

## Towards an Egyptian Theory of Dependency

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### Abstract

#### نحو نظرية مصرية عن التبعية

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يمكن تمييز ثلاثة تيارات سياسية رئيسية هيمنت على فكر المثقفين في مصر خلال نصف القرن الأخير. التيار الليبرالي العلماني، والتيار الديني الأصولي، والتيار الماركسي. وتذهب هذه الدراسة إلى أنه على الرغم من أنه كان لكل من تلك المدارس موقفها المتميز تجاه التنمية الاقتصادية والاجتماعية والطريق المفضي إلى الإحياء القومي، إلا أنها تعاني جميعاً من عيب مشترك، ألا وهو أنها تعكس نوعاً من «التبعية الفكرية». وقد حاول فريق من الكتاب المصريين مؤخراً إبراز هذا المظهر من مظاهر التبعية الذي نادراً ما تعرض له أشهر دعاة «نظرية التبعية». ويتوقع الكاتب أن يجد العرب مبررات لإبراز هذا الجانب من التبعية تفوق تلك التي تؤثر في تفكير كتاب أمريكا اللاتينية على أقل تقدير. وقد يدفع هذا المرء إلى الاعتقاد بأن نظرية مصرية (أو عربية) عن التبعية باتت قيد الصياغة.

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## 1. Three Currents of Social Thought:

In the contemporary scene of political thought in Egypt, and perhaps also throughout the Arab World, one can discern three main currents which have dominated reformist movements for at least the last fifty years: the liberal secularist, the Marxist and the religious fundamentalist schools of thought. Each of these schools has its distinctive attitude towards the problem of economic and social development and of national revival.

The liberal secularists see the problem as mainly one of Egypt (or the Arabs) lagging behind the West in raising the level of income and consumption, in the rate of technological progress and organization, in the system of government and the enjoyment of various kinds of personal and political freedom, and even in the patterns of social behaviour and modes of thinking. There is virtually no social problem, according to them, that cannot be solved by the application of science, advanced technology and rational thought which also helped the West to reach its present supremacy.

Egyptian Marxists have shown no smaller degree of enthusiasm than the liberal secularists for Western science, technology and rationalism but have always insisted, at least until the recent collapse of communist regimes, on a rigorous distinction between the capitalist «West» and the socialist «East», and preferred to lay all the emphasis on the problem of the distribution of income and wealth, and consider the basic problem of our society as that of its «dependence» on the capitalist West, and the external exploitation of our natural and human resources.

The religious fundamentalists see the problem as lying mainly in the abandonment of moslems of the main tenets of their religion which are regarded by them as just as valid today as they have always been. The solution is much closer to our hands than we think: it is simply the correct and strict application of Islamic principles.

It seems to me that although the religious fundamentalist is the only one of the three who is willing, and indeed proud to admit this humble adherence to «tradition» as well as the important place occupied by metaphysics in his intellectual stand, this is by no means confined to the religious fundamentalist's position. All three positions seem to me to contain a very big, indeed an excessive dose of respect for a particular «tradition», as well as a very big dose of metaphysics even if this may be strongly denied by the other two schools of thought.

Both the liberal and Marxist secularists allege that what they are presenting to us are ideas that are directly derived from scientific or rational reasoning which is part of the heritage of humanity at large and which has accumulated through the long history of human progress. It is alleged that these basic tenets are derived from human national thought do not reflect the specific features of any particular culture or civilization more than another, and hence should be regarded as the heritage of all

societies irrespective of cultural specificity. To the modern civilization, Europe or the «West» may have indeed contributed more than any other part of the world but this does not turn it into a purely «European» or «Western» civilization, in the sense that Arabic poetry or Islamic architecture, for example, are Arabic or Islamic. This basically «human» legacy is open for us all to use and benefit from without hesitation or false pride; it is not limited by the constraints of time or place. In any case, the Arabs and Moslems have themselves made a handsome contribution to its development and it is their right as well as their duty to utilise it and build on it. It is also alleged that what the liberal or the Marxist secularist is calling for, is not in any case the adoption of western values or ways of expression as manifested in western arts and literature, for these are admittedly culturally conditioned and may not be of universal value of relevance. But they are calling for the adoption of the products of natural and social sciences which, though developed in the west are not specific to western culture and are free from both judgements of value and metaphysics. To the liberal secularist there is basically only one system of natural science and one process of technological progress, the more modern the better, while to the Marxist there is one system of social science which reveals the laws of development of both the more and less «advanced» societies alike.

