

Review Article

**Issues in Contemporary Arab Thought:
Cultural Decolonization and the Challenges
of the 21st Century**

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Mahdi Elmandjra, *La décolonisation culturelle: Défi majeur du 21ème siècle* (Marrakech [Morocco]: Editions Walili, 1996, and Paris: Futuribles, 1996). Pp. 341.

One of the many crucial challenges that face the Third World in general, and the Muslim world in particular—including the Arab world—is the New World Order, inaugurated by two significant events in the early 1990s: the military defeat of Iraq in the second Gulf war and the collapse of the Soviet system. In addition to signaling major shifts in world alliances and witnessing the rise of the United States as the only major superpower in the world today, these two events have raised once again, and perhaps in a much more acute fashion than before, the issue of Western, especially American, cultural hegemony and its impact on Third World cultures. One must note that even some European—notably French—intellectuals are discussing ways to respond to what they see as the American cultural menace to Europe, are seeking ways to protect cultural diversity and are reviving their cultural independence vis-à-vis the United States of America.¹

Since the dawn of the age of colonialism in the early part of the

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19th century, Arab and Muslim intellectuals have always posed the question: "What is the West?" The West has posed a major challenge to the modern Muslim and Arab mind, a type of challenge that has forced modern Arab thought to critique the past and attempt to appropriate the scientific spirit of the modern West. In spite of the fact that the "West" has remained an undefined term in modern Arab and Muslim thought (does the "West" exemplify liberalism, Christianity, Capitalism or Socialism?), the West, as a scientific and socio-cultural entity, has always been on the offensive. The *Nahdah* thinkers of the nineteenth century were intrigued by the different possibilities the "Western mind" and Western science provide. They were aware of the severe stagnation of their societies and that this stagnation went against one of the main principles of Islam: the common good (*al-maṣlahah al-‘āmah*), which was ill-served by this situation. They sought to ameliorate the condition by reviving the doctrine of "the common interest" and linking it to the need for Western science. In other words, in the thought of the *Nahdah* intelligentsia, Western science and the Muslim doctrine of the common interest did not coalesce; on the contrary, for the Muslim doctrine to be well-served, the logic of modernity (i.e., science) must be adopted.² In other words, Taḥṭāwī, ‘Abduh and their colleagues thought that the above tension (stagnation versus science) could be resolved only if the intellectual Muslim elite of the nineteenth century linked its doctrinal philosophy to the logic of Western science and philosophy. However, in the resolution of this first contradiction, a second, and perhaps a more astounding, one was revealed: colonialism and science, two givens of the West. Arab thinkers of the nineteenth century were well aware that the West did not mean simply science but domination—military and political domination.

The above double tensions—Muslim stagnation and Western science, Western science and Western hegemony—have defined the parameters of the main challenges facing the Arab mind since the nineteenth century. This double bipolarity became more complex in the mid-1950s after the end of official colonialism in most of the Arab states. The new nation-states sought to modernize without sacrificing the common interest—be it derived of Muslim or nationalist thought—and sought economic and social independence from the West while still relying on it.

In this important book under review, Professor Mahdi Elmandjra of Muhammad V University in Rabat, Morocco, sheds new light on the

issue of cultural decolonization and numerous cultural and political tasks awaiting not just Arab intellectuals, but also states in the New World Order.

Cultural independence from the West is the question! What is cultural independence? While it is possible to measure and quantify economic factors, it is difficult to measure culture in the same way. The departure of official colonialism left behind a complex cultural package that cannot be overcome overnight. The intellectual elite of the *ancien régime*, some of whom fought political but not cultural colonialism, found themselves in commanding positions, caught between their adopted European culture and the culture of their respective societies. Those who have opted for Arabization, as in the case of North Africa for example, support cultural diversity and independence from the dominant culture of the West.

According to Elmandjra, the advent of post-colonialism has made matters worse for that generation of Arab and Third World intellectuals that desires cultural independence. He defines post-colonialism as a major political and cultural fact in the contemporary world which is, first and foremost, the product of the New World Order.³ As a historical event of tremendous importance to the lives of Muslims and non-Muslims alike, colonialism very often entails military occupation of one country by another (that is, military occupation by a European country). Colonialism also entails direct control of natural resources which serves the strategic interests of the colonizer.

Political decolonization began in most Third World countries after World War II and, by the early 1960s, most countries had achieved independence. However, Elmandjra argues, neo-colonialism emerged in the wake of independence and the establishment of new economic and political relationships between the new nation-state (the Periphery) and the ex-colonizer (the Centre) in which the Center has always had the upper hand or a more privileged position than the Periphery. Neo-colonialism has permitted the Center to preserve its markets, its cultural influence and sometimes its troops at a minimal cost.

