.”² This notion of material inevitability reduces civilization to a mechanical process, detached from the conscious agency of individuals who shape and influence historical developments.

Bennabi emphasizes that the 20th century experienced profound shifts in knowledge as scholars sought to “explore alternative methodologies for interpretation” beyond the limits of historical materialism. These new methodologies recognize that the emergence and evolution of civilizations are influenced by “factors beyond mere human material needs and means of production.”³

In this context, Bennabi refers to the approaches of Keyserling and Guizot, who each associated “the spirit of Christianity” with distinct cultural traditions—Germanic for Keyserling and French for Guizot. He expresses particular interest in Spengler’s theory, which interprets civilization as the product of a unique genius that characterizes specific eras as times of fundamental innovation.⁴ However, Bennabi critiques the intrusion of racial elements into these historical interpretations, noting that such ideas “later achieved methodological completeness under Hitler’s administration through Rosenberg.”⁵ He also points out that Spengler’s theory was adapted by Walter Schubart, who shifted the focus from “the genius of a certain race” to “the genius of a particular era.”⁶

Bennabi acknowledges the contributions of Sir J. Halford, who systematically introduced the geographic factor into the interpretation of civilization in his work titled “The Geographical Basis of History.” Although Halford’s theory emphasizes political and military objectives, Bennabi places greater emphasis on Toynbee’s contributions to the study of civilization. Toynbee introduced the concept of the “challenge,”⁷ interpreting civilization as a response by a people or society to specific challenges. According to Toynbee, the level of the challenge and the effectiveness of the response determine whether a civilization will advance, stagnate, or decline.⁸

After analyzing various schools of thought, Bennabi concludes that while they offer compelling insights, they ultimately fail to adequately explain phenomena like the rise of Islamic civilization. He attributes this shortcoming to specific limitations within these intellectual frameworks, pointing out, for example, that “we do not find in the formation of this civilization the geographical or climatic factor as a specific challenge, as per Toynbee’s theory, nor the fundamental economic dual factor of need and industrial means according to Marx’s theory. Additionally, the theory of collective spirit falls short in explaining the Islamic phenomenon within the unique psychological-temporal conditions that shaped it, as I previously discussed in my book *The Quranic Phenomenon*.”⁹

¹ Ibid, p. 63.

² Ibid, p.63.

³Ibid, p. 63.

⁴ Oswald Spengler (1926), *The Decline of the West*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pp. 1/25-27; 2/43-45.

⁵ Ibid, p. 64.

⁶ Ibid, p. 64.

⁷ Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954, pp. 1/8-10; 2/ 40-43.

⁸ Ibid, pp. 2/40-43; Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, p. 64-65.

⁹ Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, p. 65; Malek Bennabi (2000), *al-Zāhirah al-Qur’āniyah*, Trans by: ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 37.

However, Bennabi notes that while these theories and schools mark a beginning and an eventual decline for civilizations, the space between represents a historical progression that reaches a peak before descending. For Bennabi, the focus in studying civilization should be on the core idea that embodies the essence of civilization, as well as the human being who acts as the practical support and bearer of this idea. Specifically, regarding Islamic civilization, he explains, “It is certain that, when examining Islamic civilization, two essential elements must necessarily be included in its continuity: the Islamic idea, which is the very foundation of that continuity, and the Muslim individual, who is the tangible support for this idea.”¹

This perspective requires an examination of “the organic relationship between a particular idea, such as Islam, and the individual who serves as its tangible support, the Muslim.”² Bennabi’s viewpoint led him to engage with various social sciences. He viewed civilization as a complex phenomenon with historical, social, psychological, and even metaphysical-philosophical dimensions. This multifaceted approach will be discussed in the following section, where we explore Bennabi’s openness to social sciences.

