

The *Socio-Intellectual Foundations*  
of MALEK BENNABI'S APPROACH to  
CIVILIZATION

BADRANE BENLAHCENE



THE SOCIO-INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF  
MALEK BENNABI'S APPROACH  
to **CIVILIZATION**

IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

The SOCIO-INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS  
*of* MALEK BENNABI'S *approach to*  
**CIVILIZATION**

**Badrane Benlahcene**

Abridged by Alison Lake

© International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2013

The International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT)  
P.O. Box 669  
Herndon, VA 20172, USA  
[www.iiit.org](http://www.iiit.org)

IIIT London Office  
P.O. Box 126  
Richmond, Surrey  
TW9 2UD, UK  
[www.iiituk.com](http://www.iiituk.com)

This book is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of the publishers.

The views and opinions expressed in this book are those of the author and not necessarily those of the publishers.

978-1-56564-596-7

### **Series Editors**

Dr. Anas S. al-Shaikh-Ali  
Shiraz Khan

*Typesetting by Sideek Ali*  
*Cover design by Shiraz Khan*

## IIIT Books-In-Brief Series

The IIIT Books-In-Brief Series is a valuable collection of the Institute's key publications written in condensed form designed to give readers a core understanding of the main contents of the original. Produced in a short, easy to read, time-saving format, these companion synopses offer a close, carefully written overview of the larger publication and it is hoped will stimulate readers into further exploration of the original.

**The Socio-Intellectual Foundations of Malek Bennabi's Approach to Civilization** was published in complete form in 2011. Since Samuel Huntington's essay "The Clash of Civilizations?" first appeared concern over civilization and conflict has been reintroduced into the debate on the world order. Malek Bennabi (1905–1973), prominent Algerian thinker and great Muslim intellectual, intently focused on unravelling the causes of Muslim decline and the success of Western civilization and culture. The key problem he theorized lay not in the Qur'an or Islamic faith but in Muslims themselves. The author investigates Bennabi's approach to civilization and the fundamental principles drawn, using metatheorizing methodology. In doing so he sheds further light on perhaps one of the more intriguing elements of Bennabi's theory, that civilization is governed by internal-external and social-intellectual factors and that an equation can be generated for civilization itself. This equation of  $\text{Man} + \text{Soil} + \text{Time} = \text{Civilization}$  and of which religion, according to Bennabi, forms the all-important catalyst, is explained and its significance in terms of the reversal of Muslim decline evaluated. What is clearly apparent is that for Bennabi, Man is the central force in any civilizing process and without him the other two elements are of no value.

With regard to outcomes, Bennabi's unerring conviction that unless Muslims changed their spiritual condition they could not effect any far-reaching, meaningful change in society is echoed in the Qur'anic verse:

“Verily, never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves” (13:11).

---

**Abridged Edition of Badrane Benlahcene’s Original**

*THE SOCIO-INTELLECTUAL FOUNDATIONS OF MALEK BENNABI’S  
APPROACH TO CIVILIZATION*

ISBN hbk: 978-1-56564-368-0

ISBN pbk: 978-1-56564-367-3

2011

## INTRODUCTION

This book focuses on the work of Malek Bennabi (1905–1973), a prominent Algerian thinker and great Muslim intellectual, bringing new insight to his methodology and philosophy. Bennabi, whose research unraveled the causes of Muslim decline and the success of Western civilization and culture, concluded that problems lay not in the Qur'an or Islamic faith but in Muslims. A true picture of the effects of colonization and the factors governing civilization could solve the problems of the Muslim world and launch a new Muslim renaissance.

The work investigates Bennabi's approach to civilization and the principles drawn using metatheorizing methodology (*Mu*), going beyond available literature to present Bennabi's interdisciplinary approach to civilization and analyze its underlying structure. It highlights Bennabi's theory that internal-external and social-intellectual factors govern civilization and an equation can be generated for civilization itself.

According to Bennabi, religion is the most important catalyst for this equation of  $\text{Man} + \text{Soil} + \text{Time} = \text{Civilization}$ , and is significant for the reversal of Muslim decline. For Bennabi, Man is the central force in any civilizing process, and without him the other two elements lack value.

Bennabi's belief that Muslims must first change their spiritual condition before successfully changing society or civilization is echoed in the Qur'anic verse 13:11: "Verily, never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves."

The study of civilizations and global change continues to feature prominently in academic circles. Many researchers and scholars called for the review of works of leading civilizationists. Bennabi, the Muslim

world's first social philosopher and social scientist since Ibn Khaldūn, searched for universal laws and fundamental principles that govern human societies and civilizations and determine their destiny in history. His concern about the decline of Muslim civilization led him to analyze its causes and provide solutions. Rather than address the dilemma with economics, politics, and ideology, he emphasized the role of ideas as a catalyst for the growth of civilization.

With a deep understanding of Islam and the social sciences, Bennabi approached the performance of human societies and the dynamics of culture and civilization from a universal perspective. He aimed to resolve societal problems within the framework of civilization, the intelligible unit for study of socio-historical phenomena. He said, "The problem of every people, in its essence, is that of its civilization."

Bennabi's philosophy is an integrated system of interpretation based on a deep understanding of Islam. His approach to the study of civilization and its course in history helps diagnose the Muslim civilizational crisis and explain its origins and solutions. His scientific training combined with a historical, sociological, and philosophical outlook enabled him to analyze European civilization and generate original thought and analysis of the Ummah's strengths and weaknesses.

This study aims to determine the different factors that influenced Bennabi's approach to civilization. It considers his tools, methods, concepts, and theories and analyzes his process and approach. The end goal is to understand contemporary civilization and its consequences on social life and provide a civilizational framework for decision-makers.

Bennabi's metatheoretical approach reflects intellectual efforts in the Muslim world since the early 19th century that sought to resolve backwardness and reactivate Muslim civilization, via a comprehensive system of analysis. The resulting interdisciplinary approach draws from philosophy of history, the social sciences, and the heritage of Ibn Khaldūn. This perspective is essential for diagnosing the different partial dilemmas in the Muslim world and other civilizations.

