

## *Bias in Curricula and Course Contents*

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HODA HEGAZY

EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS are considered the prime media for transmitting a cultural tradition. In modern times, knowledge has ceased to be a relatively stable body of information and ideas, as was the case in the past. Rather, knowledge has become vast in volume and is subject to a continuous process of evaluation and reevaluation at an extremely rapid pace. Against this backdrop, it has become almost impossible for educational institutions to transmit the totality of the body of knowledge available. Thus, it has become imperative for such institutions to select from an almost limitless amount of data and ideas, and to define for the student a certain set of values that society at large has adopted. This matter raises a methodological issue, namely, that of selecting from the body of knowledge available a limited number of subjects which students should learn, then deciding on the proper content to be taught in the different educational stages.

Curricula are usually formulated and set based on a number of factors, the most important being the prevalent ideology in a given society, its educational philosophy, its value system, and its concept of human nature. Moreover, the curricula are determined in accordance with the needs of the individuals and their stages of development. Inevitably, all educational activities raise questions pertaining to the values on which is based the totality of the educational process. This means that developing a curriculum inevitably necessitates a process of inclusion and exclusion. Certain elements from the cultural tradition are excluded or marginalized, others are reinterpreted or given centrality, then transmitted to the student as though they constituted the whole tradition.



and attitudes manifested in Arabic reading books used in Egyptian primary schools prior to 1952 and those taught in 1972, it became apparent that each set of readers has its own biases.<sup>1</sup> For instance, readers before 1952 dealt with Egyptian history through its various historical epochs. One finds references to Pharaonic Egypt, to Arab/Islamic Egypt and to modern Egypt (after 1800) without underestimating or belittling any epoch. The 1972 readers, however, view Egyptian history in a different manner. The Pharaonic era, though still viewed as a great one, is not given the same centrality it enjoyed in readers taught before 1952. Egypt's Arabic/Islamic past is glorified, while its importance and direct relation to present-day Egypt is emphasized. Egypt's modern history, though frequently referred to, is usually regarded as a dark epoch (till the 1952 revolution) and its significance is belittled. Conspicuous differences are also found in the concept of identity found in the two sets of readers. While the readers taught before 1952 emphasize the various aspects of the Egyptian national identity, the 1972 readers stress only the Arabic/Islamic national identity.

Analysis of the recommended references in a course on "the Jewish history of education" in an American university yielded very dramatic results. These references, considered basic works in this field of study, stressed the common aspects between different Jewish educational institutions in different countries and eras, disregarding some basic differences. This was done in a way that seemed "objective," "neutral," and unbiased, for an impressive amount of data was marshaled to support the hypothesis that there is one "Jewish educational system" that derives its oneness from its Jewishness. Upon closer examination, however, one discovers a biased presupposition, namely, the belief that Jewish educational systems are independent of the civilizations in which the Jewish communities live. Another presupposition follows from the previous one, namely, that the scholar in this field should study what Jewish educational institutions have in common to the exclusion of all else. Most references recommended in this course are, not surprisingly, dedicated to the study of the common aspects, though they might have very little explanatory value when compared with those aspects that set one Jewish community apart from others, or what distinguishes one Jewish educational system from others in different times and other places.

The impact of the educational systems of the societies in which the

Jewish communities lived on their respective educational institutions and instruction systems was either marginalized or disregarded altogether. Jewish educational systems were thus viewed as having emerged either *ex-nihilo*, or out of a hypothetical, quintessential Jewish religious and cultural tradition. In other words, the bias underlying the initial presupposition was given an air of objectivity and neutrality through a biased selection (inclusion and exclusion) of data.

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The same could be said of a sociology course which I once studied in the USA. This course attempted to explore the relationship between Islam and Capitalism using Max Weber's thesis pertaining to the relationship between Protestant ethics and the spirit of capitalism. There is a complex, perhaps unconscious, bias implicit in the very choice of topic. This is the case because it postulates rational (Western) capitalism, which is specific to Occidental civilization, as some kind of ultimate, though silent, point of reference, and a yardstick by which all economic and cultural developments are judged. Once this Occidental perspective (or paradigm) is adopted, certain questions are raised to the exclusion of others and certain issues are underscored to the exclusion of others.

But these questions and views might be of marginal importance, or even completely irrelevant, obscuring more fundamental and relevant issues in case a different perspective (or paradigm) is adopted. Once the perspective is changed, other issues move to the center and other questions become more relevant and important. Economic developments and different modes of modernization are then judged according to different criteria and seen in a completely different light. This might be anticipating things, so let us begin at the beginning.