Bennabi’s Critical Engagement with Various Social Sciences

As previously mentioned, Bennabi views civilization as a multidimensional phenomenon that demands an interdisciplinary approach, particularly within the social sciences, rather than being limited to the insights of historians and philosophers alone. He explains this in an extensive passage, which we include here for its relevance:

Studying history involves multiple dimensions. When approached from the standpoint of the individual, it becomes a psychological study, examining the human being as a temporal and psychological agent in the building of civilization. However, civilization itself is an expression of collective life and thought. From this perspective, history is a social study that analyzes the conditions necessary for the growth of a particular society—one whose development is shaped not so much by racial or political factors but rather by its ethical, aesthetic, and industrial qualities unique to that civilization. Additionally, this society is not isolated; its progress depends upon certain essential interactions with the broader human community. From this standpoint, history takes on a metaphysical dimension, extending beyond historical causality to comprehend phenomena in their ultimate purpose. This metaphysical aspect includes influences beyond what Toynbee described as the ‘field of study’ of any given civilization.³

For Bennabi, the real challenge lies in creating a “comprehensive study”⁴ of civilizational revival within the Muslim world, enabling an understanding of the roots of its crisis and providing a structured plan for future actions. This plan should be based on diagnosing the historical stages through which Muslim society has evolved. Thus, studying civilization requires not only attention to its diverse elements as they appear in reality but also an exploration of their deeper implications.⁵ Such an analysis involves the combined use of history, psychology, sociology, and metaphysics (philosophy).⁶ Bennabi delved into the psychological theories of his time, using various tools and concepts to examine how religious ideas influence the civilizational development of humanity. In his view, religious ideas catalyze a transformation within individuals, changing them from “natural” beings into “adapted” ones by sparking a psychological evolution. To articulate this transformation, Bennabi incorporated psychological language and insights, studying how individuals evolve from isolated “individuals” into socially integrated “persons.”⁷ Concepts like adaptation, archetypes, integration, behavioral adjustment, repression, motivational forces, and the psychological impact of religion became integral to his analysis.⁸

¹ Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, p. 63.

² Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, p. 65.

³ Malek Bennabi (2002), *Wijhat al-‘ālam al-Islāmī*, trans: ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 25.

⁴ Malek Bennabi (1984), *Mushkilat al-Thaqāfah*, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 40.

⁵ Malek Bennabi (2000), *Fikrat Kmmwlth Islāmī*, trans: al-Ṭayyib al-Sharīf, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 21.

⁶ Bennabi, *Milād Mujtama’*, p. 75.

⁷ *Ibid*, p. 74.

⁸ Malek Bennabi (1986), *Milād Mujtama’*, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 65-109.

In further developing his understanding of society's psycho-sociological evolution, Bennabi sought tools that would clarify its socio-cultural progression. He found a significant resource in Jean Piaget's developmental psychology, particularly Piaget's framework for categorizing societal evolution through three stages: the age of the thing, the age of the person, and the age of the idea.¹ This approach to societal development has led many scholars to argue that Bennabi's theories and language are grounded in psychological principles, with psychology serving as a foundational source for some of his terms and concepts.²

Despite drawing on principles, concepts, and methodologies from various sciences, Bennabi consistently emphasized the importance of understanding the European and Western context within which they developed, recognizing its historical and materialistic orientation. He approached Western civilization with a historical consciousness, tracing the evolution of Western thought and sciences, noting their alignment with the civilization's material focus and its drive for global dominance.

In the Western context, the sciences emerged as relative phenomena. Developed within the structure of Western civilization, these sciences were influenced by the rationalism of Descartes, Bacon's empiricism, and Comte's positivism. While they have evolved in response to the historical needs of the West, these sciences inevitably carry inherent biases—whether in their theories, philosophical foundations, or practical applications. This bias is particularly evident in the social and human sciences, which are deeply shaped by the philosophical backgrounds of their founders. These sciences interpret human behavior and society in ways often disconnected from spiritual considerations, interpreting humanity through a Western lens focused on values, purpose, and notions of destiny.

While natural sciences may exhibit fewer biases, social sciences delve more profoundly into cultural contexts. Their study of human nature and relationships is inevitably shaped by philosophical perspectives on existence, humanity's purpose, and its relationship with higher ideals.³ Social sciences in the West have historically focused on interpreting the relationship of the Western individual to the stage of civilization it currently inhabits.⁴ Bennabi, however, acknowledged a universal base of human knowledge shared across civilizations, evolving through the contributions of all societies. From his perspective, understanding the sciences of the West involves two key dimensions.