To allow a better appreciation of Bennabi's concept of civilization, we use George Ritzer's metatheorizing approach, the systematic study of the underlying structure of sociological theory. It adapts more systematically to the Islamic intellectual and cultural framework, the

fundamental sphere of development of Bennabi's ideas. The author uses the first type of metatheorizing, (*Mu*). The goal of the present study is to better understand Bennabi's theory of civilization with the four dimensions of the subtype of metatheorizing (*Mu*).

*Mu* involves the study of theory to produce a deeper understanding of extant theory. Its internal-social dimension looks within the field of study and focuses on social rather than cognitive factors. The external-social dimension shifts to a macro level to view the larger society and its impact on theorizing, while emphasizing the relationships between the theorization process and various institutions. With Bennabi this dimension focuses on the relationship between external-social factors and the formulation and development of his approach.

The internal-intellectual dimension focuses on intellectual or cognitive issues that are traditionally internal to the study of civilization. It includes attempts to identify the major cognitive paradigms, schools of thought, paradigm changes, and the development of metatheoretical tools. The external-intellectual dimension turns to other academic disciplines for ideas, tools, concepts, and theories for the study of civilization. In Bennabi's case, this dimension involves the impact of the Qur'an, religious thought in the Muslim world, philosophy, psychology, the natural sciences, and other intellectual activities outside the field of civilization studies and its two dominant paradigms.

*Mu* provides systematic methods to understand, evaluate, criticize, and improve existing theories. Metatheorists systematically study detailed, often comparative, arrays of sociological theories. *Mu* enables a more adequate evaluation and critical analysis of extant theories.

This study's comparative method uses the *Mu* model to understand Bennabi's approach to civilization and compare his approach with Ibn Khaldūn and others. This research uses a mixed-methods approach by combining historical analysis, comparative analysis, and content analysis. Through comparison the author intends to understand and discover the differences and similarities between Bennabi's approach and others'. The content analysis method addresses Bennabi's concepts, assumptions, and terms to understand his expressions, uncover the underlying structure of his approach, and view his various conceptions as a system for an in-depth understanding based on *Mu*. The micro-macro continuum, an epistemological device for addressing the complex social world, is also used.



The main sources of the present study to analyze Bennabi's framework and his approach to civilization are the original works of Bennabi, who published all his books under one title, *Mushkilāt al-Ḥaḍārah* (Problems of Civilization), and other works on sociology and its various branches, philosophy of history, anthropology, history, and other social sciences. The author uses other works as secondary sources.

## Chapter One

### Civilization: Concepts and Approaches

An interdisciplinary approach is most productive for theory and research in civilization since it covers all aspects of the phenomenon. When investigating the development of the concept of "civilization" and approaches to its issues throughout history, it can help to identify the dominant paradigms and schools in the field of civilization studies.

Determining how the concept of civilization arose from diverse cultural and linguistic traditions in various civilizations is challenging especially in Western and Muslim traditions. Also difficult is the controversy over various definitions assigned to civilization's various fields. Most researchers agree that civilizations are the broadest cultural entities. Huntington, who places civilization in the context of history and development throughout time, also combines civilization with religion, a central characteristic of civilization, as did Ibn Khaldūn, Toynbee, Bennabi, and other civilization scholars.

Islam and the Prophet Muhammad (ṢAAS)\* changed the foundations of social relationships in tribal Arab society to an ideas-based civil Islamic culture that combined different social strata and ethnic groups. As founder of a new society and civilization, Prophet Muhammad realized urban development should replace a nomadic and tribal culture. His city of Madinah was the nucleus to transform civilization.

The term 'civilization' first appeared in Muslim cultural traditions in the 14th century writings of Ibn Khaldūn. He introduced *ḥaḍārah* and 'Umrān, comparable with the Western term 'civilization,' and 'Ilm al-'Umrān ('the science of civilization'). Ibn Khaldūn viewed civilization

---

\* (ṢAAS) – *Ṣallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa sallam*. 'May the peace and blessings of God be upon him.' Said whenever the name of the Prophet Muhammad is mentioned.

as a necessary state where humans dwell and settle together. His concept underlies the dynamic character of the phenomenon in the course of human development.

The concept of civilization developed further among Muslim intellectuals in the late 19th century with the Islamic revival and the first confrontations with modern Europe. The concept of *ḥaḍārah* became popular among scientific and intellectual circles in the Arab world, and Bennabi was a pioneer in choosing it to denote ‘civilization.’ In other languages of the Muslim world, *madaniyyah* or its derivations were used.

Muslim and Western perspectives agree on rudimentary elements of civilization: city dwelling, order or organization, and sedentary life. Languages’ various words for civilization convey that civilization contains urban society, some form of government, a form of literacy, the capacity of humans to transform their environment and lives, specialized functions, a network of social relationships, and a belief system and concept of God or a higher being.

Despite broad agreement on key qualities of civilizations, there are differences in perspective, methodology, focus, and concepts. Various approaches are viewed within the dominant paradigms of philosophy, history, and social sciences with their sub-paradigms of anthropology and sociology. The presentation provides a framework to understand the issue of civilization in general and Bennabi’s conception in particular.

The philosophy of history emerged as an endeavor to give rational explanations to events. While history is a ‘first order’ study of past actions, events, and situations, philosophy of history is a ‘second order’ study: the study of the study of these topics. It can be considered a ‘meta’ study, not dealing directly with events, actions, and situations; instead, this indirect study seeks to explain and elaborate answers about the past. Philosophers of history pursue comprehensive views of the process of history.

Historians seek to describe the past, why society changes, the role of actors and providence in history, and universal patterns in historical movements. Some schools of thought emphasized the presence of divine will, while others exalted the role of the individual, or economic and other impersonal forces in the historical process. In a progressive

approach to history, Plato, Herder, Hegel, and many other European thinkers viewed the Judeo-Christian views of time and history as progress in a straight line combined with the classical notion of historical cycles.