Rather than take a simplistic economic view of the world of ideas, reducing it to the level of mere epiphenomena (the real phenomena being modes, forces, or relations of production) German sociologist Max Weber saw the world of economy and ideas as closely intertwined. In other words, he recognized the irreducible complexity of the human phenomenon. For instance, his introduction of the category of religion in sociological studies has surely helped to dispel any illusions about the simplicity of social phenomena. It is no longer possible to explain society in terms of one factor or another, nor is it possible to rest content with an atomistic view of society that regards it as an aggregate, not a complex, of different elements (as is the case with economic models of analysis). Even though





the here and the hereafter, and between the real and the ideal. In an immanent-pantheist context, the aim of the believer is either to withdraw completely from, or to achieve harmony with, "the world," whereas within the transcendental-monotheist frame of reference, the goal is the mastery of this world in the name of another. This attempt at mastery of a world in flux in the name of a unified ideal is already one step on the road to rationalization, dealing with the infinite flux not on an ad hoc basis, but rather, in a total manner. This is a value-oriented rationality which paved the way to, and was eventually replaced by, goal-oriented rationality. The systematization of religious life also led to the elimination of such ad hoc methods of control as magic and crude forms of soothsaying. The prophet replaced the magician, and the process went on until eventually the bureaucrat replaced all.

Weber's arguments are all interconnected and the way in which they are presented in this paper does not do them justice. For instance, the salvation-oriented religious outlook helped reinforce the autonomy of the Occidental city by breaking kinship ties, and by replacing family or tribal groupings with broader religious ties. So whereas the Oriental city remained clannish or tribal in character, the Occidental city became an autonomous professional grouping of believers. If the salvation-oriented religious outlook helped in the origination of the autonomy of the city, some of the autonomous urban classes, in turn, proved to be the only possible carriers of one variety of the ethics of this religion. Weber argues that neither the landed, nor the military aristocracy, nor the peasantry could have developed a religious outlook that stressed individual responsibility and accountability. It is only small tradesmen who have the time to meditate, whose very occupation forces them to engage in the processes of calculation, and who are quite conscious of their status. Only this urban group can espouse a world outlook based on an inner-worldly asceticism.

It may be observed that the interrelations between the various aspects of this argument are such that it takes a spiral form, one aspect leading to another which, in turn, begins to act on the original causal factor. Some commentators on the work of Weber (*The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*) suggest that his work represents a dialog with the ghost of Marx. In some important aspects, Weber was seeking to emphasize the complexity of social phenomena and to show the inadequacy of any

conception of the causal primacy of one specific factor in contradistinction to others. But to conclude on the basis of the preceding argument that Weber attributed to ideas causal primacy and that he denied socio-economic formations any powers of determination, would be to miss the point. As indicated earlier, his account of the rise of modern capitalism does not envisage it as being *caused by* the Protestant ethic nor *vice versa*. Rather, he saw an elective affinity between the economic system and religious belief. If this is true of the specific Protestant ethic thesis, it is even more so of the wider thesis about the process of rationalization in Occidental civilization. It seems the distinction between Occidental rationality and what he classified as non-rational civilizations is correlated with another: the distinction between feudal and patrimonial socio-economic formations. It seems there is an “elective affinity,” if we may use the term in this new context, between rationalism and feudalism on the one hand, and non-rationalism and patrimonialism on the other. Without going into the details of the distinction, it seems that Weber argues that patrimonial societies such as China and the Islamic state – where there is no individual property to speak of (or, when it exists, it is precarious and not hereditary), no self-equipped military owing fealty to a feudal landlord, but rather a military force recruited and paid by the state, and no formal law but rather general principles of justice or a set of laws tailored to specific situations – were not conducive to the rise of the rationalist impulse.

The preceding account is not meant to be a synopsis of the Weberian thesis about the rationalism of Occidental civilization; it simply tries to underscore some aspects of that thesis which are relevant to this study. Perhaps the most important conclusion from the standpoint of this chapter is that the Protestant ethic thesis is a part of a whole. When engaging in a comparative approach, only complete wholes can be subjected to comparisons. It is a worthless mental exercise to try to compare two component parts belonging to two different systems or structures. In that sense, the Protestantism-capitalism thesis cannot be divorced from the wider context of the rationalization thesis. Weber tried to study this specifically Occidental phenomenon of rationalization as manifested in what he considered to be specifically Occidental phenomena: the city, secular law, feudalism, inner worldly asceticism, etc., and it was this specificity that concerned him most.

