



Economic Contributions of Malik Bennabi to the Development of Islamic Economic Thought

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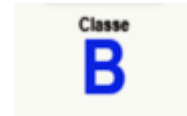
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Economic Contributions of Malik Bennabi to the Development of Islamic Economic Thought

المساهمات الاقتصادية لمالك بن نبي في تنمية الفكر الاقتصادي الإسلامي

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Abstract

The objective of this research paper is to highlight some of the economic contributions of the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi (1905–1973) to the development of Islamic economic thought.

The paper follows the historical and analytical academic methodologies to trace and analyze his economic ideas and thoughts from the 1940s to his death in 1973 especially through his book *Al-Muslim fi Alam Al-Iqtisad* (The Muslim in the World of Economics).

The Findings of the research confirm that Malek Benabi is one of the greatest and most significant Muslim thinkers in the modern Islamic history of the 20th century. He contributed significantly to the advancement of Islamic economic thought, even though he was misunderstood during his lifetime and ignored for some time after his death, before he became recognized as one of those thinkers and reformists, who influenced many intellectual Muslims and left a great impact on the contemporary development of Islamism worldwide.

Key words: Malek Bennabi, Islamic Economic Thought, Conditions of Civilization.

JEL Classification: A11, A13

المخلص

تهدف هذه الورقة البحثية إلى تسليط الضوء على بعض المساهمات الاقتصادية للمفكر الجزائري مالك بن نبي (1905–1973) في تنمية الفكر الاقتصادي الإسلامي.

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تتبع هذه الورقة المنهجيات العلمية التاريخية والتحليلية لتتبع وتحليل آرائه وأفكاره الاقتصادية منذ أربعينيات القرن العشرين حتى وفاته عام 1973، خاصة من خلال كتابه "المسلم في عالم الاقتصاد". تؤكد نتائج البحث أن مالك بن نبي من أعظم وأهم المفكرين المسلمين في التاريخ الإسلامي الحديث للقرن العشرين، وقد ساهم بشكل كبير في النهوض بالفكر الاقتصادي الإسلامي، رغم أنه أسيء فهمه أثناء حياته، وتم تجاهله من طرف البعض بعد ذلك، قبل أن يصبح معروفاً كأحد أهم المفكرين والإصلاحيين، الذين أثروا في العديد من المتقنين المسلمين، وتركوا تأثيراً كبيراً على التطور المعاصر للإسلام في جميع أنحاء العالم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: ملك بن نبي، الفكر الاقتصادي الإسلامي، شروط النهضة.

INTRODUCTION

The present research paper highlights some of the contributions of the Algerian thinker, Malek Bennabi to the economic development of Islamic economic thought.

The aim is to find out the new ideas he advanced and defended to gauge how significant was his contribution.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section gives an overview on the life and education of Malek Bennabi. The second section discusses some of the publications. Section Three of the Paper reveals and expose some of Malek Bennabi ideas and thought on Islamic economics and summarizes them in order to show his contributions towards the development of Islamic economic thought. The fourth and last section presents the conclusion.

1. Life and Education of Malek Bennabi

Malek Bennabi (1905–1973) is one of the greatest and most significant Muslim thinkers and intellectuals of the 20th century. However, he was quite misunderstood and ignored for some time, before he became recognized as one of those thinkers and reformists, who influenced many intellectual Muslims and left a great impact on the contemporary development of Islamism worldwide.

Nowadays, he is considered by many Muslim scholars (Boukrouh, 2006; Walsh, 2007; El-Mesawi, 2008; Chennouf, 2011, Ouissi, 2012;

Benlahcene, 2013; Dilmi, 2013; Adil, 2017, Talbi, 2017 and Kechacha, 2019) as one of the most prominent Muslim thinkers of the 20th Century.

He is an encyclopaedic thinker, philosopher and sociologist with a great worthwhile intellectual production. He enriched the Islamic library, with useful works on the Islamic renaissance, in which he dealt with the problems of human society, particularly the Muslim society, focussing on the reasons behind the underdevelopment of the Muslim world and how to revive it with a rigorous scientific methodology. He sought to revitalize Islam as a dynamic social and moral force that lead to the revival of the Muslim civilization that was lost in the few previous centuries. He is identified with the ideals of Islamic modernism's *işlah* (reform) and *nahḍah* (renaissance; revival). This resulted in a project of cultural, religious, psychological, educational, historical, social, political and economic dimensions (El-Mesawi, 2008 and Kechacha, 2019).

