

Book Review

BIAS: Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences

Edited by Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri (Virginia: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1427AH/2006) ISBN 1-56564-416-6 paperback, ISBN 1-56564-417-4 hardback, pp. 329.

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Bias: Epistemological Bias in the Physical and Social Sciences is a multi-authored book by eleven authors and edited by Abdelwahab Elmessiri. It critiques the bias in methodology and terminology suffered by the research, especially among the Third World intellectuals in general, and the Arab-Islamic world in particular. The bias, according to the book, is about the abandoning of the indigenous paradigms and biases that arise from their own existential and historical situations as a result of encountering the Western framework and paradigm as not only a foreign source but also believed to be dominant even among the Arab writers and researchers. The danger of this phenomenon is so pervasive that it tends to distort the whole process and gives serious effect to the future of the affected culture and civilization.

The goal of the book as set by its editor, Elmessiri, is to discover some of the biases latent in the Arab terminology, methodologies as well as research tools, and to challenge the dominance of Western framework, paradigm, and conceptual principles. The Western salient features of secularism and materialism are not just foreign to other cultures but are themselves too weak to be the ultimate and universal point of reference.

This awareness is vital to support the interest of any specific culture to continue to survive as a cultural formation with a specific identity, and to be alternative ones marked by a greater degree of independence and neutrality. The book is meant to be a creative and revolutionary attempt to emphasize the importance of rebutting biases and to acquaint readers with the means to recognize and surmount biases as well as find an avenue by which the shift can be made.

The main framework of the meaning of bias and problems faced by the Third World in general and Arab in particular is well articulated by Elmessiri in the introduction and the first chapter entitled 'The Gate of Ijtihad: An Introduction to the Study of Epistemological Bias'. It is his hope that this endeavour for freeing the Third World and the Arab world from the Western influences will have more

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objective conception and encourage innovation and creativity for future developments.

Though the book is a product of many writers, each chapter supports the main themes of the book with different aspects explored from different areas of study both in physical and Social Sciences. Studies on Social Thought, Political development, Psychology, Education and culture represent chapters on Social Sciences and researches on technology, Architecture and Hard Science or Physics for Physical Sciences.

The theme of the dominance of the Western framework and the need to return to original ethos of a locality appears in all chapters. Adel Hussein in his chapter on social thought supports the idea of freeing the Arab thought from the Western materialistic secular ethos. He insists on the need for returning to the original ethos of one's culture and society without which the Islamic understanding towards life will be distorted.

Bias in political development is dealt with by Nasr M. Arif who focuses on the spirit of West self-centricity and evaluates the Other which is considered by him as a "civilizational arrogance" that relegates the "Other" to a position inferior to that of the "Self". The study of history is boldly based on the Western historical experience by having linear development of human societies across all stages and projecting its ideals and objectives. The author suggests a methodology of determining bias and neutralizing it by considering several dimensions which include doctrinal and the totality of dimensions, historical roots and environmental and societal pattern of a particular society.

Research on Psychology is discussed by Rafik Habib who points to wrong emphasis on measuring human intelligence. Testing scientific concepts and methods is given more focus than human performance which gives way to the spirit of cultural infiltration in experimentally derived results, method and theory. Instead of improving the IQs of individuals, it has become an obsession for radical empiricism to highlight the imbalanced performance between Arab and the West. Thus, it drifts further away from the desired philosophical and ideological model of life.

Hoda Hegazy highlights the formulation of curricula based on the prevalent ideology in a given society, not from outside. This is supported by Saad Abdulrahman al-Bazi'i in his study on the methodology in literary criticism. A thorough revision of foreign methods is crucially needed before using them. He looks forward to seeing the Arabo-Islamic world's critical attitude towards the Western thought though it involves very difficult tasks.

The theme of making Islam or Arab as a potential paradigm also exists in some chapters. Ferial J. Ghazoul, for example, highlights the uniqueness of literature of the suppressed people in expressing their feeling in a more beautiful way. The author discusses three literary texts which challenge the Western expressions that uncover African impotence while stripping bare imperial mechanisms to anchor its hegemony, disseminate prejudice, undermine and condemn the culture of the Other. They are Chinua Achebe (*Things Fall Apart*) Tayeb Salih (*Season of Migration to the North*) and Tahar ben Jalloun (*I Am An Arab, I Am Suspect*) who

creatively present a comprehensive view of existing biases while simultaneously deconstructing the grounds from which prejudice derives and on which it thrives.

Some chapters are quite bold in presenting the Islamic answers as better answers than those of the West. Adel Hussein highlights the Islamic strength in the civilizational studies which can provide more holistic understanding of human character and meaning of progress compared to the Western materialistic understanding. The Qur'anic standpoint on issues related to human intelligence provides a better solution compared to that of the West in dealing with the issue of artificial intelligence as exposed by Mahmoud Dhaouadi. It also challenges the Western concept of intelligence based on evolution by asserting that human intelligence was there at the beginning of creation and as the outcome of a deliberate divine choice and decision. The Qur'an also gives the foundational answer to the issue of artificial intelligence that it can never be equal to human intelligence.

Chapters on Physical Sciences of the book have quite common findings. For example, objects go beyond their physical aspects especially on the issue of their transference from one community to another. Each physical aspect is heavily embedded with human value and culture. The issue of technology transfer is dealt with by Hamed Ibrahim el-Mously. He suggests that transfer of technology cannot happen in the stages of adaptation and innovation, which are decisive for technological independence. Al-Mously also calls for educational reform in science and technology by having own identity research that explores the problems of society and therefore leads to appreciation of cultural distinction, and avoids the destruction of much of their traditional knowledge and technological experience.

Mahjoob Taha discusses the Western development in hard sciences which brings a lot of problems and produces a sceptical attitude across time. Indeed, the philosophy underlying the physical laws deserves to be ascertained in all of its processes to ensure more sustainable findings across time. As an alternative to the Western claim of universal pattern, A. I. Abdelhalim's chapter is a showcase of a development of architecture based on local values.

Overall, the book is quite successful in presenting various aspects of biases that occur in the Arab writings and suggesting ways to encounter it. It is also successful in highlighting the future needs and directions of the Arab paradigm and framework in some of the issues including education, technology as well as study on man.

Another aspect highlighted by the book is the complexity of the study of culture in dealing with the issue of universality versus specificity which is rooted in epistemological, ethical and aesthetic systems that affect all sciences. It proposes for open-ended universal human paradigms based on knowledge of all cultural formations in all of their specificities and manifestations and attempts to arrive at a higher level of abstraction, and thus universality which is not acknowledged by the West.

Having the Arabic culture on board will bring broader understanding of the complexity and importance of particularity with better analysis. Issues discussed

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are attempts to underscore the need for more endeavours to propose alternatives to Western epistemological paradigms.