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Factors Contributing to Underdevelopment and Civilizational Decline in the Islamic World According to Malek Bennabi: A Sociological Analysis

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Abstract

This research paper aims to shed light on a highly significant issue, namely the vision of the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi regarding the problem of civilizational backwardness resulting from the manifestations of underdevelopment that characterized Muslim society. Among the most prominent of these manifestations are the absence of the world of ideas, the disintegration of the network of social relations, social deprivation, and colonial susceptibility. Collectively, these problems constituted direct causes of the stagnation of the civilizational project in the Islamic world.

The main conclusion drawn from this study is that the issues addressed by Malek Bennabi represent some of the most significant factors behind the underdevelopment and civilizational decline of Muslim societies, particularly in relation to building their civilizational and developmental project. Therefore, if Islamic societies genuinely aspire to establish a strong and sustainable civilization, they should give greater attention to Bennabi's ideas while avoiding the problems he identified as major obstacles to civilizational progress.

Keywords: Factors of Underdevelopment; Civilizational Backwardness; Islamic World; Malek Bennabi; Sociological Analysis.

Introduction

Malek Bennabi is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers who sought to diagnose and analyze many of the challenges confronting the Islamic world. A careful examination of his writings reveals that the issues he addressed were, in most cases, deeply rooted in reality and differed from those explored by many other scholars and intellectuals. His ideas directly engaged with the diverse civilizational problems facing Muslim societies. Moreover, Bennabi did not merely present these issues from a theoretical perspective; rather, he consistently sought to propose practical and objective solutions that were closely connected to social reality.

Among the most significant issues addressed by Bennabi was the problem of underdevelopment, which had characterized the Arab-Islamic world for many decades and contributed to its civilizational decline compared with Western societies, which, during the same period, were experiencing remarkable progress and development across various fields.

Based on this perspective, the present paper examines the major manifestations of underdevelopment identified by Malek Bennabi as the principal causes of the civilizational backwardness of the Islamic world. To achieve this objective, the paper is organized around the following main sections:

1. A brief overview of the life of Malek Bennabi.
2. The manifestations of underdevelopment and civilizational backwardness in the Islamic world according to Malek Bennabi.
3. The Islamic world and its struggle between its underdeveloped reality and the advanced Western reality.

1. A Brief Overview of the Life of Malek Bennabi

Malek Bennabi (Malek Ben Nabi), whose full name was Malek Ben El Hadj Omar El Khodr Ben Mustapha Ben Nabi, was born in Constantine, Algeria, in January 1905. Bennabi believed that being born during this particular period enabled him to witness an entire century, as his generation maintained a connection with both the past and the future. As he stated: "Anyone born in Algeria in 1905 belongs to a period in which one's consciousness is connected to the past, represented by its last witnesses, and to the future, represented by its first architects" (Ben Hamad Al-Owaisi, 2012, pp. 51–52).

This perspective explains why Bennabi entitled his memoirs *Memoirs of a Witness of the Century*. He was raised in a conservative family that lived under modest economic conditions. Bennabi had a particularly close relationship with his grandmother, Hajja Zuleikha, whom he regarded as a moral school that instilled in him the values of goodness, generosity, and ethical commitment.

His family—consisting of his parents, grandmother, Bennabi himself, and his two sisters—later moved to Tébessa. Owing to the family's difficult financial circumstances, Bennabi temporarily lived with his uncle in Constantine. However, following his uncle's death, his aunt sent him back to his parents in Tébessa. Reflecting on this period, Bennabi described it as one of the most difficult phases of his family's life.

From an early age, Bennabi regularly attended mosques, where he memorized classical Islamic texts and the Holy Qur'an, which he considered a major source of spiritual strength and intellectual formation.

In 1923, he was finally admitted to a formal school, where he devoted himself to intellectual and academic development. He studied Arabic and Islamic literature and developed a strong interest in reading both Arabic and French newspapers, including *Al-Muntaqid*, *Al-Rayah*, and *Al-Nidal*.

Bennabi was also an active member of the Unitarian Movement (*Al-Wahdawiyyin*). In late December 1931, he delivered a lecture entitled "Why Are We Muslims?", which generated considerable debate between him and advocates of separatist tendencies.

