

## **Book Review**

### **Contemporary Sociological Thought**

*Al-Fikr al-Ijtimā'ī al-Mu'āṣir wa al-Zāhirah al-Flāmiyyah al-Ittiṣāl-  
iyyah: Ba'd al-ab'ād al-Hadāriyyah* [Contemporary Sociological  
Thought and the Communication Phenomenon: Some Cultural  
Dimensions] by Abdurrahman Azzi. Algiers: Dār al-Ummah, 1995.

Reviewer: Mahmoud M. Galander, Department of Communication,  
International Islamic University Malaysia.

The book under review is an explication and analysis of four Western sociological schools of thought: the critical school, phenomenological sociology, symbolic interactionism, and structuralism. The author also introduces certain theoretical concepts which he sees as suitable for the study and analysis of the Arab sociological realities. The author is highly critical of Arab intellectuals, particularly those from the eastern realm of the Arab world, for being prisoners of an intellectual dogma which made them focus on the classical approaches of Auguste Comte, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, and led them to disregard these new approaches.

Symbolic interactionism, pioneered by Herbart Mead, sees society as an interconnected and interrelated systems of meanings. The institution of language becomes, therefore, the most important element in the construction and exchange of meaning between members of society. Azzi outlines the ideas and positions of Herbert Mead, Charles Cooley, W. Thomas, William James, Hugh Duncan, Howard Becker, and Herbert Blumer in the evolution and development of the school. He highlights twelve basic propositions of the school, most of which assert the dependence of society's members on the communication of meaning through shared symbols. Society is, therefore bound by the meanings which people construct, while the behaviour of people remains a product of a subjective construction about self, others, and the social requirements of the situation.

Azzi believes in the relevance of symbolic interactionism to the study

of sociological phenomena in the Arab context, perhaps because Arab culture, by its very nature, is oral. Thus for the interpretation and analysis of such a culture, symbolic interactionism provides a better tool of analysis and evaluation, specially because reality in the Arab social, religious, and political context is much dependent on the consumption and use of symbols.

As a former student of one of the proponents of the phenomenology (p. 55), Azzi details the historical evolution of the school, explains its main theoretical concepts, and highlights the role of Alfred Schutz (who has received little intellectual attention in the west because his approach contradicted the basics of the Western industrial capitalism) in founding the school.

According to Schutz individuals constantly engage in an exchange of relationships with each other, thus creating and becoming part of the total social entity. Two types of social relationships are envisaged, an intimate type which Schutz called the "thou-oriented" relationship, in which people share emotions—a relationship of "consociate" (p. 65). The other type, according to Schutz, is the relationship of "contemporaries," a non-human relationship in which individuals view each other as "something" rather than "someone," and understand their relations as being instrumental towards the fulfilment of some goals other than the relationship.

Structuralism however is one of the most pervasive schools of sociology whose effect is manifested in such new fields of study as semiology and ethnology. The author analyses the basic works of Strauss, as well as the latter important development of the school, post-structuralism. Basically structuralism sees all social activities as related to language, and sees language as a structure, and as the highest form of cultural product. This strong epistemological relationship between structuralism and linguistics justifies the presence and use of various linguistics-related concepts and methodologies in structural analyses.

According to the author, structural analysis may provide a better tool of analysis and explanation for the role of Western mass media in the Arab context. The author places some emphasis on the use of structural methodology in literary arts, especially in the *Maghrib* area where structuralism has firmer roots due to the cultural ties of these countries with France and Western Europe in general.

The critical school has addressed many important issues including authoritarianism, the role of the authoritarian state in the preservation

of the status quo of the social system, and the rise and fall of individualism. The critical school also probed the place of communication in the contemporary Western societies. Jurgen Habermas proposed, in his theory of "universal pragmatics," that all communication actions are forms of social action, and that in order to create understanding, an individual must engage in a "speech action" in which various validity claims are maintained (p. 128). Azzi provides a translation of the complicated theory and model that Habermas used to distinguish between communication action on one hand, and strategic and symbolic actions on the other.

The final chapter of the book is the crux of Azzi's intellectual endeavour. The author begins by considering several theoretical concepts. He defines "reality" as "what you can not express unless you live in it" (p.157). Azzi uses several Qur'anic verses to explain the concept of reality, and to show how it is understood in the Muslim context, as consisting of both moral and material dimensions. Likewise, Azzi defined "imagination" as "what stays at a distance from reality" (p. 162). He gives several examples of such forms in which imagination is used for the purpose of understanding reality: ideology, arts, dance, theater and so on. He posits that reality and imagination are the two elements upon which communication duality is based. He theorizes that in order to study a situation we need to start from a state of mind in which intellectual doubt must be resolved through research. In order to understand situations we have to understand them within the duality of reality and imagination.

The author then uses this dichotomy between reality and imagination to establish his perspective of communication (or information, as the more popularly used term in the Arab world). He describes all communication systems as being related to the imaginative context, what he calls *nizām mikhyālī*. These *mikhyālī* systems are either positive or negative, depending on whether or not the mind could easily interchange them between the two levels of reality and imagination.

As stated earlier the book is an attempt to introduce several contemporary sociological theories and theoretical concepts which Arab scholars have so far ignored. Though he successfully accomplished this task, Azzi has raised more questions than answers through this endeavour. One important question being the suitability of the various sociological approaches for the interpretation and explanation of reality. Much has been written on this issue since the early years of this century. No satisfactory answer has been given as yet, thus the

introduction of the four schools of thought to the Arab world will not, as Azzi has suggested, solve the problem of reality analysis in the Arab world. It is true that they may provide new perspectives through which the Arabs may view and analyze reality, but the ultimate answer is still far away.

This book brings into foreground, the issue of the intellectual dichotomy in the Arab world between the *Mashriq* and the *Maghrib*. The dichotomy is historically related to several religious, demographic, political, and geographic factors, and has long been considered an element in the fission that has plagued the Arab world for long. This issue is not marginal, it is, rather, central to what the author aims to achieve through his book. For example, the discussion on Habermas and his theory of universal pragmatics has led Azzi to emphasize the expected differences between communication competence and language competence among members of the same culture. In such a situation variations in interpretations, and discrepancies between intended and perceived meanings will prevail. Azzi's book itself is case in point. The reviewer had to spend much time in order to "decipher" some of the concepts and terms which the author has used in the book within his (*Maghribi*) communication context. This reviewer made his own conclusions as to the meanings and concepts, and translated these concepts in a manner that may not reflect the intentions of the author. Many Arabic phrases and terms which several Arab scholars and intellectuals from the *Maghrib* use in their intellectual discourse constitute "barriers" in relation to the readers from the *Mashriq*, because of the low level of intersubjectivity, and the lack of the "universality" that Habermas has hoped for.

### Malaysia's Economy

*Malaysia's Economic Success* by Ataul Huq Pramanik. Kuala Lumpur: Pelanduk Publications, 1997. Pp. 250. ISBN 967 978 497 5.

Reviewer: Syed Serajul Islam, Department of Political Science, IIUM.

Despite a plethora of models and strategies, a great majority of the Third World countries have failed to achieve economic development. However, Malaysia is an exception to this pattern and is considered a role model for many developing countries. Ataul Huq Pramanik's *Malaysia's Economic Success* highlights the challenges that Malaysia