The first aspect is the scientific perspective, where the Western worldview, primarily materialistic in nature, tends to neglect the spiritual dimension in scientific inquiry. Viewing itself and its sciences as a universal model,⁵ it emphasizes efficiency and decisiveness through material-centric approaches. This focus on efficiency leads to the study of phenomena and the presentation of facts based on the logic of pragmatism, which, within the Western tradition, often means taking decisive action by any means. In doing so, it frequently disregards ethical considerations, prioritizing aesthetic or practical outcomes over spiritual values.

The second aspect is the practical dimension, which is particularly relevant to the Renaissance efforts in the Muslim world. These efforts require specialized sciences to examine the state of the Islamic nation in relation to the current stage of its civilization. Such an examination seeks to analyze the root causes of the long-standing backwardness within Islamic society and address the entangled network of “dead and deadly ideas”⁶ that have shaped the current reality in the Islamic world. The goal is to untangle these influences and provide a path toward revitalization.

¹ Malek Bennabi (2002), *Mushkilat al-fikr fī al-'ālam al-Islāmī*, Trans by Bassam Barakah and Ahmad sh'bw, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, pp. 30-40.

² Ali Qurayshi (1988), *Attaghyeer al-Ijtima'i 'inda Malek Bennabi*, Cairo: Maktabat Azzahra', p. 8.

³ Akbar Ahmad (1990), *Naḥwa 'ilm al-insān al-Islāmī*, trans by: 'Abd al-Ghanī Khalaf Allāh, 1st ed, Hyrmdn: al-Ma'had al-'Ālamī lil-Fikr al-Islāmī, pp. 42-48.

⁴ Nūrah Khālīd al-Sa'd (1997), *al-taghyīr al-ijtimā'ī 'inda Mālik ibn Nabī: dirāsah fī binā' al-naẓariyah al-ijtimā'iyah*, 1st ed, Jeddah: al-Dār al-Sa'ūdīyah lil-Tawzī' wa-al-Nashr, p. 7.

⁵ Muḥammad Amzayān (1991), *Manhaj al-Baḥth al-ijtimā'ī bayna al-waḍ'iyah wālm 'yāryh*, 1st ed, Hyrmdn: al-Ma'had al-'Ālamī lil-Fikr al-Islāmī, pp. 129-150.

⁶ Bennabi refers to “dead ideas” as those concepts that have forsaken their principles and deviated from their ideal model, no longer having roots in their original cultural context. This concerns ideas that have lost their vitality while still being deeply ingrained in the social reality. As for “deadly imported ideas,” they are concepts that contradict the components of our social reality. Bennabi, *Mushkilat al-fikr*, p. 209.

Bennabi advocated for the creation of a sociology tailored specifically to the Muslim world, designed to address its unique challenges in the post-colonial era. As he noted, “There ought to be a sociology developed specifically for the era of independence.”¹ While Bennabi has no formal training in sociology, his engagement with the discipline went beyond basic understanding, demonstrating a sociological analytical approach.² His argument was not merely based on cultural differences but also on the objective reality of Muslim society’s distinct origins and development, in contrast to the West. The theories, concepts, methodologies, and principles of modern sociology evolved within a social context fundamentally different from that of the Muslim world.

In response to this, Bennabi proposed a model for social analysis based on Islamic sociological principles, grounded in revelation. This is clearly reflected in his book *The Birth of Society – The Network of Social Relations*, where he examines society through an Islamic perspective, integrating psychological and historical perspectives in his social theory. He also criticized various aspects of modern sociological methodology.

What Bennabi accomplished in this context is considered pioneering when compared to efforts such as the localization of sciences, Islamization of knowledge, Arabization of sciences, and other initiatives aimed at critiquing contemporary knowledge and adapting it to the social and cultural contexts of non-European and non-Western countries. These issues have been central to scholars in the fields of humanities and social sciences, particularly within the Tangier-Jakarta axis. It is important to recognize that Bennabi was a trailblazer in addressing this issue, not only by raising it but also by contributing significantly to its theoretical framework and practical solutions.³ His work represents a significant step in providing both a theoretical and applied alternative to modern sociology, whether aligned with Marxist or liberal perspectives. Following his lead, numerous ambitious studies have emerged, aiming to establish Islamic sociology—distinct in its focus on the challenges facing the Muslim world and, in its methodology, which is liberated from the materialistic and Western-centric philosophical frameworks.⁴