Without a generally accepted conceptual scheme that could provide a framework of unity, those who attempted to write world history have used three approaches: the model of series (sequence) of cultures or civilizations in which all cultures (civilizations) are subject to the same developmental pattern; the progress model; and the simple parallel histories of humankind's diverse peoples. The sequential model is the most developed and emerged from the works of the great civilization scholars such as Ibn Khaldūn.

Compared with the traditional paradigm of the philosophy of history and its various approaches to civilization, the social sciences paradigm is just emerging. Anthropology was the first social science to address the study of human civilization and culture. Civilization, in the anthropological tradition, is the highest state of culture and the broadest cultural identity.

Sociologists approach history from a different angle. Historical sociology does not intend primarily to build developmental models of the structured processes of change. It focuses upon history while examining the social aspects of historical events, facts, or institutions. In this context, civilization, as a large-scale phenomenon and long-term historical and evolutionary process of development, belongs to macrosociology. Like historians and philosophers of history, macrosociologists believe they can understand the most basic processes of change in human life in broader spans of time of analysis.

The most pressing problems of our time are increasingly seen as macrosociological and requiring macrosociological theory and research for solutions. Many microsociological problems and developments cannot be understood or addressed except in a context of broader societal trends. Macrosociology, with its focus on units of analysis, has contributed to the study of large-scale phenomena by analyzing long-term processes, cultural systems, societies, and civilization.

Sociology of change has contributed to the study of civilization and historical change by categorizing levels of change based on a single variable: size (family, society, culture, civilization, world); period

(historical, long-term, short-term); or aspect (cultural, intellectual, and civilizational).

The empirically-focused social sciences paradigm has avoided more theoretical and philosophical questions. The literature has demonstrated a methodological need for interdisciplinary study of civilization and a systematic examination of its complexity. The various concepts of 'civilization' could assist in considering its multi-faceted character and inadequate existing approaches. The failure of other approaches to comprehensively manage the study of civilization suggests that civilization cannot be adequately studied at various levels in an isolated manner, but should be conceptualized in a global perspective.

## Chapter Two

### **The Major Concepts of Bennabi's Approach to Civilization**

Bennabi criticized the reformist and modernist trends in the modern Muslim world for overlooking the causes of the crisis and only focusing on symptoms. He asserted that efforts to ignite a renaissance in the Muslim world did not produce a systematic approach to the crisis. The problem was rooted in the Muslim culture of the post-*al-Muwahḥid* era, and Bennabi said the historical process paved the way for colonizability. Colonization is not the main reason for the present situation in the Muslim world, but our vulnerability to be colonized is one of the many secondary factors.

Bennabi's definitions of civilization are varied. He recognized that civilization activates social capacities to face crucial problems of a society, and indicated the balance between the moral and material aspects in human life. Since society justifies human activities in the realm of history, society is the core force in any civilizing process.

Bennabi asserted that moral and material factors are crucial to create balance and liveliness in human society and generate solidarity and unity. He defined civilization via its structure and social essence: "...the human being learns how to live within a group and perceives...the essential importance of the network of social relations in organizing human life in order to perform its historical function and responsibilities."

For Bennabi, the formula “Civilization = Man + Soil + Time” represented the equation of civilization, which structurally determines its elements or ingredients. These basic elements of any civilizational action or product indicate that the problem of civilization deconstructs into three categories: man, soil, and time.

Bennabi said all objects or things humans produce result from man (*Insān*), soil (*Turāb*), and time (*Waqt*). The three elements found in every society are the fundamentals for a society to begin a civilizing process. When we scientifically address the construction of human personality, soil exploitation, and time organization, only then will civilization provide the necessary social services and assistance humans need for development. In this equation, man (*Insān*) is the primary device of civilization and the central force in any civilizing process. Bennabi criticized the reformist movement in the Muslim world for its attempt to reform the milieu rather than the human factor, and argued that we must reform man. He stated that civilization rises with the integrated type of man who transforms his characteristics into his ideals to undertake his role in society.

The concept of orientation (*tawjīh*), according to Bennabi, refers to harmony in the movement of a civilization, unity in objectives, and avoidance of conflict between efforts starting from the same sources and aiming at similar objectives. Bennabi viewed culture as the primary factor influencing man as a social personality, and society as a collective body. The mode of culture determines the direction of civilization and its destiny in history.

In Bennabi’s equation, religion is essential to organize and direct the three elements towards their civilizing process. All civilizations without exception in history have flourished amid religious ideas. However, in Bennabi’s approach, religion cannot begin its civilizing function as a catalyst unless it embarks upon a civilizing process that assembles man, soil, and time in one project. He argued that contemporary civilizations formulated the original dynamic synthesis of man, soil, and time in the cradle of a religious idea.

Bennabi discussed the origin and nature of society’s realms, where the component of any action belongs to one of three categories: objects, persons, and ideas. Applying the mechanism of synthesis to these elements demonstrates that all actions, activities, and deeds are the sum of men, plus the sum of materials or instruments, plus the sum of ideas

behind those actions. The accomplishment of civilization depends on the entirety of the activity resulting from the sum of all the activities done by man.

In the realm of the person, civilization starts its process with a transformed individual integrated into society's activities. Bennabi's "realm of persons" denotes the sum total of relations, constructive or destructive, among a certain group, and emphasizes the significance of those relations. Consequently, society's destiny in its civilizing process is based on the nature or the quality of the relations in that system formed by the realm of persons.

According to Bennabi, the realm of ideas consists of impressed ideas derived from sacred or secular sources, and functions as a pattern that orients and guides society to certain values and ethics. In Muslim civilization, impressed ideas derived from the Qur'an and Sunnah. Bennabi considered civilization the result of a living, dynamic idea that mobilizes a pre-civilized society to enter history and construct a system of ideas according to its archetypes.

The realm of ideas gives vision and original patterns to society to formulate its civilization, and forms a prototype all persons in a society can follow, distinguishing the culture. The realm of ideas is important for society to undertake any constructive role in history. The realm of objects provides tools, channels, natural resources, and instruments needed for the civilizing process. It provides the material needs for the historical movement of society and expresses the position of society in its civilizing process.