In 1931, Bennabi married a French woman who embraced Islam and adopted the name Khadija. During his stay in France, he became acquainted with several prominent political figures who influenced his intellectual development, including Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Messali Hadj, the leader of the North African Star Movement, with whom he participated in the theatrical production *The Just Ruler* (Bousnah, 2019, pp. 89–91).

In 1965, Bennabi assumed several official positions, including Advisor for Higher Education, Director of the University of Algiers, and Director General of Higher Education. These appointments provided him with broader opportunities to disseminate his ideas through books, seminars, and academic lectures. During this period, he published several important works, including *Algerian Horizons*, *The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World*, *The Muslim in the World of Economics*, and *Memoirs of a Witness of the Century* (*The Child*, *The Student*), in addition to numerous articles and lectures.

In 1967, he established a weekly intellectual seminar at his home in Algiers, which attracted young participants from across the Maghreb and Europe. During this stage of his life, he devoted himself entirely to intellectual work and the organization of scholarly discussions. In 1971, he entrusted his student and Lebanese lawyer and friend, Omar Miskawi, with preserving his intellectual legacy and authorized him to publish and translate all of his books and articles.

Bennabi performed the Hajj pilgrimage in 1972, passing through Damascus, where he delivered a lecture entitled "The Role of the Muslim in the Last Third of the Twentieth Century." This lecture is often regarded as his intellectual testament. One year after his return, Malek Bennabi passed away on 31 October 1973, while crossing the Algerian Sahara on a cultural mission, at the age of 68 (Boufoula, 2024, p. 62).

1.2. Factors That Shaped the Personality of Malek Bennabi

The Influence of Arab and Islamic Culture

Malek Bennabi received a solid scientific and literary education during his early schooling. He studied Islamic theology (Tawhid) under the guidance of Sheikh Mouloud Ben Mawhoub, while Islamic jurisprudence (Fiqh) and the Prophetic biography (Sirah) were taught to him by Sheikh Ben Abed. He was also profoundly influenced by the Islamic reform movements in Algeria, particularly that led by Abdelhamid Ben Badis, as well as by the reformist movement in the Arab East. Among the leading reformers who shaped his intellectual outlook were Jamal al-Din al-Afghani, Muhammad Abduh, and Rashid Rida. Bennabi himself noted that one of the most significant influences on his intellectual development came from books he discovered in Al-Najah Library, describing them as "distant springs" that nourished his thinking.

Among the individuals who exerted the greatest influence on Bennabi's intellectual formation was Hamouda Ben Saï, whom he regarded as the person responsible for a qualitative transformation in his way of thinking. From him, Bennabi learned not only the study of the sciences but also methods of interpreting the Holy Qur'an from a social perspective, emphasizing its relevance to social life and civilizational development.

The Influence of Western Culture

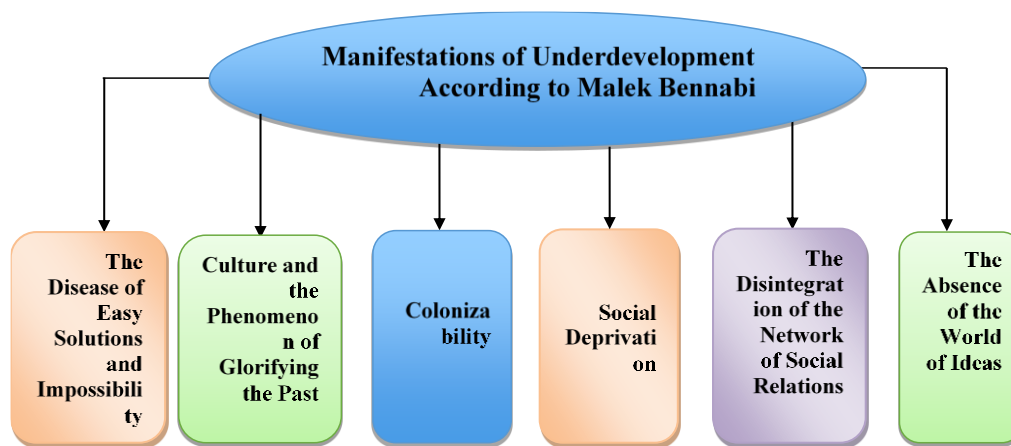
Bennabi's intellectual development was also shaped by Western philosophy and thought. He was influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche, particularly through *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. From Immanuel Kant, he adopted the concepts of rights and duty, while the educational philosophy of John Dewey, especially as presented in *How We Think*, introduced him to the pragmatic approach that emphasizes the practical value of education. Bennabi also examined the writings of several Orientalists on Islam, including the works of Eugène Jung, particularly *Islam Between Life and Death* (Bousnah, 2019, pp. 93–94).