Elmandjra argues that some members of the political elite of new nation-states have sought to modernize their countries by blindly imitating the West. These elites have benefitted from political and military protection by the West that has permitted them to stay in power. For example, in some of these countries, the West has never raised the issue of human rights or the absence of democracy.

Principles may be easily sacrificed for preserving the strategic interests of the West. The basis of neo-colonialism is a new form of economic domination that allows other discreet forms of domination—political, cultural, and intellectual.

During the Cold War between the Soviet Bloc and the Western capitalist world, Third World countries felt somewhat relieved from cultural and political pressure from the West since the balance of world power permitted them to function somewhat freely. However, the status quo changed with the collapse of the Soviet system and the military defeat of Iraq. These two events left both the Arab world and Arab culture vulnerable to the influence of the United States. With the emergence of the United States as the leading superpower, a number of states, such as Cuba, Syria and Libya, were, and still are, accused by the Center of supporting terrorism.

Since the colonial era, the Periphery has been dependent on the Center, and the diffusion of ideas through satellites instituted a new relationship between the Arab world and the West. The Center practices what Elmandjra and other leading North African intellectuals call a hegemonic "imperialist culture."⁴ These thinkers, many of whom grew up in the shadow of colonialism, draw our attention to the major conclusions of European thinkers about the rise of America in recent years and its cultural impact on the whole world, including Europe: "L'empire americain est le seul au monde, c'est une hegemonie exclusive, et c'est la première fois que ce phénomène étrange survient dans l'histoire de l'humanité."⁵

Throughout his work, Elmandjra reminds us of the following: (1) Europe itself is wary of American cultural challenges and hegemony; (2) the Arab world faces a double invasion from both Europe and the United States; and (3) the competition between Europe and the United States to invade the world culturally has wreaked havoc in the ranks of the Third World intelligentsia.

In its path towards development, the Arab world needs Western science and technology. However, Western science cannot be imported without the cultural and ethical values that underlie it. It is a well-known fact that during the imperialist phase, the West used culture and ideas as a means to colonize the Third World; hence, the warped notion of "orientalism," and the strong missionary presence in the colonized lands. Classical imperialism was sustained by the physical presence of imperial troops overseas. Physical and mental conquest went hand in

hand. With the rapid advances in technology, the situation is somewhat different in the age of neo-imperialism. The intellectual and cultural integrity of small nations is endangered. The culture of colonialism was ideological in nature. The purpose was to create an indigenous cultural elite with Western values and plant Western systems of education and thought in the Third World. Today, the cultural invasion through advanced technology leads to the following conclusion: besides being ideological in nature, Western culture aims at subduing the means of criticism and rationalism in the Third World. In our case, it is aimed at Arab and "Muslim reason," at making this "reason" forget its unique and glorious past.

One of the unfortunate facts in today's world is that no one can rival the economic and intellectual hegemony of the United States. This country has huge economic resources, military prowess, advanced technology, and the will to conquer the whole world intellectually.⁶ Therefore, Elmandjra poses the following question: how are we to achieve an overall rational, cultural, political, and social renaissance in the contemporary Arab world? It is clear that the only way to do so is by facing the contemporary cultural challenges of the West, especially of the United States in the context of the New World Order.

The New World Order, inaugurated in the aftermath of the military defeat of Iraq in the second Gulf War, is a daunting reality. And the only way to face it is by strengthening Arab unity. Here, Elmandjra agrees with some of the conclusions of another leading Arab North-African intellectual, Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī:

Arab existence is well and alive. The recent war that the allies launched against Iraq has undoubtedly points to the vitality of Arabism and its enshrined presence in the souls of the Arab masses that rallied to support Iraq, very often against the wishes of their governments. Also, what is of significance in this regard is the Arab nationalist position that Francophone Maghrebi thinkers took, many of whom were deprived the chance to learn Arabic in their childhood. In addition to rallying support for Iraq, they expressed their dismay at and frustration with the European attitude towards Iraq.⁷

During the age of imperialism, the main purpose of the Arab nationalist project was to ensure the independence of the Arab world. The independence of Algeria helped towards achieving that goal. However, the 1967 war was a major setback in that it did not allow Arab unity and solidarity to take deep organizational and intellectual

roots in society. The emergence of the regional state in the Arab world, as an Arab and international political fact, and as a social, economic and psychological condition that cannot be overstepped, places more hurdles in the face of the Arab nationalist project. The Arab world is divided now more than ever. In addition to the cultural challenge and political division, the Arab world has to take into account the Zionist project and its metamorphosis in the context of the New World Order.

Further, in post-colonialism, the Zionist project has taken on a new role that is financed and morally supported by the United States as *le chef de file du post-colonialisme*. The passage from colonialism to post-colonialism has been aided by the support of ex-colonizing countries and has been ratified by the United Nations. And against this context, the Zionist Project has sought the recognition of chief Arab states.