Bennabi also made early efforts to define the scope of Islamic sociology, focusing particularly on the challenges facing the Muslim world in the post-independence context. He proposed a methodology for the discipline, which he envisioned as combining both statistical analysis and interpretive approaches. The aim, according to Bennabi, would be to identify abnormal conditions and explore their origins or historical contexts.⁵ While Bennabi’s proposal represents an initial step, it requires further development into a comprehensive scientific framework. This ongoing process is being advanced through various initiatives, not only within the Muslim world but also globally, as Bennabi’s call has inspired intellectual and academic endeavors among Muslim researchers, scholars, and scientific organizations.

Bennabi’s Critique of European Centrism

The previous sections discussing Bennabi’s engagement with schools of historical interpretation, psychology, and sociology highlight that, while he drew from these fields, he was highly critical of them. He argued that although these disciplines also reflect significant Western biases in their perspectives, concepts, and applications, making Western centrism apparent. This view is supported by Al-Attas, who describes European centrism as a particular form of racial centrism, grounded in the belief that the race or society of a particular group is superior to others. As a result, European centrism tends to evaluate non-European societies based on the cultural assumptions and biases of Europeans.⁶ This European-centric attitude also extends to the American context. It is defined by several key characteristics.

¹ Malek Bennabi (2002), *Fī mahabb al-ma’rakah: Irhāsāt al-thawrah*, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 35.

² Zaki al-Milād (1992), *Mālik ibn Nabī wa-mushkilāt al-Ḥaḍārah*, 1st ed, Bayrūt : Dār al-Ṣafwah, pp. 109-111.

³ al-Sa’d, *al-taghyīr al-ijtimā’ī*, pp. 6-10.

⁴ Ibid, p. 316.

⁵ Malek Bennabi (2002), *Bayna al-Rashād wālyah*, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 37.

⁶ Sayyed Farid al-Attas (2021), *Taḥbīq Ibn Khaldūn: Iḥyā’ taqlīd mahjūr fī ‘ilm al-ijtimā’ī*, Trans by: Usāmah ‘Abbās, 1st ed, Beirut: Markaz nuḥūd lil-Dirāsāt wa-al-Buḥūth, p. 98.

First, there is a duality between the self and the other, where Europeans are seen as the active, knowledgeable subjects—the narrators and heroes of history—while non-Europeans are relegated to passive objects with no voice. Second, Europeans are positioned at the forefront, with emphasis placed on their dominance and leadership, rather than on meaningful interactions with non-Europeans. Third, Europeans are viewed as innovators, often disregarding the diverse cultural contributions that have shaped many aspects of modern civilization. Finally, European concepts and frameworks dominate, especially in the study of Islam and Arab societies, where Western categories are imposed. This reflects the fallacy of European centrism, which mistakenly assumes that the global nature of European science and technology makes everything European universally applicable.¹

In his critique of Western civilization, Bennabi highlighted a deeply ingrained sense of superiority within European thought, where Europeans regard themselves as the epitome of strength and excellence. This mentality enables them to dominate those outside their circle, perceiving them as inferior in civilization, intelligence, strength, and creativity, thereby justifying their subjugation, disdain, and exclusion.² These attitudes are most vividly expressed through colonization, oppression, and persecution, with colonization serving as its emblem. While civilization and globalization are touted as ideals, their true essence lies in domination, exploitation, and enslavement.

Bennabi expressed concern over this mentality, pointing out that the Western view of history begins with the Greeks and Romans, takes a break, and then picks up again in Paris and London.³ He argued that for the West, power, and authority are considered the sole routes to happiness, with peril arising when this power diminishes. Bennabi suggested that Westerners are trapped in a binary: either they are oppressors or the oppressed, with no middle ground.⁴ He observed that “the power complex lies at the heart of the European affliction... Control and happiness are intimately linked in this mindset, reflecting a fundamental aspect of the European consciousness.”⁵ Bennabi believed this revealed the need for Europeans to be helped in overcoming this delusion.