## **2. We are all Traditionalists:**

It seems to me that both the Marxist and the liberal secularist have exaggerated their claim and have much less cause to be so pleased with themselves than they imagine, since it is not too difficult to direct to them a similar criticism to that which they direct to the religious fundamentalist. This is easier in the case of Marxists who have often treated Marxist texts in the same way as the religious fundamentalists treat their own. Marxist materialist philosophy could also be shown to be just as metaphysical as theology when matter is said to be primary and when the existence of God is categorically denied. Much of the Marxist's talk about the principles of «contradiction», the «struggle of opposites», or quantitative changes turning into qualitative ones» often appear as more like poetry than science. Whether in philosophy, history or economics, the Marxist's attitude is often based on a prior moral or political stand which is derived more from a judgement of value than from empirical investigation. Marxists have therefore a hundred reasons for hesitating before ridiculing the religious fundamentalist since their thought is just as metaphysical and fundamentalist. The attraction of the Marxist's attitude to social problems lies not in his «science» but in his moral and political stand which takes the side of the underdog.

It is possible, though perhaps not as obvious, to address a similar criticism to the liberal secularist. One may wonder, for instance, how far have western social «sciences» really succeeded in ridding themselves of arbitrary assumptions and how much of these assumptions are merely a reflection of some specific western values. On what «scientific» grounds, for instance, is Machiavelli's separation between

politics and morality based? Or the assumption of western democratic principle that all men are equal? Or that every individual is entitled to only one vote irrespective of income and social status? Or the sacredness of the right of private property or of the right of the consumer to buy what he desires without restriction and of the producer to manipulate the consumer? On what foundation of «science» has the state adopted the goal of maximizing the rate of growth of output, of producing the supersonic planes of the invasion of space before some basic needs have been satisfied for some sections of the population? What is the scientific basis for believing that all the problems created by the progress of technology will be solved by more modern technologies or that the history of man is a history of progress and that every historical epoch is «higher» than the preceding one, or that the greater our ability to predict the future the greater our happiness or that widening the range of choice always leads to greater satisfaction? Is there really a scientific basis for the Western philosophy of education which seems to favour an ever increasing freedom for the younger generation in expressing every desire and every whim? Or for taking for granted that «leisure» is always more enjoyable than «work»? Or that the material benefits of modern technology are always greater than any social or psychological harm that may result from it? One could go on giving examples for ideas and attitudes that are usually presented as if they are the results of more rational or scientific thought but are indeed only expressions of moral judgement, cultural preferences or metaphysical views that have virtually nothing to do with science. Those fascinated by whatever the West is doing insist on adopting all this in the name of «science», «modern technology», or «human progress», when in fact they are often doing no more than copying the products of a specific culture. They are not sacrificing their cultural tradition for the sake of science or progress but simply replacing one cultural tradition by another.

Both the liberal secularist and the Marxist often ridicule the advocacy made by the religious fundamentalist for the application of «Islamic law», saying that state and religion should be kept apart, but they themselves have never really done anything of the sort. Who could allege that the Marxist state has escaped from the domination of Marxist metaphysics over its policies, laws and culture? The Western liberal state has done no better even though it has been more pretentious, for the obsession with science and modern technology has almost become a kind of religious faith in the western liberal state, complete with its priesthood and rituals which people take for granted and no one is permitted to question. The dangers of nuclear energy is ignored in favour of its material gain, unemployment is tolerated in the name of raising the rate of growth of output, what cannot really be measured or calculated is either neglected or is subjected to some fake attempt at measurement in order to make a cost-benefit analysis possible. The necessary blessing is therefore given to projects that have already been chosen on the basis of a prior judgement or to serve some powerful private interest. The practice of psychoanalysis is permitted in the name of science when it is often closer to magic, while

mathematics is imposed on old and new sciences to give respectability to research work which is exceedingly trivial and often utterly useless. Several millions of pounds or dollars are wasted on financing attempts at prediction and forecasting which are further from science than they are from astrology, and serious side effects of modern medicine are tolerated in the hope of safer products in the future. All such issues, when discussed, are tackled in a great show of democracy while decisions had already been taken and all the power of mass media is mobilized to impress upon the people that these decisions are the only correct ones.

### 3. The inevitability of metaphysics

There is of course nothing wrong with being influenced by some a priori belief or by a metaphysical view of the world. Indeed such an influence is inevitable, and if having such a view of the world or of the goal of life is regarded like having a religion then, as Eric Fromm put it, «no culture of the past or present, and it seems no culture in the future can be considered as not having a religion... People may worship animals, trees, idols of gold or stone, an invisible god, a saintly person or a diabolic leader; they may worship their ancestors, their nation, their class or party, money or success... They may be aware of their system as being a religious one, different from those of the secular realm, or they may think that they have no religion, and interpret their devotion to certain allegedly secular aims, such as power, money or success, as nothing but their concern for the practical and the expedient. The question is not one of religion or not but of which kind of religion?»<sup>(1)</sup>.