In such a scenario, one might say that the task of the Third World in seeking economic and political liberation from this new mode of hegemony is all the more urgent. One of the crucial factors in this liberation, according to Elmandjra, is cultural decolonization since the principal goal of post-colonialism is cultural hegemony and the propagation of Western values in the Third World.⁸ The North refuses to embark upon a thorough dialogue on cultural values with the South on the supposition that occidental values are the norm—that is, they are universal values—and that adopting them will mean the solution to the social and economic problems of the Third World.⁹ Not counting its nuclear and military prowess or economic and political influence, "post-colonialism is a weapon that aims at destroying cultural diversity"¹⁰ in today's world and creating one universal homogeneous culture: occidentalized culture.¹¹

It is not by coincidence, argues Elmandjra, that the majority of the hot spots (over 90%) in the world are in the Muslim world, and the main reason for this is the refusal of the West to come to terms with a system of values other than its own. However, he hastens to add, the problem is not caused purely by external factors. The Muslim world, just like most of the Third World, suffers from the absence of democracy, a crisis in human rights and a lack of democratic channels that enable people to express their ideas freely. These conditions spur no major outcry from the West.

The dilemma is: how are we to safeguard global cultural diversity and pluralism in the face of the mounting hegemony of the United States of America? The answer lies in effecting major changes in the

thinking of both North and South. The North must recognize cultural diversity and the South must affirm its cultural independence: "La décolonisation culturelle, c'est-à-dire celle des esprits et des coeurs, est, en effect, une entreprise de plusieurs générations."¹² How do we achieve this?

The United States has begun to mount a war against its new global enemies in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet system. This is expressed clearly in Samuel Huntington's thesis. The West has become preoccupied with the "menace" of Islam, "Islamic terrorism" or Islamic fundamentalism. Elmandjra argues that the entire Muslim world, with its cultural and ethnic complexities, has been reduced and atomized into terms such as the above. The fact is that most Muslims live in countries that have authoritarian regimes which are supported by the West and its democracies. In fact, real cultural decolonization begins when the West and the intellectual elites of the Third World consider seriously the thesis that modernization does not necessarily mean occidentalization and that there are non-Western models of for modernization (the Japanese, for example).

A fascinating phenomenon that characterizes modern civilization is the profound changes taking place in the passage of this civilization from a "culture of production" to a "culture of information and scientific knowledge." This is possible because of radical breakthroughs in science and technology. Because of the scientific superiority of the West, the information gap between North and South has become almost insurmountable and it is increasing day by day. For example, in 1990, the United States possessed 56 percent of the world's data banks, especially those of research and science. The European community possessed 28 percent, Japan 12 percent and the Third World one percent. This has resulted in the West holding a superior position in economic and political affairs; the spread of Western ideas through the adaptation of Western technology; the brain-drain from the Third World to the advanced Center, and the gradual domination of Western cultural, intellectual and scientific values in the Third World. This leads to the absence of a real cultural dialogue between South and North, "En revanche, c'est l'absence de communication et de tolérance culturelles, qui risque de mettre la paix en péril dans les années à venir."¹³

The Third World suffers from a continuous "intellectual hemorrhage," identified as the "brain drain," the exodus of competent people, professionals and intellectuals from the South to the North.

Many emigrate not just in search of better economic and social conditions, but because the development process in their native countries lacks the appropriate vision to incorporate them productively. Very often, this lack of vision is compensated for by blind imitation of the modernized North, leading to transfer of technology with no creative contribution from the South. In other words, the South can purchase technology but it must create its own forms of modernity and modernization. However, these forms cannot be created in the context of the continuous exodus of skilled professionals. Therefore, the Muslim world suffers from three major problems: illiteracy, lack of scientific research, and lack of democratic values.

Elmandjara argues that the population movement from South to North (or vice versa, although this is rare except in the case of colonization) is beneficial since it expands the cultural horizon of the host country and population and leads to more and more much-needed cultural interchange.¹⁴ The North, in need of labour from the Third World, imported skilled and non-skilled labour from many Muslim countries, most notably Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Turkey, and Pakistan. The continuation of this exodus is an indication of underdevelopment in these countries. "Le sous-développement c'est l'incapacité de former ou d'utiliser d'une façon rationnelle les ressources humaines compétentes."¹⁵ Skilled migrants do not leave for financial reasons alone, but because in their adopted country, they have a better chance to obtain further education in their profession and more opportunities for advancement.