Malek Bennabi combined between the traditional Islamic education of the mosque *madrassah*, and the Western education of the colonial French school whose effects can clearly be felt from reading his thoughts and from the manner he formulated his ideas. He received his primary Qur'anic and French schooling at the Algerian eastern city of Tébessa near the Tunisian border, where his father worked as an officer in the Islamic judiciary. Between 1921 and 1925, Malek Bennabi completed his secondary studies at the Lycée Franco-Arabe of Constantine (Dilmi, 2013, Kechacha, 2019).

In 1925, he attempted to pursue his graduate studies in France, but he was unsuccessful, due to lack of financial means. So, he kept looking for a job without success, until 1927, when he was finally appointed as assistant clerk to the Shari'ah court of Aflou in the far western province of Oran at the time, at more than 700 kms away from his town Tébessa (Ouissi, 2012). As recorded by Abu-Rabi' (2008), Malek Bennabi was transferred in 1928 from the Shari'ah court of Aflou to the court of Chelghoum Laid (in the eastern region of the country) from which he resigned following a dispute with a French clerk of the civil court of the small town. In 1929, Malek Bennabi embarked on business enterprise, but it turned out to be unsuccessful. But in 1930, the year of the centenary of French occupation of Algeria, Malek Bennabi succeeded to go to Paris to

continue his studies with his father's financial support. However, following a politically motivated rejection of his application to join the Institut des Langues Orientales de Paris, he joined a polytechnic school from which he graduated as an electrical engineer in 1935 (Bennabi, 2006a; Abu Rabi', 2008 and El-Mesawi, 2008).

In 1938, with the help of an old friend from Tébessa in Algeria, who put him in contact with an Algerian Association of Immigrant Workers at the city of Marseille in France, which was looking for a person who could conduct literacy classes for them. Bennabi became the director of the Centre Culturel du Congrès Musulman Algérien (Cultural Centre of the Algerian Muslim Congress) founded by the Association. The success of the centre attracted the attention of the French authorities, which soon closed it down, after a few months of intense activity (El-Mesawi, 2008; Abu-Rabi', 2008).

Malek Bennabi's life conditions worsened due to World War Two and to the total breakdown of relations between Algeria and France after November 1942. He was compelled to accept a job in Germany, where he managed to write his first and seminal book *Le Phénomène Coranique* (The Qur'anic Phenomenon) – the manuscript which was subsequently destroyed during an air raid. Rewritten from memory, the book was first published in 1946 in Algiers (Bennabi, 2006a; Abu-Rabi', 2008, Dilmi, 2013, Kechacha, 2019).

2. Publications of Malek Bennabi

From 1946, Malek Bennabi started his unbroken career as a thinker, a reformist and a writer. He published in 1947 his only novel *Lebbeik: pelerinage des pauvres* (here I am: pilgrimage of the Poor), illustrating the spiritual and geographical journey of a poor Algerian pilgrim to the sacred holy places of Mekkah and Medinah. This was followed by in 1948 with the publication of his controversial ideas "Les Conditions de la Renaissance" (The Conditions of Renaissance) (Bennabi, 2006a).

Bennabi was influenced by a large number of Muslim and Non-Muslim scholars and thinkers, mainly by Ibn Khaldūn, Abd al-Ḥamid Ben Badis, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Arnold Toynbee. Despite his criticisms of Orientalists such as Louis Massignon and H. A. R. Gibb, he recognized

their importance. He learnt history, like Ibn Khaldūn, in order to determine and verify the causes behind the rise and fall of civilisations. He ended up by becoming disappointed with the underdevelopment of the Muslim Ummah and the failure of some Muslim leaders to address the problems faced by the Muslims, so, he tried to solve these problems in his own way (Adil, 2017).

His first work, *Le Phénomène coranique: Essai d'une théorie sur le Coran*, (The Quranic Phenomenon) illustrated his apprehension regarding Orientalist influence on young Muslim scholars. He offered an exceptional exegesis of the Qur'ān and Islam reconciling reason with revelation. The book suggested an ecumenical ambition to raise Muslim consciousness and to educate non-Muslims (Walsh, 2007, Benlahcene, 2011).