1.3. Major Works of Malek Bennabi

Malek Bennabi has often been described by scholars as the thinker of civilization, since the vast majority of his writings are devoted to analyzing the problems of civilization and the conditions necessary for its revival. His intellectual legacy includes several influential works, among the most notable of which are:

- The Qur'anic Phenomenon.
- Memoirs of Malek Bennabi (The Rottenness).
- The Conditions of Renaissance.
- For the Sake of Change.
- The Ideological Struggle in Colonized Countries.
- The Idea of an Islamic Commonwealth.
- In the Midst of the Battle.
- The Problem of Ideas in the Muslim World.
- The Problem of Culture.
- Memoirs of a Witness of the Century.
- The Birth of a Society (Boufoula & Ben Souilah, 2023, p. 10).

2- Manifestations of Underdevelopment According to Malek Bennabi



Source: Prepared by the Researcher.

2.1. The Absence of the World of Ideas

According to Malek Bennabi, underdevelopment is closely associated with the absence of the **world of ideas**, or with the dominance of ideas that are incompatible with the social order. In such circumstances, individuals become incapable of producing meaningful and productive achievements because the intellectual environment neither encourages creativity nor stimulates the development of their latent potential. Bennabi argues that the world of ideas influences society from two main perspectives:

- **First**, ideas constitute a fundamental driving force behind the advancement and renaissance of social life.
- **Second**, the absence or distortion of ideas becomes a major source of weakness that obstructs social growth and sustainable development.

2.2. The Disintegration of the Network of Social Relations

Bennabi maintains that the network of social relations begins to disintegrate as soon as the symptoms of underdevelopment emerge. Social cohesion gradually weakens, giving rise to excessive individualism. Over time, this fragmentation develops into a chronic condition that erodes the unity and cohesion of the social body. Since ideas play a fundamental role in the process of civilizational construction, their effectiveness depends largely on the strength and integrity of social relationships. Corrupted relationships within the world of persons inevitably produce negative consequences for both the world of ideas and the world of objects. Thus, the social decline affecting the world of persons inevitably extends to ideas and material production, resulting in a state of deprivation and civilizational stagnation (Azroual, 2019, p. 51).

2.3. Social Deprivation

Social deprivation, according to Malek Bennabi, is one of the major manifestations of underdevelopment. It is reflected in a society's inability to provide its members with the social guarantees necessary to ensure their dignity, well-being, and self-realization. This deprivation manifests itself in various forms, including unemployment, inadequate access to food, and deficiencies in healthcare and education. Bennabi devoted considerable attention to this issue in his writings, emphasizing that the provision of such social guarantees is an indispensable prerequisite for building civilization.

He argued that individuals living in a society that has failed to attain the characteristics of a civilized community are inevitably exposed to social deprivation. This condition is both a consequence and an indicator of the society's lack of

effectiveness. Accordingly, Bennabi regarded social deprivation as one of the most significant features expressing the underdevelopment and civilizational backwardness experienced by the Islamic world (Saoud, 2006, p. 170).

2.4. Colonizability as a Manifestation of Civilizational Backwardness in the Islamic World

Malek Bennabi viewed colonizability as a psychological condition characterized by a weakened sense of patriotism, national dignity, and collective responsibility. In such a condition, individuals become preoccupied with their daily economic concerns and personal survival at the expense of broader societal and civilizational responsibilities. Bennabi first introduced this concept in 1948 in his influential book *The Conditions of Renaissance*, where he defined it as the set of negative intellectual, psychological, social, and political conditions that place a society in a state of weakness, incapacity, and vulnerability when confronted with external challenges, thereby depriving it of the ability to resist them effectively.

Bennabi maintained that colonialism succeeded in dominating the Islamic world primarily because of this internal condition of colonizability rather than because of the inherent strength of the colonizing powers. He argued that colonizability was itself the outcome of the ideological conflict prevailing within colonized societies—a conflict deliberately exploited by colonial powers. According to Bennabi, no nation can be conquered unless it has already become internally weak and socially fragmented.