Bennabi asserted that no historical activity can exist among these realms without "the social relations network," a concept strongly linked with his understanding of the nature and dynamism of society from socio-cultural and historical perspectives. The dialectic relationship among the three realms denotes and implies the existence of the social relations network. This realm provides minimum necessary relations among the three realms for any historical action that attempts to construct a civilization. The three realms cannot function without the social relations network.

Since Bennabi was primarily concerned with how to reconstruct Muslim society, revive its culture, and purge it from negative elements inherited from its age of decline, he emphasized the need for "sociology

of independence.” The starting point for that new sociology is to redefine ‘society.’ He implied that while the natural society is a static society, historical society is dynamic. He argued that some characteristics are common to all types of historical society. The social relations network links members of society and directs activities to fulfill a common function that is the specific mission and vocation of that society.

## Chapter Three

### **Bennabi’s Interpretation of the Movement of Civilization**

Bennabi viewed the cycle of civilization as “a numerical series following its course in similar but not identical terms,” suggesting that particular civilizations are cyclical and follow a patterned course. Each social group imprints its specific characteristic upon civilization and each civilization has a distinct identity. Civilizations differ in their specific psycho-temporal conditions but are similar in their general pattern in history.

Bennabi asserted that civilization begins its cycle when its fundamental elements synthesize within the frame of the religious idea, and finishes when those fundamental elements are no longer in dynamic interaction. Every civilization plays its role in history until it declines and ceases to develop and lead humanity. Another civilization starts anew to formulate its cycle in history. This transitory process of civilization justifies the cyclical phenomenon in history.

Bennabi argued that any society in its civilizing process will follow a defined pattern leading to a civilizational transformation. After completing the pre-civilized stage, a society in its second stage (civilized stage) will undergo three phases: the soul (the spiritual), reason (the rational), and instinct (the instinctive).

The cyclical notion can address social problems by determining our position in the cycle of history and understanding the causes of decline and the potential for progress. The cycle concept can explain the movement of civilization and is the underlying framework to analyze and understand human social existence. Bennabi, who developed this idea from Ibn Khaldūn, suggested that human civilization starts from a

given point and follows a determined pattern. In the final phase, the values of civilization transit and move forward to another place. This transition implies the existence of a cycle.

Bennabi believed that the three phases of the cycle are not spontaneous shifts from one situation to another but reflect deep transformations and modifications in humans and society. Exceptional circumstances are necessary to generate the historical organic synthesis of the three factors: man, soil, and time. This synthesis marks the birth of a society as it coincides with the beginning of its historical action. At this point, the social values are not yet concrete reality.

At the beginning of every civilization a religious idea sows seeds to generate the movement of a civilization. Then, the spiritual phase begins to dominate the life of the individual and of society. During this phase, the disintegrated man will change to an integrated man, when the social relations network is densest. This conditioning process organizes instincts in a functional relationship with the requirements of the religious idea. The individual engages in life, in this new state, based on the laws of the Spirit.

The social relations network reaches its perfect state while its religious idea continues to expand. At the same time, civilization can now cope with new problems and necessities, creating a new order and new standards. The spiritual phase then decreases with society's development, the rise of material problems, and expansion of civilization, moving civilization into the second (rational) phase. Reason now controls all activities while civilization continues to progress in history. As civilization shifts into the rational phase, society enjoys its well-developed relations network but suffers from certain defects. In psychological terms, the individual no longer has full control over his vital energy while performing his social functions. Parts of society's forces and energies have fallen into inactivity and others have declined.

Throughout the history of a civilization, the process of its evolution manifests on the individual's psychology and society's moral structure, which ceases to adjust individual behavior. When rational forces start to lose control over the activities of the individual, civilization faces a new context where instinctive forces dominate the spiritual and rational ones. Civilization pushes into the post-civilized stage and its values move to a new synthesis of man, soil, and time. In this third phase, the social network dissolves and religious ideas or society no longer control



individual instincts. Chaos and lawlessness prevail. Instincts are gradually liberated as the control of the soul decreases gradually.

When instincts are completely liberated, man's destiny falls under their influence, the third phase of civilization begins, and the religious idea ceases to fulfill its social function. Consequently, society disintegrates and marks the end of a cycle of civilization. When the inspiration of the soul ceases, the rational work also tends to stop.

Bennabi maintained that civilizations are interrelated cycles that commence with a religious idea and end when instinctive forces dominate the spiritual and rational forces. He believed this complete cycle of civilization with its three phases demonstrates the vital energy of civilization and how it transforms from one phase to another. Knowing each phase of the evolution of civilization and understanding its characteristics will provide us with a general framework of development and evolution.

Based on Bennabi's categorization of societies, a human society does not fix itself at one point in its life. Instead, it transfers from one situation to another following the psychosocial values of its development. Therefore, knowing the position of the society in the developmental axis is indispensable to identify the stage of that society, its related problems, and accomplishments.

On the axis representing the stages of development, a historical society occupies a specific location, Bennabi said. History reveals the existence of three stages: pre-civilized society, civilized society, and post-civilized society. At any moment each society is at one of these three specific stages and is characterized by specific values. Bennabi focused on history, sociology, and psychology for methodology to understand issues of civilization. He used psychosocial interpretation to explain the historical journey of a society to discover the features of the present Muslim world.

Bennabi viewed the individual in pre-civilized society as the natural man (*homonatura*) who is ready, like the Arab Bedouin during the Prophet Muhammad's era, to enter a cycle of civilization. A pre-civilized society needs a driving force to motivate civilizing faculties. Although the society owns the primary elements of civilization (man, soil, and time), they are unmovable without the force of the religious idea. Without the dynamic interaction between man, soil, and time

within the frame of the religious idea, society will not undertake its civilizing process or witness any psycho-social transformations.