The European-centric worldview has paved the way for colonialism, which is now widely regarded as a moral failure in the history of humanity, with its roots tracing back to the Roman foundations of Western civilization. Bennabi states, “There exists a colonial reality, defined by colonial practices... We aim to examine it scientifically within our societies and to understand colonialism fully, we must delve deep into history... Colonization is viewed as a setback in human history because its origins lie in Rome, where Roman civilization left its colonial legacy.”⁶

This Eurocentric mentality, closely tied to colonial ambitions, led Europe to disregard the cultural legacies of non-European societies. As a result, “Western historians distorted history, presenting it as a simplified narrative that begins at the Acropolis in Athens and ends at the Palace of Chailot in Paris, or perhaps a bit further.”⁷

Bennabi expressed his astonishment at the surprise of some prominent European figures when they discovered that human civilization extends far beyond the European-centered narrative. He remarked, “This scientific misconception becomes evident to certain intellectuals in Europe, who are often shocked when speakers challenge their belief that civilization begins and ends with Europe. Had they examined history more closely, they would recognize a significant gap between the civilizations of Aristotle and Descartes—a gap filled by Islamic civilization.”⁸

¹ Ibid, p. 100.

² Abdelghani lebibat (2022), “Irhāṣāt alnanzryh mā ba‘da alkwlwnyālyyh wa taqwīd al-khiṭāb al-isti‘mārī fī Kitābāt Mālik ibn Nabī,” *Review of Letters and Human Sciences (RLHS)*, Vol. 15, No. 2, pp. 370-371.

³ Bennabi, *Fī mahabb al-ma‘rakah*, p. 160.

⁴ Malek Bennabi (2001), *Fikrat al-Afrīqīyah al-Āsiyawiyyah*, Trans by: ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, 3rd ed, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, p. 258.

⁵ Ibid, p. 258.

⁶ Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, pp. 147-148.

⁷ Ibid, 148-149.

⁸ Ibid, p. 149.

Bennabi's Critical Engagement with the Discourse of Modernity

In our previous discussion, we aimed to showcase Malek Bennabi's openness to the prominent intellectual trends, methodologies, and ideas of his time, particularly those from Western thought—especially in historical interpretation and social sciences. Bennabi borrowed insights, terminology, and tools from these fields but approached them critically. This critical stance allowed him to selectively adapt or “localize” knowledge to develop his own framework for addressing the challenges of civilization in the Islamic world. In his *Memoirs*, Bennabi reflects on his observations, experiences, and understanding of the significant events of the twentieth century, focusing on Algeria and the broader Arab-Muslim world. Across his body of work—from his earliest writings to his later publications—Bennabi deeply explored philosophical, methodological, and cultural dimensions to address complex human issues.¹

Though Bennabi was open to a variety of intellectual paradigms, schools of thought, and methodological frameworks—and incorporated numerous concepts, terms, and analytical tools from modern fields of knowledge—he maintained a critical stance toward the secular Western worldview underlying these fields.² He viewed this perspective as largely shaped by rationalism, empiricism, and reductionism, which often depicted human nature in ways that minimized the spiritual dimension. This, he argued, led to a gradual erosion of humanity by focusing predominantly on the external, material facets of human personality, stripping away its essential spiritual and intrinsic qualities.³

Bennabi's approach consistently embodied a conscious critique of the research fields he engaged with. He viewed modern social and human sciences as products of Western cultural and intellectual traditions. For him, these fields were integral to the discourse of Western modernity, fundamentally shaped by materialistic, secular, and scientific foundations. He emphasized that the modern Western worldview had produced sciences whose foundational models, methodologies, and views on humanity were inherently rooted in these perspectives.

In *the Quranic Phenomenon*, particularly in its opening chapters, Bennabi articulates the philosophical and methodological premises that inform his critique of this underlying worldview. He addresses how modern materialistic ideas and methodologies approach religion and religious phenomena, establishing the basis for his distinct approach to studying religion. This critical framework allowed him to question conventional Western methods and propose alternative ways of understanding religious experiences and knowledge.⁴

As an integral part of modernity's comprehensive framework, the Western worldview predominantly leans towards secularism, characterized by atheism, Gnosticism, and humanism. In line with this global perspective, the prevailing trend in Western thought is materialistic and secular.⁵ Consequently, modern disciplines such as sociology, psychology, philosophy, and general thought approach human beings and the conditions of their civilization, laws, and structures from a materialistic perspective.