To illustrate this argument, Bennabi referred to the history of the Crusades. He noted that European pilgrims traveling through Muslim territories during the Middle Ages observed the growing insecurity of travel routes, the spread of banditry, and the inability of the Islamic authorities to maintain order. These observations convinced European powers that the Islamic state had entered a period of decline, encouraging them to launch military campaigns against the Levant and occupy Jerusalem. In Bennabi's view, internal weakness always precedes external domination.

More importantly, Bennabi introduced the notion of psychological colonialism, which he considered synonymous with colonizability. He argued that this mentality emerged within Muslim societies long before colonial powers contemplated occupying them. As he famously stated, colonizability was formed beneath the domes of the mosques of the Islamic world, not in London, Paris, Moscow, or Washington (Tabaa & Fatih, 2017, pp. 61–63).

Bennabi further explained that colonizability represents the internal factor that responds to the external colonial factor. It reflects a profound psychological surrender that facilitates and perpetuates colonial domination, making liberation increasingly difficult. Consequently, the psychological readiness of colonized peoples to submit to foreign rule becomes one of the strongest factors ensuring the continuity of colonial influence.

According to Bennabi, contemporary Western domination no longer requires direct military occupation. Instead, it operates through cultural, intellectual, and psychological influence that instills feelings of inferiority, dependence, and admiration for Western superiority. This mentality has contributed to the persistence of dependency in many Arab societies, where governments often compete to secure the approval of Western powers, particularly the United States.

Bennabi's concept of colonizability remains relevant in explaining the persistence of foreign influence in the contemporary Arab and Islamic world. It helps account for the continued spread of poverty, illiteracy, underdevelopment, declining educational standards, and the expansion of political, financial, and administrative corruption (Tabaa & Fatih, 2017, pp. 64–65).

Finally, Bennabi argued that a person suffering from colonizability becomes psychologically oppressed, alienated from his or her identity, and deprived of self-confidence and authenticity. Such a condition inevitably weakens the individual's belief in his or her ability to transform reality and contribute to civilizational progress. Thus, colonizability, as an individual psychological condition, originates from a negative self-concept that diminishes personal effectiveness and confidence in one's capacity to accomplish meaningful tasks. As a result, the Muslim individual becomes unable to fulfill his or her pioneering social and civilizational role, tending instead toward passivity, demanding rights while neglecting corresponding responsibilities (Tabaa & Fatih, 2017, pp. 70–71).

2.5. Culture and the Phenomenon of Glorifying the Past

Malek Bennabi argues that when culture becomes preoccupied with glorifying the past, it is transformed into an **antiquarian culture**, in which intellectual activity no longer moves society forward but instead remains confined to the achievements of previous generations. Such an orientation, he maintains, has profoundly influenced educational systems, making them excessively centered on historical knowledge at the expense of the demands of the present and the challenges of the future. Consequently, ideas become imprisoned by an excessive attachment to the past, which gradually turns into a psychological refuge rather than a source of inspiration for renewal.

For Bennabi, this tendency destroys every genuine hope for social transformation. While Western societies actively seek the conditions of progress and, in many instances, adopt principles that originated in Islamic civilization without explicitly acknowledging their origins, many Muslim societies remain absorbed in recounting the achievements of their ancestors. Nevertheless, Bennabi was by no means opposed to authenticity. On the contrary, he was deeply committed to his Arab-Islamic identity and believed that Muslims should acquire a genuine understanding of their culture and return to their religious, intellectual, and moral foundations. However, he insisted that pride in one's heritage must be translated into practical action rather than remaining merely an emotional attachment or rhetorical slogan.

Accordingly, Bennabi maintained that the destiny of nations depends on their ability to transform their cultural heritage and accumulated historical experience into productive intellectual capital capable of supporting renewal, modernization, and civilizational advancement (Bour, 2017, pp. 121–122).

2.6. The Disease of Ease and Impossibility

The Disease of Ease

According to Bennabi, Muslims sometimes underestimate the complexity of social and civilizational problems, assuming that they can be solved easily and without sustained effort. This tendency, which he described as the **disease of ease**, is reflected in the belief that eloquent speeches or superficial solutions are sufficient to resolve the deep-rooted challenges confronting Muslim societies. Likewise, many individuals avoid profound intellectual reflection and instead prefer simplistic explanations that require little effort (Al-Abed, 2014, p. 390).