In 1954, the renowned French publishers, Editions du Seuil in Paris, published his fourth major book *La Vocation de l'Islam* (the Vocation of Islam), in which he elaborated that the decline of Muslim civilization (the instinctual stage) coincided with the moral and intellectual sluggishness of "post-Almohadean man," who emerged in the fourteenth century (Bennabi, 2006b; El-Mesawi, 2008).

In 1956, he presented his book *L'Afro-Asiatisme* in which he set out the theoretical and cultural foundations of the non-alignment movement, whose first seeds were sown during the Bandung Conference in 1955. In 1956, he left France and settled in Cairo, Egypt, where he published in 1957 a booklet under the title *SOS Algeria* in Arabic, French, and German in which he denounced the atrocities and genocide committed by the French army against the Algerian people. He then continued to promote the Algerian cause by his own means (Bennabi, 1956; Abu-Rabi', 2013).

Between 1957 and 1962, Malek Bennabi organized a series of informal seminars of ideological edification for Muslim students in Cairo. During this period, he travelled regularly to Syria and Lebanon to deliver public talks and meet with intellectuals and thinkers. Besides the translation into Arabic of his earlier books, Bennabi's intellectual activity at this stage resulted in a number of important books, such as *Milad Mujtama'* (On the Origins of Human Society), *Fikrat Commonwealth Islami* (The Idea of an Islamic Commonwealth) and *Al-Sira' al-Fikri fi'l-Bilad al-Musta'marah*

(The Ideological Struggle in the Colonized Countries) (Bennabi, 2010; Kechacha, 2019).

After Algeria's independence, he returned to Algeria in 1963, where he was assigned by the first Algerian President Ahmad Ben Bella, to establish a centre for cultural orientation. Frustrated by the bureaucratic routine that impeded the approval of the project, Bennabi launched from his home a regular intellectual forum, where he focused on the issues of culture and civilization. In 1964, he was appointed as Director of Higher Studies at the University of Algiers. Meanwhile he continued his intellectual activity by starting a discussion group, called *al-Qiyām* (the values). He also contributed in writing regularly to the local press, especially the French journal *Révolution Africaine* in which he wrote almost weekly (El-Mesawi, 2008, Kechacha, 2019).

In 1970, he resigned from his official post and devoted himself to seminars and conferences both at home and abroad. During this period, he founded the Annual Conference on Islamic Thought that lasted even after his death up to the 1980s. This series of conferences exposed the Algerian intellectuals to the various and diversified thoughts of Muslim scholars from all over the Arab Muslim World (Adil, 2017).

Bennabi published a number of other important books. They include, among others, his two-volume memoirs, *Le Problème des idées dans le monde musulman* (The Problem of Ideas in the Islamic World), *Al-Muslim fi 'Alam al-Iqtisad* (The Muslim in the World of Economics), *Perspectives Algeriennes* (Algerian Perspectives), *L'Islam et la démocratie* (Islam and Democracy), *l'Oeuvre des Orientalistes* (The Work of the Orientalists), etc. (El-Mesawi, 2008, Bennabi, 2015; Bennabi, 2016a; Bennabi, 2016a Adil, 2017; Kechacha, 2019).

His efforts to promote intellectual discourse in Algeria led to difficulties with the Algerian authorities. The government banned him from leaving the country and tried to control his movements. Only in 1971, he was allowed to leave Algeria with his wife and three daughters for the pilgrimage to Makkah. He took this opportunity to visit Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Libya and Tunisia, where he delivered talks about "the Muslim's role in the last third of the twentieth century". The following year he returned to Algeria, got ill and breathed his last on 31st October

1973 in Algiers where he was buried (El-Mesawi, 2008; Abu-Rabi', 2008; Kechacha, 2019).