Scientific knowledge is one of the major landmarks of development and progress in contemporary society. Because of rapid advancement in science and technology, scientific information is going to double its in the next decade or so. This is tremendous in view of the fact that we are learning more in a decade than did our ancestors in a thousand years. But the West and Japan control most of this knowledge, and the best minds of the Third World continue to migrate to the Center. This is creating fundamental "knowledge" gaps between North and South and, coupled with the North's feeling of cultural superiority, difficulties in effective cultural communication between South and North, "C'est une question d'ethnocentrisme qui rend difficile l'insaturation d'une véritable communication culturelle."¹⁶ Elmandjara deplores the inability of contemporary civilization to use the possibilities created by this huge information environment for the benefit of all mankind. The West, which constitutes 22% of the world's population and is going to

constitute only 16% of the world's population 30 years from now, consumes 70% of total world resources, has three major obsessions: (1) the demography of the Third World; (2) Judeo-Christian ethics; and (3) Japan.

The world is facing the challenge of cultural pluralism. According to Elmandjra, the future holds two possible scenarios. First, the reinforcement of a monolithic international system, as is seen today in the context of the New World Order, that is characterized by the emergence of the United States as the supreme power. The maintenance of cultural diversity is a value that the world must defend. By not defending this right, the Third World will not achieve full cultural liberation and independence. The West is repeating history by employing a new form of colonization: post-colonialism.

The second scenario is represented by the Japanese model that refuses to see the world in terms of military polarization between East and West or South and North but a world that is dominated by different coexisting civilizations. This is an age of different but coexisting civilizations. The modernization of Japan does not mean the occidentalization of Japan, that is, the adoption of the value system of the West. It means modernization with a new system of values.

In recent decades many have called for dialogue between East and West. Elmandjra argues that although dialogue is the only effective means of cultural exchange between East and West, it faces some crucial obstacles: (1) inequitable distribution of resources between the Third World and the First World; (2) the incompleteness of the process of decolonization; (3) the appearance of new forms of recolonization in the context of the New World Order; (4) the high level of illiteracy in the South; (5) the cultural alienation of the political elites in the South from their people; (6) the lack of democracy; and finally (7) the lack of knowledge of the cultures of the South.

Notes

1. See Paul-Marie de la Gorce, *Le Dernier Empire* (Paris: Grasset, 1996), and Ignacio Ramonet, "L'empire américain." *Le Monde Diplomatique*, February 1997, p. 1.
2. For a detailed discussion see Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi^c, *Intellectual Origins of Islamic Resurgence in the Modern Arab World* (Albany: State University of

New York Press, 1996), especially chapter one.

3. "Le post-colonialisme est un phénomène très récent qui date du début des années 1990, comme suite à la chute des régimes communistes, la Guerre du Golfe et l'effritement du peu d'unité que le Tiers Monde était parvenu à construire....Le post-colonialisme est, avant tout, le préduit du 'nouvel ordre mondial'." M. Elmandjra, *La décolonisation culturelle*, 208.

4. See for example Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Introduction à la critique de la raison arabe* (Casablanca: Editions le Fennec, 1995) and *al-Mashru' al-nahdawi al-ʿarabī* [The Project of Arab Renaissance] (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥdah al-ʿArabiyah, 1996).

5. Paul-Marie de la Gorce, *Le Dernier Empire* (Paris: Grasset, 1996), 16.

6. Ignacio Ramonet, "L'empire américain." *Le Monde Diplomatique*, No. 515, February 1997, p. 1.

7. Muḥammad ʿĀbid al-Jābirī, *Mas'alt al-hawiyah: al-ʿurūbah, al-islām wa al-gharb* [The Issue of Identity: Arabism, Islam, and the Occident] (Beirut: Markaz Dirāsāt al-Wiḥdah al-ʿArabiyah, 1995), 16.

8. "Mais la libération du Sud passe d'abord par une décolonisation culturelles car un des principaux objectifs du post-colonialisme est l'hégémonie culturelle et la propagation des valeurs occidentales. Les conflits à venir seront des conflits de valeurs et il y'a une très grande urgence à développer une communication culturelle entre le Nord et le Sud." M. Elmandjra, *La décolonisation culturelle*, 214.

9. "Le Nord a déployé jusqu'à présent très peu d'efforts pour comprendre et encore moins pour parler le langage du Sud. Il faut accorder une priorité aux systems de valeurs pour se rendre compte que la crise actuelle entre le Nord et le Sud est une crise du système total." Mahdi Elmandjra, *Rétrospective des futurs* (Casablanca: Ouyoun, 1992), 164.

10. Elmandjra, *La décolonisation culturelle*, 215.

11. Mahdi Elmandjra, *al-Ḥarb al-ḥadāriyyah al-ūlah* [The First Civilizational War] (Casablanca: ʿUyun, 1994), 21-22.

12. Elmandjra, *La décolonisation culturelle*, 15.

13. Ibid., 29-30.

14. For a detailed discussion of this subject, please consult Claude Liauzu, *Race et civilisation: L'Autre dans la culture occidentale* (Paris: Syros, 1992).

15. Elmandjra, *La décolonisation culturelle*, 175.

16. Ibid., 188.