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- (1) Eric Fromm: **To Have Or To Be?**, Abacus, London, 1979. p.135.

Fromm offers the following interesting explanation of the inevitability of metaphysics, though he does not use this term, «... the human species can be defined as the primate who emerged at the point of evolution where instinctive determination has reached a minimum and the development of the brain a maximum. This combination of minimal instinctive determination and maximal brain development had never occurred before in animal evolution and constitutes, biologically speaking, a completely new phenomenon.

Lacking the capacity to act by the command of instincts while possessing the capacity for self-awareness, reason, and imagination - new qualities that go beyond the capacity for instrumental thinking of even the cleverest primates - the human species needed a frame of orientation and an object of devotion in order to survive.

Without a map of our natural and social world - a picture of the world and of one's place in it that is structured and has inner cohesion - human beings would be confused and unable to act purposefully and consistently, for there would be no way of orienting oneself, of finding a fixed point that permits one to organise all the impressions that impinge upon each individual. Our world makes sense to us, and we feel certain about our ideas, through the consensus with those around us. Even if the map is wrong, it fulfills its psychological function. But the map has never been entirely wrong - nor has it ever been entirely right. It has always been enough of an approximation to the explanation of phenomena to serve the purpose of living. Only to the degree that the practice of life is freed from its contradictions and its irrationality can the map correspond to reality.

The impressive fact is that no culture has been found in which such a frame of orientation does not exist. Neither has any individual».

No apology is needed, therefore for having a «tradition» or a «metaphysical» frame of reference. What does seem to require an apology and to need correction is that we are all, religious fundamentalists, liberal secularists and Marxists alike, slavish imitators and mimetic. The religious fundamentalist is the only one who admits this but the others are just as guilty. Of the Marxists, J.P. Sartre has once said that they «behave as if Marxism did not exist and as if each one of them, in every intellectual act, reinvented it, finding it each time exactly equal to itself»<sup>(2)</sup>. But blind imitation is also shown by the faithful enthusiasts for Western civilization even when they pretend or think themselves to be independent and original. They present to us the products of western thought, whether that of Greece, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment or the modern industrial epoch, as if they are just as good for us now as they were or still are for Europe. What is called the «Dark Ages» for Europe is presented to us also as dark, although the Arabs never saw a brighter age. The beginning of our renaissance is considered to be the day when we first came in contact with the modern West and our writers, politicians and reforms are assessed according to how far they managed to assimilate and to transmit western values and traditions. What the West regards as literary or artistic treasures should be just as strongly treasured by us even if they are in stark conflict with one taste. We are required to change our taste to be able to appreciate and enjoy them. Our economists and sociologists divide economic and social development into stages according to the same stages that the West has gone through, and what could be measured in a Western society is also subjected to measurement in ours even when the results of such calculations are utterly absurd. Machinery and means of production, transport and communications as well as patterns of consumption and of urban growth which were developed to meet certain requirements of western societies in certain periods are transferred to us irrespective of our different needs and environments. In what important ways is this different from the blind adherence of the religious fundamentalist to his glorified past? And if we are all slavish imitators of some model or other, past or present, Arab or Western, who would dare cast the first stone?

#### **4. We are all dependent:**

It is in this sense that we are all «dependent». All the main currents of social reform in Egypt today seem to be «dependent» in this sense and the quarrels among them seem to be mainly about whom to imitate. This is not meant as doubting their sincerity and genuine desire for reform, but only to point out that with all their differences they have this important characteristic in common even though this criticism may come as a surprise to many of their adherents.

During the last 15 years, or rather since the reorientation of Egypt's economic

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(2) J.P. Sartre: *The Problem of Method*, Methuen, Northampton 1963, pp.50-51.

policies towards what came to be known as «the Open Door Policy», a number of Egyptian writers, from a variety of disciplines, came to express their rejection of «dependence» and to advocate «delinking» in one form or another. Among economists, the most notable are Ismail Sabry Abdallah, Ibrahim El-Issway, Ramzy Zaki and Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil. All four are academics associated with Cairo University or the Institute of Planning. I.S. Abdallah was also a minister of planning, as well as director of the Institute of Planning in the early 1970's. It is safe to say, however, that their version of «dependency theory» is not very different from that of the Latin American School as expressed by F. Cardoso, A.G. Frank, Dos Santos, O. Sunkel and others. The well-known Egyptian economist Samir Amin could be mentioned with either of the two groups. The main source of inspiration for all of them is the Marxist critique of capitalism and hence almost all my previous remarks about the attitude of Egyptian Marxists apply also to the Egyptian «dependency economists». Reading them<sup>(3)</sup>, like reading the Latin American writers on dependence, delinking and self-reliance, gives the reader a greater sense of relief after reading the mainstream of development literature, but one cannot help feeling, in the light of what is said above, that something important is missing. The image of the desired society implied in their writings, as it is in the Latin American school, is still that of modern western society after some necessary modifications. The problem of Third world development is seen not as being mimetic but rather as being exploited, and exploitation is understood almost exclusively in an economic sense. Cultural invasion when tackled at all is seen as the invasion of «capitalist» culture, which is objectionable again because of being exploitative. What is lamented is mainly, and often solely, «inequality» of exchange, unfair trading or the illegitimate appropriation of surplus value. While all this is indeed to be lamented, if what I started with in this paper contains any element of truth, there is much more to «dependence» than economic exploitation».