Psycho-social development of the individual and society will allow a civilizing movement because the society's capacities are aimed at a social project. When civilized society begins to change itself to achieve its goals, its civilization is emerging. The civilized stage reflects the ability of a society to organize and formulate its own worldview and culture. When man is prepared to initiate a civilizing process, the social relations network is strongest. In this context, society can protect its civilization and keep its pace of development. All individuals at this stage enjoy the protection of society, and society accomplishes its civilizing function.

When society reaches the post-civilized stage, it is no longer dynamic and loses its civilizing capacities, entering decline. Consequently, the religious idea ceases to synthesize civilizational values, and the social relations network degenerates. Yet downfall is not fated. Another civilizing action may prevent society from that destiny and change its path of decline. Once society has lost its cultural framework, its realm of ideas enters a state of chaos and its culture is no longer civilizing. Bennabi noted confusion about stages and misunderstanding of their characteristics among scholars. Confusion of stages will complicate any effort to resolve a society's problems.

Bennabi tried to resolve the problems of the present situation in the Muslim world by viewing it at the third stage, where society has lost original thought or behavior compared to other stages. To resolve its problems, society must regain originality and dynamic behavior by creating a new man who is liberated from the characteristics of post-civilized man. He can then enter a new synthesis with time and soil, and incorporate a religious idea. Bennabi argued the need to know our stage of history and the causes of backwardness or development. Social problems are historical: what is convenient for a society at a certain stage of its development may be harmful at another stage.

Bennabi also approached the evolution of society from the psycho-sociological perspective, and introduced the concept of society's three psycho-sociological ages of development: the age of objects, the age of people, and the age of ideas. He presented a general concept of the dialectic relationship between the realms of people, objects (things), and ideas that gives meaning to the concept of the three ages. Bennabi

said every society has its own complex cultural universe where the realms of objects, persons, and ideas are intertwined with the society's concerted action. One realm is always supreme over the other two realms.

Society at its first age formulates its judgments and decisions according to the criteria imposed by the realm of objects. The nature and quality of judgments are subject to man's primitive needs and ground him in the realm of objects. Bennabi argued that human society experiences the age of objects in the pre-civilized and the post-civilized stages. In today's Muslim society it affects the psychological, moral, social, intellectual, and political levels. At the psychological and moral levels, when culture is centered on objects, the 'object' stands at the top of the scale of values, judgment will be quantitative rather than qualitative, and everything will be judged by the scale of objects, not values.

In its second age, society forms its judgments according to the standards of a human model or example, deriving from the realm of persons, not objects. In this age the realm of objects and ideas should accompany the realm of persons. Bennabi presented the *Jāhili* (pre-Islamic Arab) society as an example of centralizing ideas on the realm of persons, which was confined to tribal boundaries. In present Muslim society there is an interface between the despotism of objects and persons, which Bennabi argued is harmful especially at the moral and political levels.

This author believes the concept of the three ages is an important tool to measure the movement of society in the course of history, and to measure the leading values of society in a specific moment to know if the society is in ascent or decline. The action of society should be seen as an integrated activity whereby the realm of objects mixes with the two realms of persons and ideas. One realm always dominates the other two, distinguishing one society from another in terms of thought and behavior.

The concept of the three ages could be used as a scale to measure a society's psychosocial maturity, the direction of its civilizing process, the organization of its activities, and the transfer of values from stage to stage throughout history. Furthermore, the domination of one realm over the other two shows where society is located in its historical movement. The ages represent the social values and cultural surroundings that dominate and influence society at any point of its development.

Bennabi placed the Muslim world in the pre-civilized stage where it struggles to enter a new civilizing process. He interpreted the movement of civilization through various levels of analysis for a comprehensive understanding of the dynamic process of civilization in history. His concepts of the cycle, the three stages, and the three ages are a multi-level analysis of one phenomenon.

The development of society in its civilizing process is recorded qualitatively and quantitatively, Bennabi said, in its social relations network, which indicates the stages of society in the course of its history. He argued that any civilizing process commences before its three realms develop. The formation of the realm of persons is a precondition for the formulation of the social relations network. Society then functions while the realms of ideas and objects are still simple. The realm of persons then changes and integrates in the new order of relations. The social relations network starts to work while the other two realms of ideas and objects are still immature.

The realm of ideas plays the role of social protector while strongly linked with the social relations network. A society undertakes reconstruction, which is impossible without the social relations network. The realm of ideas alone cannot justify the development or decadence of a civilization. Rather, it must integrate with the social relations network. The history of a society is nothing more than the history of the network of its social relations created in the beginning by a religious idea.

## Chapter Four

### **The Roots of Bennabi's Approach to Civilization: The Internal-Social Dimension**

Using Ritzer's definition of the internal-social dimension, this chapter focuses on the impact of these factors on Bennabi's approach. Bennabi's biographical sketch is sparse, and his autobiography covers the period from his birth in 1905 until 1939. Limited sources covering the rest of his life are supplemented by his books, his contemporaries' writings, and in historical records of his era.

Malek Bennabi was born in 1905 to a poor family in east Algeria. The Islamic environment that formed his personality also protected Algerian Muslims amid colonial pressure on their culture and civilization.

His grandmother's "devout stories were formulating unconsciously my personality and throughout them I knew that benediction is in the zenith of the Islamic values and ethics."

Under French rule, he witnessed a collective migration of many native families, including his own relatives, from Algeria to eastern Arab countries. This protest to colonial rule dramatically changed Algeria's social and economic structure. The traditional Islamic environment degenerated, traditional life disintegrated, and a collective existence was in danger. Bennabi realized the importance of social relationships at the micro-level of the family and the macro-level of society.

In Bennabi's community, the *zāwiyah*, a traditional institution, played a crucial role in preserving Islamic teachings after the decline of Muslim civilization, as did education and formal Arabic literature. Storytellers preserved popular culture, while the mosque and *madrasah* also played a crucial role in Bennabi's education. He learned Arabic grammar, literature, poetry, jurisprudence, and theology.