Other facets of human existence are often overlooked or marginalized, including the spiritual or religious aspect of human personality, which may receive less acknowledgment, be denied, or relegated to secondary importance. This is partly due to the zeal for empiricism and rationalism, which either disregards or struggles to systematically and precisely validate the existence of religion or the spiritual dimensions of human life, influenced by the stringent empiricism and scientific rigor of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

¹Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (2022), “Malek Bennabi wa-dirāsāt al-Qur’ān: Ab’ād falsafīyah wa-ma’ālim manhajīyah,” *Majallat al-Fikr al-Islāmī al-mu’āṣir*, No. 104, p. 29.

²Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, pp.99-105; Bennabi, *Mushkilat alfkār*, pp. 17-23.

³Bennabi, *Mushkilat alfkār*, pp. 17-23.

⁴ Malek Bennabi (2000), *al-Zāhirah al-Qur’ānīyah*, Trans by: ‘Abd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, pp. 51-72.

⁵ Malek Bennabi (1994), *The Problem of Ideas in The Muslim World*, Trans by: Mohamed T. Mesawi. Petaling Jaya: Budaya Ilmu Sdn. Bhd, pp. 3, 10, 47; Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, pp. 99-106.

In essence, Bennabi contends that modern philosophy and the social sciences and humanities, as viewed through the lens of modernism, have increasingly embraced reductionism. By prioritizing empiricism, rationalism, and the scientism prevalent in contemporary knowledge fields, these disciplines have failed to acknowledge alternative sources and methods of knowledge, reducing life to superficial dimensions.¹

With advancements in the natural sciences, sociologists and philosophers began adopting scientific methodologies to study human and social phenomena. This shift towards scientific rigor and simplicity led to the use of experimental methods in social research. Auguste Comte's notion of "social physics" was instrumental in establishing the framework for "positivist" approaches in the social sciences and humanities. Since then, positivism has become the dominant methodology across these fields, including psychology, with proponents asserting that experimentation alone forms the basis of all knowledge and advocating for the exclusion of non-experimental elements.²

Consequently, the foundations of modern sciences have increasingly leaned towards reductionism, which manifests in two prominent aspects of contemporary knowledge. Firstly, there's a tendency to avoid non-experimental sources of knowledge, such as revelation (as found in religious texts like the Quran), due to historical conflicts between the church and scientists, leading to a general dismissal of all religious experiences without rational scrutiny. Secondly, there's a tendency to reduce complex human and social phenomena to simplistic materialistic dimensions, devoid of deeper meaning. Modern social sciences and humanities, guided by a positivist understanding of "scientific methodology," have adopted approaches that view human experiences and conditions primarily through a materialistic lens. Figures like Comte, Saint-Simon, and others championed a positivist model that emphasized quantitative measurement and the application of observation and experimentation techniques. Within this framework, religious and spiritual realities are often dismissed as invalid or meaningless, perceived merely as human-made myths or idealized constructs used to explain phenomena beyond empirical understanding, as argued by Freud and other proponents of Western modern discourse.³

Freud's assertion, as perceived by Bennabi, and indeed in all sciences produced by modernity, raises a significant issue. This major issue revolves around the juxtaposition of reason and science against religion, in a manner that portrays them as fundamentally opposing entities. They are depicted as "opponents in essential opposition to religion and revelation, totally opposed to them. Moreover, they are considered sufficient in addressing humanity's profound questions and managing individual and collective psychological and social affairs."⁴

Bennabi sees framing the issue in this way within the context of Western civilization as both a disregard for fundamental truth and a misinterpretation of a problem that does not actually exist. He argues that the true matter at hand lies between two perspectives on reality—not between science and religion, but between religion and scientism. He states, "The root of this misconception is the mindset adopted by proponents of scientism, who overlook the foundational principles upon which empirical science itself is based."⁵ Thus, Bennabi believes, "we must approach this issue from a broader, more philosophical perspective, not only in interpreting religious phenomena but in understanding humanity itself."⁶

This view does not imply that Bennabi rejects the practical value of experimental studies, advanced scientific techniques, or quantitative models; he acknowledges their usefulness and validity. However, he contends that an exclusive reliance on these methods has led to reductionism, neglecting one of the most vital sources of knowledge: religion. Additionally, the secular, materialistic approach underlying modern knowledge falls short of a holistic understanding of human nature and conditions.⁷

¹ Bennabi, *The Problem of Ideas*, pp. 3-5; Malek Bennabi (2001), *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*, Trans by: Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, pp. 29-41.