## 5. An Egyptian school of dependency?

In a widely acclaimed book published in 1981<sup>(4)</sup>, Adel Hussein went much further

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- (3) See for instance (all written in Arabic):  
 Ismail Sabry Abdallah: *Nahwa Nizam Iqtisadi Alami Gadid* (Towards a New International Economic Order), The General Egyptian Book Organization, Cairo 1976; Ibrahim El Issawy: *Fi Islah Ma Afsadahu Al-Infatih* (On Reforming the Damages of Open Door Policies), Al-Ahali-Books, Cairo 1984, and, *Al-Maazaq wal Makhrag* (The Trap and the Way Out), Al-Tagammue Party, Cairo 1987; Ramzy Zaki: *Dirasat fi Azmet Misr Al-Iqtisadiya* (Studies in Egypt's Economic Crisis), Madbouli Bookshop, Cairo 1983 and, *Mihnath Al-Dayoun Wa Siyassat Al-Tahrir* (The Debt Predicament and Liberation Policies), Third World Publishing House, Cairo 1991; Mahmoud Abdel-Fadil: *Taammulat fi Al-Masaala Al-Iqtisadiya Al-Misriya* (Reflections on Egypt's Economic Problem), Dar Al-Mustaqbal Al-Arabi, Cairo 1983.
- (4) *Al-Iqtisad Al-Misry Min Al-Istiqlal [I]ltabaeya 1974-9*, (The Egyptian Economy from Independence to Dependence) Dar Al-Wihda, Beirut 1981.

than Egyptian academic economists by emphasizing the issue of cultural dependence and emphasizing the need for cultural liberation<sup>(5)</sup>, and the present writer wrote in the same vein in a number of articles and books published since the late 1970's<sup>(6)</sup>. But as one might expect, emphasis on cultural dependence may be more ably expressed by non-economists. The two most forceful expressions of what may be called «an Egyptian theory of dependency» may be those of Tariq Al-Bishry, a historian and lawyer, and Abdel-Wahab Al-Meseiry, a professor of English literature. The economic dimension hardly appears in their writings<sup>(7)</sup>, but their philosophical, political and historical analysis carries the analysis of dependency much further perhaps than any other Egyptian or indeed Arab writer has done.

For an Egyptian or an Arab to emphasize the cultural aspects of dependence rather than being confined to the economic sphere, as most Latin American writers have done, is not at all surprising. The populations of Latin America are largely of European stock, they speak European languages, have the same faith (or lack of it) and their social development has always proceeded along the path drawn by Western Europe or North America. What they have against Europe or North America is not cultural but economic domination. Since they breathe the same «cultural» air they fail to notice anything odd about it. With the Egyptians, or the Arabs, in spite of almost two centuries of cultural submission, this point has fortunately not yet been reached. It would be a sad day when this cultural domination is not even noticed.

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(5) See in particular volume two pp. 301-329.

(6) Galal Amin: *Mihnat Al-Iqtisad Wal-Thaqafa fi Misr* (Egypt's Economic and Cultural Predicament), Al-Marqaz Al-Arabi Lil-Bahth Wal-Nashr, Cairo 1982), *Tanmeyah Am Tabaeye Iqtisadiya Wa Thaqafiya?* (Development or Economic and Cultural Dependence), Cairo Publications 1983. *Al-Iqtisad Wal-Siyasa Wal-Mugtamaa Fi Asr Al-Infatih* (Economy, Politics and Society in the Era of Liberalization), Madbouli Bookshop 1984; *Qessat Doyoun Misr Al-Kharigiya Min Mohamed Ali Ila Al-Youm* (The Story of Egypt's External Debt from M. Ali till Today) Ali-Mokhtar Publishing House, Cairo 1987.

(7) See for instance: Tariq Al-Bishry: *Al-Haraqah Al-Siyaseya fi Misr, 1945-52* (Political Movement in Egypt, 1945-52) new edition with a new long introduction, Dar Al-Shorouq, Cairo 1983, especially pp.27-48; Abdel-Wahab Al-Meseiry: *Al-Furdous Al-Ardy*, (The Earthly Paradise), Reflections on Modern American Civilization), 1979.