In his first book, Bennabi reinterpreted the Qur'an's main themes and elaborated his theories in different social and cultural fields. His central thesis on religion guided his analysis of its essence and role in any civilizing process. For Bennabi, religion is imprinted in the order of the universe as a law that characterizes the human spirit. Bennabi discovered Islam in its universal perspective when later he met many Muslim thinkers and activists in France. He considered Islam a religion, way of life, social generator, culture, and civilization.

The educational problem in the Muslim world was a core problem that concerned Bennabi. Vision, methodology, means, and function were lacking, especially in Algeria under oppressive colonial rule. Two educational systems instilled in his mind and soul a search for reasons in the decadence of the traditional system and the advance of the modern (French and Western) system of education.

While the former was in a terrible state, the latter was expanding. It enjoyed developed methodologies and a clear vision and gained the protection of the colonial regime. Yet its secularized vision and westernizing mission contradicted the Muslim civilizational framework, a dichotomy that occupied Bennabi's attention throughout his life and career.

Bennabi observed and recorded the changes occurring in life and thought in European and Muslim Algerian environments. These two contexts influenced his concepts regarding the man of nature and the man of civilization. He experienced new trends of thought in Muslim intellectual circles. The ‘*Ulamā*’ movement was unprecedented in Algerian society in approach and method concerning society’s reforms.

Bennabi’s background as a citizen of a colonized Algeria, student in two educational systems, and contact with European colonizers shaped his ideas about the colonized and the colonizer and the concept of “colonizability” as a tool to analyze the psychological situation of today’s Muslims.

Bennabi’s knowledge of European thought raised his intellectual and political awareness, and his interest shifted from engineering to philosophy and the social sciences, and subsequently to Muslim reformist thought, the decolonization movement, and revival efforts in Algeria and the Muslim world. He realized the importance of the ‘*Ulamā*’ movement in Algeria and propagated the ideas of *iṣlāḥ* (reform), and *Maghrib* (North Africa) unity. Bennabi was impressed by the ‘*Ulamā*’s reformist movement for a free and independent Algerian society until they gave up social leadership to politicians. He believed the importance of educational and cultural activities over political activism.

As a political refugee in Egypt, Bennabi established connections with intellectuals and traditional institutions, influencing Arab intellectuals to focus on issues of civilizing renewal and renaissance in the Muslim Ummah. Bennabi died in Algiers in 1971, leaving the legacy of the greatest Muslim thinker Algeria has ever produced in modern times.

Bennabi’s connections were determined by *Mu* in its internal social dimension. He believed in teamwork and strong links with intellectuals of the Muslim and the developing world to solve complicated matters of underdevelopment. His strongest links were with the reformist movement in the Muslim world represented by the ‘*Ulamā*’.

Bennabi’s loyalty to Islam and admiration of Ibn Khaldūn framed his analysis of the inferiority complex of Muslim intellectuals towards Western culture. He said that intellectuals of traditional culture (‘*Ulamā*’) could not accomplish their important mission in history due to the framework of the *al-Muwahḥid* era. The ‘*Ulamā*’ focused on the

purity and preservation of Islamic teachings, and cared about changing souls and mindsets from their post-*al-Muwahhid* culture to a new culture.

Bennabi was influenced by some early Muslim scholars and writers such as Ibn Taymiyyah, Ibn Khaldūn, and Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, and considered himself a product of that chain of reformers. After his experience in other Arab countries he broadened his analysis to include other religious ideas, and examined the various explanations of the social phenomena and the role of religion in historical change.

## Chapter Five

### **The Roots of Bennabi's Approach to Civilization: The External-Social Dimension**

According to the metatheorizing approach, external social factors focus on the macro level analysis and address the objective aspects. They look to the institutions and the historical roots of thought. These factors mark a dimension of *Mu* that shifts to the macro level to look at the larger society and its impact on the development of theorization. The external social dimension emphasizes the relationship between the theorizing process and various institutions, structures of society, and other social activities that have direct or indirect relationship with the development of the approach or theory.

Bennabi aimed to resolve the problems of Muslim civilization in the context of colonization and decolonization using sociology to understand the larger socio-historical context. Bennabi believed colonialism was part of the whole civilizational agenda of the West, and needed a civilizational response from within.

The Western sciences of anthropology, archaeology, and sociology helped ensure its claimed civilizational mission to civilize the indigenous, the barbaric, and the primitive. Such terms were used to denote colonized peoples and civilizations. It followed the dichotomy of distinction between it and others, imposing expansion and dominance through alien standards. It divided people and fragmented Muslim countries along ethnic and linguistic lines, endangering if not destroying the unity of the Ummah.

Algerian society of the pre-colonial era was in its post-civilized stage. Sociologically, it was stable with higher development than during the entire colonial era. Algeria enjoyed a harmonious life, political stability, economic progress, cultural creativity, social harmony, and literacy. Its ‘*Ulamā*’ spread education and Islamic teachings and preserved Algerian identity.

Unfortunately, development and prosperity did not last. The colonial movement passed through four important stages that left their mark on the coming generations of Algerian society. The conquest and resistance stage (1830–1848) began with a policy of “limited occupation” by France. The policy was intended to isolate Algerians from resistance and to change their social, political, economic, cultural, and religious structure.

The second resistance stage and colonial intensification (1847–1871) divided Algeria and subjugated native Algerians. The total colonization and native acquiescence stage (1871–1919) further oppressed Algerian Muslims and expanded the settler population. In the stage of Algerian awakening (1919–1962), colonization reached its zenith while Pan-Islamist reformism and revival emerged among native intellectuals and politicians.

Lastly, the powerful appeal of Islam, which throughout the centuries provided Algerians a sense of collective identity, mobilized anew in the 1920s and 1930s. During the fourth stage of colonization, the conflict between natives and colonial rule was at its worst.

From Bennabi’s view, Algeria had been in a state of chaos for three centuries, compared to the glorious history and standards of Islamic civilization. That chaos’s internal and external aspects form the dialectic of colonizability and colonialism. For Bennabi, colonialism contributed to the chaos with its direct presence in all spheres of life. To accomplish colonial objectives, especially in the Muslim world, colonialism aimed to halt any civilizing process by establishing an artificial dichotomy between the components of society.