² Subhani et al., *Bennabi's Thoughts on Civilization*, pp. 176-177.

³ Sigmund Freud (1990), *Civilization and its Discontents*. In Mortimer J. Adler, *Great Books of the Western World* (Vol. 54). Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, inc, pp. 800-801.

⁴ El-Mesawi, *Malek Bennabi wa-dirāsāt al-Qur'ān*, p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 31.

⁷ Bennabi, *al-Zāhirah al-Qur'āniyah*, pp. 51-72.

Bennabi argues that modern scientific perspectives, Bennabi argues, are limited to narrow, worldly objectives. In contrast, religion—as illuminated in the Quran—encourages humanity to harness its civilizational potential, bridging spiritual aspirations with earthly needs and elevating ambitions beyond mere material existence.¹

In summary, the discourse of modernity empowered Bennabi, the Muslim thinker adhering to Islamic principles, to comprehend the philosophical, methodological, and historical development framework of various sciences and theories.² Despite benefiting from these diverse sciences, Bennabi recognized the necessity for a methodology that recognizes all aspects of human personality and its interconnectedness. Additionally, Bennabi’s awareness of the underlying modernist structure behind those sciences enabled him to utilize the natural sciences without conflating their domain with that of the humanities and social sciences.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has explored the depth and breadth of Malek Bennabi’s intellectual engagement with his contemporary context, social issues, and the challenges facing Muslim civilization as he developed his intellectual project. Through an analysis of Bennabi’s interactions with modern, predominantly Western knowledge, it becomes clear that while he recognized and appreciated the advancements and practical insights offered by modern thought, he remained cautious of the secular, reductionist foundations that underpinned much of Western intellectualism.

In exploring his critique engagement with schools of interpretations of history, social sciences, the Western centrism worldview, and the discourse of modernity, Bennabi challenged the tendency to overlook the spiritual dimensions of human existence. He argued that a purely materialistic worldview fails to capture the complexity of human identity and the broader purpose of civilization. This critique extended to his analysis of modern social sciences, where he questioned their tendency toward reductionism and empiricism, which he saw as insufficient for understanding the full scope of human experience. Bennabi advocated for a broader, philosophical perspective that integrates the insights of revelation with other fields of knowledge within a worldview that doesn’t limit itself to a materialistic, narrow conception of existence. Furthermore, the paper emphasized Bennabi’s foundational commitment to addressing the specific social and civilizational challenges facing the Muslim world. His intellectual project sought not merely to diagnose the crises but to lay the groundwork for renewal, rooted in an authentic understanding of Islam’s principles yet open to the constructive aspects of modern knowledge. His openness to intellectual currents and methodologies reflects a creative synthesis, moving beyond mere imitation to foster an informed and critical engagement with contemporary thought.

Ultimately, Bennabi’s legacy offers a blueprint for Muslim scholars and intellectuals today. To realize his vision, we must engage with his ideas not only as a source of insight but as a living framework to be refined and expanded upon. This constructive engagement calls for us to apply his insights to our contemporary context, striving to revive the civilizational role of the Muslim Ummah and guide our societies toward a balanced, purposeful development. By building on Bennabi’s intellectual foundation, we contribute to a collective project aimed at breaking free from stagnation and advancing a holistic civilizational revival that addresses both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life.

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¹Bennabi, *Shurūṭ al-Nahḍah*, p. 14; Bennabi, *Milād Mujtama’*, p. 73.

² John L. Esposito (1995), *The Islamic Threat Myth or Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; Ahmad S. Moussalli (1998), *Introduction to Islamic Fundamentalism: Realities, Ideologies and International Politics*. In Moussalli, Ahmad S. *Islamic Fundamentalism Myth and Realities*. Reading: Garnet Publishing Limited; Yahya H. Zoubir, (1998), *Democracy and Islam in Malek Bennabi’s Thought*. The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences, Vol. 15, No. 1, pp. 107-112.

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