Any specificity can be viewed in two distinct ways: from the viewpoint of its uniqueness, or from the viewpoint of its universality. If they are concerned with defining uniqueness, the researchers try to discover the features that set one culture apart from another. If, on the other hand, they want to discover the universal in the specific, they try to discover what is common between one culture and another. To reach this level of generality, one needs a language not reducible to the specificity of any one single system or structure, or else one would be reducing the laws and language of one structure to another, thereby missing both the uniqueness and specificity, and the universality. That is why nobody has asked the question: Why did the medieval European artist not use the Arabesque? Or, why did modern art in China not produce impressionist or post-impressionist paintings? “Arabesque” and “impressionism” are terms specific to the culture<sup>5</sup> that produced them and therefore cannot serve as terms of universal applicability. The question should be formulated in terms of concepts of symmetry, unity, and beauty, because such terms are on a level of generality that makes for their applicability to almost all systems. All cultures have a sense (consciousness) of symmetry, but not all cultures have an Impressionist school of painting.

What I am suggesting here is that the very terminology of the problematic of capitalism and Islam is misleading. Occidental capitalism, if we accept the Weberian viewpoint, is specific to Occidental civilization. But to try to envisage Islam using this category of capitalism would be to lapse into Euro-centricity, or what two American scholars on India once termed the “imperialism of categories.”<sup>6</sup>

It was entirely appropriate for Weber to use the phenomenon of Occidental capitalism to further explore his culture and its specific and enduring relationships, but to use the same set of terms to explore the specific nature of another culture is quite misleading.

This is the basic flaw of Russell Stone’s “Religious Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism in Tunisia”<sup>7</sup> where the author concludes, after some empirical research, that the Jerba sect, a Muslim religious sect with what may be termed a Calvinist state of mind, has a definite orientation toward capitalist enterprise. This demonstration of the relationship between the religious ethic and capitalist activity, the author argues, “again suggests that Weber’s hypothesis generally applies to many societies. Just as the Protestant ethic led to capitalist development in Europe at the time of the

Reformation, likewise a similar religious ethic among Jerba merchants in Tunisia in the 19th and 20th Centuries resulted in successful capitalistic activity.”<sup>8</sup>

Stone’s conclusion is diametrically opposed to the spirit of Weber’s scholarly works and his preoccupations. Whereas Weber was concerned with specificity, precisely to loosen the grip of the idea of a general law applicable to all social phenomena, Stone wants to demonstrate the universal validity of the “Weberian law.” But even within the confines of his own thesis, Stone demonstrates implicitly the very opposite of what he has set out to prove. If the ethic of Calvinist Geneva helped bring about an economic system (or pattern) that prevailed all over Europe, the ethic of the small tribe of Jerba did not lead to similar developments. Therefore, the original question remains more or less the same – why there, and not here?

Maxime Rodinson’s *Islam and Capitalism*<sup>9</sup> is not as limited in scope or argument as the preceding work, but nevertheless it suffers from the same constricting empiricism. This very erudite work sets forth to demolish many sacred myths and long-established certainties in the West concerning the “Arab mentality” and the submissiveness of the Islamic mind. Rodinson ably demonstrates that Islamic civilization had some seeds of rationalization. There is a great deal of appeal to human reason in the Qur’an and an exhortation to reflection. He also shows that there was an Islamic world market<sup>10</sup> and a strong commercial sector during certain periods in medieval Islam. Rodinson likewise indicates that the “coefficient of magic” was no higher in Islamic society than in any other.<sup>11</sup>

But Rodinson, despite the usefulness of his work in some respects, misses the essential point and operates on a strictly economic level. As a self-avowed materialist, he denies religion any autonomous role, and denies its absolute role in history. One justifiably wonders: Can a true materialist write about the sociology of religion without reductionism? Would not the very assumptions of the discipline run counter to his view of humankind and history? That is why in a book on Islam and capitalism, Rodinson, in a facile manner, writes off “the process of systematic idealization to which the Caliphate of ‘Umar has been subjected in Sunni tradition.”<sup>12</sup> But it is precisely this process of idealization that matters most on this level of analysis, and to write it off as a mere “illusion” is to miss the point. Rodinson concentrates on legislation, economic figures,

sayings and maxims to prove that nothing in Islam or Islamic civilization would inhibit the development of capitalism. But then figures, like maxims, can be interpreted in many ways, and it was probably the general orientation of the culture, a socio-economic formation that buttresses an outlook – and an outlook in turn that reinforces the formation – that made Islamic civilization take its particular form and no other.

Bryan Turner's *Weber and Islam*<sup>13</sup> is perhaps the only work I know of that tries to encompass the problem in its totality. For instance, he does not confine himself to religious ethics as Russell does, nor to economy and general principles as Rodinson does, but deals with the Islamic city, Islamic law and other related subjects with breadth of vision and knowledge of and respect for Islamic civilization. Turner does not lapse into Euro-centricity. However, rather than presenting a sustained argument, Turner lapses into mere comparative vignettes of various tenuously related subjects such as Allah and humankind and the difference between Shaykh and Saint. Each study in itself is very illuminating, but they do not interconnect and rather than answer the question about the relationship between Islam and capitalism, or even Islam and rationalization, the author tries to reconcile Weber's thesis about Oriental patrimonialism with Marx's thesis about the Asiatic mode of production.