In response, Algerian nationalism was developed under the double efforts of the ‘*Ulamā*’ on the intellectual-religious level and under politicians on the political level, demonstrating the relationship between Bennabi’s paradigm and the two sub-paradigms of decolonization: the reformist and the modernist.



Bennabi considered that to resolve the problems of colonization and colonizability we must resolve the basic issues at the base of the entire crisis, starting with an integrative framework. Bennabi's civilizational paradigm would analyze human conditions and societal change within the frame of civilization as a comparative framework.

## Chapter Six

### **The Roots of Bennabi's Approach to Civilization: The Internal-Intellectual Dimension**

This study discusses the internal-intellectual factors that form the third dimension of metatheorizing in its *Mu* subtype. It relates the study of cognitive factors to the field of civilization and is internal to Bennabi's field of study to resolve the problems in the Muslim world. It identifies the major cognitive paradigms, schools of thought, paradigm changes, and general metatheoretical tools to analyze existing theories and develop new ones.

Two broad paradigms have dominated in the study of civilization: the philosophy of history and social sciences. Bennabi considered the study of civilization a unique field whose methodology and concepts derive from the social sciences. With his knowledge of the Qur'an and study of religions he could avoid materialist and secular conceptions of knowledge and historical change. Using the internal-intellectual dimension of *Mu* in this study helped to discover Bennabi's awareness of the dominant paradigms in the study of civilization.

This chapter applies content analysis to trace some ideas to original thinkers. The analysis of dominant paradigms and various schools and perspectives establishes links between Bennabi's concepts, terms, and methods and their origins in the related fields and dominant schools of thought during his lifetime and throughout the subject's history.

Within the paradigm of philosophy of history, three schools share the study of civilization with their related paradigms: the cyclical view, the progress view, and the simple side-by-side views of mankind's diverse people. The paradigms form the main views of historical change in human conditions and the main schools that approached the issue of civilization by noticing and conceptualizing patterns in historical change.

The 19th century school of historical progress, with Hegel, Comte, and Marx as its leading scholars, saw history as progressive and contributed to Bennabi's study of civilization. In Hegel's dialectical method, history is the story of the progress of civilization and human freedom. Marx, the other leading figure in the school of historical progress, was inspired by Hegel's thought. While Hegel used the dialectic of the mind, Marx used the dialectic of economic means.

Influenced by progress, Comte applied Darwin's theory of evolution and the development of physical sciences to human conditions and historical change. The school's main contribution within the scope of this research is its explanation of the historical movement, its stages and causes.

Bennabi asserted that the majority of historians tried to assemble historical events rather than develop a framework for rational interpretation of these events. He saw a link between the Hegelian notion of contradiction or dialectic and the Marxist idea that contradictory causes generating social changes are economic. Bennabi acknowledged Hegelians' ideas as catalysts for change, and praised Marxists for their dialectical analysis. Bennabi considered that Marx's theory of human needs cannot explain the dynamics of the birth of a civilization.

Bennabi criticized the school of historical progress for being more theoretical than historical and for its Eurocentric basis. The school focused on some variables of historical change and neglected the complexity of civilization as a multifaceted phenomenon. He was further influenced by the cyclical school, of which Ibn Khaldūn and Toynbee were the leading scholars. Bennabi saw himself as successor to its approach and methodology. The school distinguished patterns in historical change and conceptualized these patterns as cyclical. Scholars arrived at universal patterns of historical change after examining historians' data.

In *Muqaddimah*, Ibn Khaldūn pioneered an investigation of history to detect its laws and patterns. His study on the nature of society and social change led him to develop what he called *ʿIlm al-ʿUmrān*, the science of civilization, wherein generations and processes contribute to a civilization's direction. His concept of *ʿAṣabiyyah* is the force that motivates historical change in the rise, growth, and disintegration of dynasties and states.

Toynbee viewed world history as a sequence of civilizations and

considered civilizations the result of the dialectic challenge and response and stages of growth and decline. He emphasized the nature of civilization as the “whole” or intelligible unit of the study of historical change. Like Ibn Khaldūn, he was a determinist who conceptualized a civilizing process that must end with the breakdown and decline of civilization.

Many scholars agree that Bennabi is the second Ibn Khaldūn by his ideas, method, and concern. Both the notions of causality in history and the cycle of civilization attracted Bennabi’s attention. He believed the notion of the cyclical movement allows the discussion of the conditions of progressive development and the factors of decline. Bennabi transcended Ibn Khaldūn’s state as the intelligible unit of socio-historical study to use civilization as the unit of historical study. Toynbee’s use of civilization as the unit of historical analysis, his notion of the cycle, and his formulation of challenge and response also influenced Bennabi’s approach.

Bennabi used the methodology of the social sciences to analyze social events of his time and discuss the role of religion in the civilizing process. For Bennabi, sociology and psychology were necessary to ignite a Muslim renaissance. He saw religion as the synthesizer of social values and the catalyst for civilization to enter a dynamic interaction. Bennabi viewed man as the primary device of civilization that originates change. He was dissatisfied with the two dominant paradigms of the philosophy of history and the social sciences, the three schools, and various approaches to the study of civilization.

## Chapter Seven

### **The Roots of Bennabi’s Approach to Civilization: The External-Intellectual Dimension**

The fourth dimension of *Mu* in the metatheorizing approach includes the external-intellectual factors as an alternative to other academic disciplines for ideas, tools, concepts, and theories in the analysis of theory. The external-intellectual dimension focuses on the influence of sciences and fields of research that are traditionally considered external to civilization studies. In Bennabi’s case, this external-intellectual dimension

involves the impact of the Qur'an and Sunnah, religious reformist thought in the Muslim world, psychology, the natural sciences, philosophy, and other intellectual activities external to the study of civilization and its two traditional dominant paradigms.