3. Malik Bennabi Contribution to Islamic Economics

Malik Bennabi is not considered an economist as such, but rather a thinker, a writer and a philosopher of civilizational renaissance. This is because his discussion of economic issues is not done in the way economists deal with economic matters. His writings on economic issues are spread over in various lectures, articles and non-economics books, although most of these are summarised by the author himself in one book entitled *Al-Muslim fi 'Alam al-Iqtisad* (The Muslim in the World of Economics). He did not view economics as science, but rather viewed it as a philosophy and a thought, subject to *Ijtihad* (reasoning within the boundaries of Islamic Shari'ah). He spoke of the economy as a vital factor for the flourishing of civilization, and as a major factor in the cultural take-off and a vital component of the prosperity of civilization (Kachacha, 2019).

Malik Bennabi is ranked among the very few who have profoundly and systematically contributed to the debate concerning the issue of development. According to him (Bennabi, 2013), the problem of underdevelopment that the Islamic world suffers from - especially in its economic aspect - requires tremendous efforts from an intellectual standpoint, to search it, treat it, and find appropriate solutions to it. Therefore, solving this problem is a great responsibility of Islamic thinkers and economic economists, and it requires them to do their utmost to use their queen of *ijtihad* to confront the problem of underdevelopment. Bin Nabi believes that targeted solutions should meet two conditions:

1. The first is to be in accordance with the imperatives of the age, so that they are realistic and effective, not to be traditional or idealistic, far from the data of the times.
2. The second is that it is within the legitimate limits, in accordance with the teachings of Islam that are based on the Quran and the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah.

After the Algerian independence from France, he criticised the ideas and policies of the Algerian educated elite in the economic field, who tried

to tackle the economic problems of Algeria, on the basis of the liberal capitalist economy or the socialist materialist economy. In his book *Al-Muslim fi 'Alam al-Iqtisad* (The Muslim in the world of Economics) he criticized their stance on the economic issues, dividing these intellectuals were into two classes:

1. The Marxists who - perhaps by virtue of their atheism - are indifferent to the ideology or materialist contradiction to Islam and choose socialism.

2. The Liberals who - out of their ignorance of the Islamic economic teachings - avoid materialism and atheism, choosing capitalism.

He implicitly called for the need to search for solutions to economic problems outside of capitalism and socialism, and the need to search for the reasons for the failure of development plans that were applied in the third world on the basis of these two doctrines. He also criticized the position of Islamic economists on the economic problem and how it should be tackled. He mentioned that their efforts were devoted solely to studying banks and financial systems in the economy, and he described these efforts as merely an attempt to reconcile Islam and capitalism. In this context, he implicitly called for the need to search for solutions to economic problems outside of capitalism and socialism, and the need to search for the reasons for the failure of development plans that were applied in the third world on the basis of these two doctrines. For example, he mentioned a university thesis entitled "Investing without interest", which was presented by a Muslim student in front of an American university in the year 1971. He argued that, although his thesis won the admiration and appreciation of colleagues and professors, but it is an implicit choice for the liberal principle, and it is nothing more than an attempt to lay an Islamic streak for this principle. He called for the necessity of discovering another way to advance the economy that deals not only with banking and financial investment without interest, but also deals with the social investment that covers all the socio-economic aspects of the Muslim (Bennabi, 2013, Kechacha, 2019).

Bennabi (2000b) unravelled the causes of Muslim decline and the success of Western civilization and culture. He concluded that the problems do not lay in the Qur'an or in the Islamic faith but in the

Muslims themselves. He called for launching a new Muslim renaissance based on an interdisciplinary approach to civilization which highlights his theory that internal-external and social-intellectual factors govern civilization and an equation can be generated for civilization itself. He perceives the history of Muslim civilization as cyclical, proceeding through spiritual, rational, and instinctual “psycho-temporal” stages founded on the changing synergy of man (*insān*), soil (*turāb*), and time (*zamān*) (Boukrouh, 2006; Benlacene, 2011).

According to Malek Bennabi (2013), religion is the most important catalyst for the equation of Man + Soil + Time = Civilization, and man is the central force in any civilizing process, and without him the other two elements lack value. is significant for the reversal of Muslim decline. Therefore, for Bennabi, Muslims must first change their spiritual condition before successfully changing society or civilization. This is echoed in the Qur’anic verse of Surat al-Ra’ad (13:11), which stipulates: “Verily, never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves”.