The level of research in the area of Islamic civilization was, till very recently, monopolized by colonialists or by zealous missionaries sure of their cultural and religious superiority and unaware of their epistemological biases. Such Orientalists and missionaries produced excellent scholarly editions of the classics of Islamic civilization, but their work was inordinately ideological and ethnocentric. The work of Gustave E. von Grünebaum is an excellent example. His study of medieval Islam is a brilliant, erudite work made up of dehistoricized statements which give no explanation of the phenomenon at hand. For instance, "Islam," von Grünebaum says, "did not follow the West in changing the purpose of conduct from the static ideal of happiness to the dynamics of the pursuit of happiness."<sup>14</sup> This is a descriptive statement that adds nothing to one's knowledge. Moreover, by abstracting the trait of staticism, it turns history into a battlefield of allegorical absolutes, with an Islamic absolute always lagging behind. In another statement, von Grünebaum claims that "the West is ready to sacrifice the present for the future."<sup>15</sup> Any researcher knows that in the West, the ideal is no longer one of sacrifice or

renunciation, and only totalitarian societies are “stigmatized” by this virtue. Only recently have we begun to read works by young European social scientists who look at Islamic civilization not as an antique to be admired or condemned, but as a social process susceptible to the universal laws of change. However, most of the members of this group are materialists and reductionists who, like Rodinson, are busy exonerating the ghost of Marx.<sup>16</sup>

The level of available research and the ideological burden of the researchers might represent some impediments in the attempt to deal with the issue of Islam and capitalism, but the major hurdle is the very way in which the issue is formulated. If we accept the argument that there are no “natural” economic systems,<sup>17</sup> then capitalism, like Faustianism or futurism in the field of literature, is part of a language specific to one cultural formation and therefore does not have universal applicability. Occidental civilization, along with its cultural idiom, cannot be used to describe or examine another. What is needed is a general language and analytical categories, external to all systems and structures, but applicable, in some way, to all. Rather than capitalism, rationalization might be a more general and more appropriate term, in relation to which the issue can be rephrased as “rationalization and Islam.”

Yet, despite the more general nature of the term “rationalization” we still have problems. If we were to speak of “non-rational civilizations,” it would be like talking of “prelogical societies,” a notion that has been completely discredited. Every society has its form of rationalization, of matching means to ends. Weber himself detects in the Chinese empire forms of value-oriented rationalization. The issue is probably best phrased as “Islam and modernity.” It is an incontrovertible fact of our “modern” age that modern technology and science are global phenomena, and that any society that does not adopt them, in one form or another, perishes. A course on the subject would deal with relevant issues and ask questions such as: Can Islamic society adopt science and technology without losing its unique identity? How can Islam, or the reformist Islamic movements, mobilize the masses to achieve the transition from societies based on agriculture and low levels of technology to those bent on mastering nature? Phrased in this way, the issue becomes a question asked by the Muslims themselves from within, yet it is a question of universal significance. Then, rather than try to demonstrate that the Islamic city cannot produce capi-

talists, we can begin to ask what type of outlook the Islamic city generates. In this way, the whole structure, because it is approached from within, can begin to yield its secrets and give us its laws, which will no longer be considered defects to be corrected or wrongs to be righted. The fact that Islamic society never distinguished between secular and religious law – or at least even when there was a distinction, the ultimate legitimacy of law was religious – will not be a major drawback but simply a trait, a *donnée*, to be interpreted and explained, and probably evaluated. But when evaluating it, we should not accept as a criterion the degree of proximity to Occidental civilization. The totality of humankind's experience in the East and the West, past or present, should be the only standard.

Given our knowledge about the crisis of legitimization in secular society, coupled with our awareness that Occidental world mastery has led to world imperialism, two world wars, and a world about to be depleted of its natural resources, the idea of a religiously guided society might not be that unpalatable or non-rational after all. The concept of a Confucian accommodation with the world, be it the world of nature or the human-made world of history, might not be necessarily negative.

Adopting some aspects of such a Confucian perspective, or any non-Western perspective, would lead to posing a set of questions completely different from those questions that result from adopting a Western perspective. The way Western capitalism, forms of economic development in the Orient, and the varied forms of modernization in the world are studied would then take a completely different course. Each school curriculum would then posit its own questions based on a common universal human concept.