Bennabi produced a Qur'anic exegesis and interpretation based on modern scientific discoveries and developments in the social sciences. In explaining the cyclical conception of historical change, Bennabi referred to the Qur'an to explain the work of the religious idea in the civilizing process and credibility of the Qur'anic principle in history. He examined how religion transforms the human personality and directs the civilizing process.

Bennabi's motto was the Qur'anic verse: "Verily, never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change their inner selves." It framed the analysis of man's status and the dominance of the human factor in historical change and change in human conditions. Bennabi maintained that to initiate a civilizing process, society must change a human's status from his natural raw state to a conditioned individual.

Qur'anic principles help us understand historical change and the role of religion in the process, while historical investigation helps prove Qur'anic principles and provides empirical proof. Bennabi opposed modernist thought or the secular spirit which denied religion any active role in human civilization. He sought to prove that the Qur'an and Revelation as stated in the teachings of all prophets are an integral part of human civilization.

To resolve the problem of backwardness in the Muslim world we should consider the permanent patterns of history mentioned in the Qur'an and explained by Ibn Khaldūn in his cyclical notions of historical change, universal patterns, and laws in history. The Qur'an and Sunnah, in the context of *Mu*, were major external-intellectual factors influencing Bennabi's approach to civilization.

Reformist thought in the Muslim world adopted the ideas of *iṣlāḥ*, *tajdīd*, and *nahḍah*, the hallmarks of that movement (reform, renewal, and renaissance). They were the expression of a new paradigm that emerged in the mid-18th century. Ibn Abd al-Wahhab's movement sought to revive the original and fundamental worldview of Islam, where the idea of oneness anchors all other dynamic principles. Al-Afghani, the other mentor of reformist thought in the Muslim world,

belonged to the same reformist paradigm stating that the pure teachings of Islam were necessary for any revival or reform to succeed. Bennabi adopted the fundamental ideas of that movement in its intellectual aspects.

In Algeria the reformists did not approach backwardness from a comprehensive perspective. Bennabi turned to psychology for a systematic approach, wanting to understand how the human personality could be changed and developed along with the objective of achieving the civilizing process. He needed to understand how religious ideas enter into the synthesis of social values and elevate human vision.

Bennabi endorsed Freud and Jung regarding the position and function of religion, incorporating developmental psychology from Piaget. Bennabi wrote that the religious idea frees the human soul from the law of instincts and subordinates it to the law of the spirit. Religion directs the individual's behavior toward his/her vital powers and enables society to undertake common activity. Freud helped Bennabi understand the psycho-temporal role of religion in changing the inner side of human personality, and in directing the vital powers of individuals and groups towards a positive role in the civilizing process.

When the religious idea directing the civilizing process loses its dynamic role, society's civilizing process degenerates and ceases to work in unison with its idea or archetypes. Although Bennabi derived the concept of stages mainly from Ibn Khaldūn, he applied modern developmental psychology to analyze the psychosocial progress of society. Influenced by Piaget, he stressed that the individual and society seem to undergo the same three historic stages: the age of the object, the age of the person, and the age of the idea.

Philosophy is the fourth intellectual factor to influence Bennabi's approach to civilization. Philosophy, Cartesian thought, and modernity discourse were his external sources, including ideas of Ibn Ṭufayl, Daniel Defoe, Ibn Rushd, and al-Ghazālī. One of Bennabi's most important borrowings from Descartes was his analytical method. He applied two different, yet closely inter-related analytical mechanisms to study the structural elements of civilization and the function of those elements in the civilizing process.

Bennabi was one of few theorists who tackled civilization as a multi-aspect phenomenon. His contribution can be considered an important

development and an alternative to the traditionally fragmented and contradicting paradigms. Bennabi is important as a system builder and a theorist of the interdisciplinary approach.

External-social factors helped Bennabi determine his starting point to study civilization. His concern about the situation in Algeria and in the Muslim world during his time led him to formulate his approach for an adequate solution to the various problems his society and the Ummah faced. At the methodological level, Bennabi applied the methods of historians, while at the intellectual and cognitive levels, he integrated and borrowed from various disciplines to address civilization's three main dimensions: historical, social, and cultural.

External-intellectual factors included the Qur'an and Sunnah, the religious reformist thought in the Muslim world, psychology, the natural sciences, philosophy, and other intellectual activities external to the field of study and its two traditional dominant paradigms.

There should be more emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach to the study of civilization that Bennabi formulated and developed, and for the adoption of the metatheorizing approach in studying the formulation and development of ideas, approaches, theories, and fields of research for its potential to provide a comprehensive understanding of the genesis and growth of knowledge.

**The Author**

BADRANE BENLAHCENE is Associate Professor of civilization studies and philosophy of history, Department of Philosophy, Batna University, Algeria, and Department of Islamic studies, Faculty of Arts, King Faisal University, Al-Ahsa, Saudi Arabia. He is an expert on the work of Bennabi having published articles in a number of journals and presented papers on Bennabi and civilization studies at conferences in Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Malaysia.

website: <http://drbadrane.com>

**IIIT Books-In-Brief Series** is a valuable collection of the Institute's key publications written in condensed form to give readers a core understanding of the main contents of the original.

Renowned Algerian intellectual and scholar Malek Bennabi (1905–1973), was concerned with unravelling the causes of Muslim decline and the reasons for Western civilization's success and achievements. The key problem he theorized lay not in the Qur'an or the Islamic faith but in Muslims themselves.

This study investigates Bennabi's approach to civilization using metatheorizing methodology to examine his thesis and shed further light on perhaps one of the more intriguing elements of his theory, that civilization is governed by internal-external and social-intellectual factors and that an equation can be generated for civilization itself.

This equation of Man+Soil+Time = Civilization and of which religion forms the all-important catalyst, is analysed and its significance in terms of the reversal of Muslim decline evaluated. What is clearly apparent is that for Bennabi, Man is the central force in any civilizing process and without him the other two elements are of no value.

With regard to outcomes, Bennabi's unfailing and unerring conviction that unless Muslims change their spiritual condition they cannot effect any far-reaching, meaningful change in society is echoed in the Qur'anic verse: "Verily, never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves" (13:11).