According to Benlahcene (2011) 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. To Bennabi, the problem of readiness for colonization (*Al-qabiliyah lil isti'mar*) was rooted in the indolence of Muslims of the post-al-Muwahid era, the historical process which 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. (Benlahcene 2013).

Bennabi (2013) pointed to the reasons for the failure of economic plans applied in Islamic countries and underestimated the role of banks in the economy. He did not consider them as essential in it, stressing that they do not go beyond being part of the modern world of economics. He gave two completely different examples of economies, which achieved economic success without the need for banking or finance: the first example is the Chinese economic directive that continued its dynamism without relying on financial investment. The second example is the

German experiment of the German Schacht, and his success in reviving his country's economy prior to World War II, starting from almost scratch, which was launched in its first steps without an initial budget. However, Bennabi is against duplicating and implementing the same plans prepared for some countries in different countries with different social cultures. He does not accept the mere imitation of the imported ideas. He cites the experience of Indonesia, developing economic plans based on Schacht's plan, but which failed miserably, despite the material possibilities that the country possesses in terms of natural and human wealth, which are supposed to be sufficient conditions for success. He criticized Sharht's plan for Indonesia and attributed the reasons for his failure to neglecting the social equation of the Indonesian people (Bennabi, 2013).

In the context of his argument about the social equation in Japan and China, Bennabi called for the necessity of modifying the social equation of the individual as such, and that economic dynamics is linked to a general social essence, whether under capitalist or socialist theory. For example, for the first with the Japanese experience, and for the second with the Chinese experience. An economic lesson learned from this experience is that economic plans include a prerequisite for success that is not the prerogative of economists, which is the necessity of taking into account the social equation of the people to whom those plans were developed. Concerning the Chinese socialist experience and the German capitalist experience, he warned about the necessity of liquidating the economy from the doctrinal aspects, and getting rid of them in the starting stage, whether in its technical or political image (Kechacha, 2019).

Bennabi also criticized those who blame the Fuqaha' (Muslim jurists) for not coming up with solutions to the economic problems faced by the Muslims. He indicated that it is not within their competence to present economic solutions based on the Qur'an, Sunnah or other sources of Islamic Shari'ah. He noted that providing economic solutions is the role of economists because it is their speciality. He then clearly defined the role of jurists to provide their opinion on the extent to which the solutions provided by economists comply with Islamic Shari'ah (Kechacha, 2019).

Some of the important economic recommendations suggested by Bennabi (2013) can be enumerated in the following points:

- Stop the position of choice between capitalism and the way of Marxism, and not looking for a third way.
- Clear the misunderstanding about the function of money and financial investment in the economy.
- Demonstrate that neglecting the social equation and submitting to foreign plans and projects according to equations that are alien to the countries and societies in which they are applied, do not only fall short of achieving the expected results but will fail miserably.
- Get rid of some of the contracts that froze it in the field of economics from the Islamic thought.
- Break the restrictions imposed by foreign ideas on Islamic Ijtihad.
- Show the mistake of determinism that confined the economic choice to the existing curricula.
- Draw attention to the need for Ijtihad to establish an economic doctrine outside the capitalist and socialist systems.
- Review and reassess the subject of the function of money in economics.
- Clarify the idea of social investment as an alternative to financial investment.
- Demonstrate the importance of taking into account the social equation when applying economic plans.
- Discover new horizons on how to harness social energies to start from, to build a strong economy capable of facing the conditions of underdevelopment.
- Exercise Islamic thought on the freedom to act in the face of economic dilemmas.
- Guide how economic issues should be handled so that they are effective and meaningful.

Malek Bennabi concluded his book, *The Muslim in the World of Economics*, with a useful summary, in which he referred to the most important ideas contained in it. He also identified the role entrusted to Islamic economic thought, and the location of his book from this thought, and the extent of his contribution to playing this role. He contends: "I believe that Islamic thought is called upon to wage a major battle to meet the challenge of the world of economics" (Bennabi, 2013).

4. Conclusion

From the research study about the economic contribution to the Islamic economic thought, it is quite clear that Malek Bennabi, even though he is not an economist as such, his ideas on Islamic economics and how it should be put in practice is very significant. He suggested many ways and means on how to achieve economic reform in the Muslim world, so as to come out of the underdeveloped situation it finds itself in.

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