Bennabi further argued that when political action is guided by the principle of ease, it naturally attracts individuals who evaluate issues according to immediate convenience rather than long-term consequences. When this tendency is reinforced by political propaganda and emotional slogans, societies become increasingly vulnerable to opportunistic politics. In this context, slogans such as colonialism, imperialism, and patriotism may be manipulated merely as attractive political rhetoric rather than as concepts leading to genuine reform. As Bennabi observed, such slogans often serve to "lubricate the slope," making society slide more easily toward superficial and ineffective solutions (Bennabi, 1981, p. 27).

The Disease of Impossibility

The opposite tendency is what Bennabi called the disease of impossibility. In this case, individuals perceive challenges as impossible to overcome, even when practical solutions exist. They may exaggerate the magnitude of problems to avoid making the necessary effort, or they may underestimate their own capabilities and consequently regard meaningful change as unattainable.

Historically, Bennabi noted that some colonized peoples considered the liberation of their countries impossible. Similarly, many Muslims today continue to wait for a miraculous savior—another Salah al-Din—to reunite the Muslim world, while believing that any attempt to revive Islamic civilization is destined to fail. Such a mentality reflects psychological defeat rather than objective reality and constitutes one of the major obstacles to civilizational renewal (Al-Abed, 2014, p. 390).

3. The Islamic World and Its Struggle Between Its Underdeveloped Reality and the Advanced Western Reality

The emergence of Western civilizational dominance represented a decisive turning point in the history of the Islamic world. It generated a series of intellectual, cultural, and political challenges that gradually marginalized Muslim societies and their civilization within a global order increasingly shaped by Western influence. Consequently, the Islamic world found itself compelled to engage with Western civilization and adapt to its intellectual and institutional frameworks.

Bennabi vividly described this situation by comparing the Islamic world to a patient seeking treatment in the pharmacy of Western civilization. He asked: "The Islamic world has entered the pharmacy of Western civilization seeking a cure—but for what disease, and with what medicine?" Through this metaphor, Bennabi emphasized that effective treatment cannot begin without first identifying the real causes of the illness. In his view, the Islamic world required a profound diagnosis of its internal civilizational crisis before searching for appropriate remedies.

Bennabi further argued that contemporary Muslim societies have borrowed numerous ideas from Europe without considering the social and cultural conditions that originally gave those ideas their effectiveness. As a result, both inherited Islamic ideas and imported Western ideas have lost much of their vitality and social value. This uncritical borrowing has inflicted considerable moral and material damage on the development of the Islamic world. The Islamic world's entry into the global civilizational order was therefore, in Bennabi's view, unplanned and indiscriminate, producing more harm than benefit.

Nevertheless, Bennabi did not reject learning from other civilizations. On the contrary, he regarded benefiting from the experiences of others as both legitimate and necessary. However, he insisted that borrowed solutions must always be adapted to the historical, cultural, and social conditions of the receiving society. As he stated, "Nothing is weaker than refusing to benefit from the experiences of others; however, any borrowed solution must be referred back to the realities and conditions of the society that adopts it" (Taibaoui, 2021, pp. 58–60). This principle reflects Bennabi's broader conviction that genuine civilizational renewal cannot be achieved through imitation but only through creative adaptation grounded in a society's own cultural and historical context.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper finds that, in light of the persistent manifestations of underdevelopment and civilizational decline currently experienced by the Islamic world, Muslim and Arab societies should give serious consideration to the ideas advanced by Malek Bennabi as a means of overcoming the cycle of stagnation and joining the path of civilizational progress achieved by more advanced societies. Bennabi's ideas were not merely theoretical reflections; rather, they constituted a realistic and comprehensive framework for civilizational renewal.

His vision may therefore be regarded as an integrated civilizational project that emphasizes the reconstruction of ideas, culture, and social institutions as essential prerequisites for sustainable development. Several countries have drawn inspiration from Bennabi's intellectual legacy and have achieved significant developmental progress. Among the most frequently cited examples is Malaysia, whose remarkable civilizational and socio-economic development has often been associated with the adoption of principles consistent with Bennabi's vision, particularly those related to the conditions of renaissance and the foundations of sustainable development.

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