

**The International Philosophy Day organized by UNESCO
(Baku, November 17, 2022)**

**Particularism vs. Universalism:
The Missing Link between Wishfully Thinking and Genuinely Implementing Universal
Values**

**Hassan HAMI, PhD
(Morocco)**

Sometimes, asking a good question is as hard as getting a blind answer, if not an answer at all. No matter how we keep trying, the task may prove to be a waste of time and an elusive endeavor. Nevertheless, if we don't ask questions, we won't stay on course or move forward.

We are gathering in Baku, thanks to the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology at the Azerbaijani National Academy of Sciences, on the occasion of World Philosophy Day. We are invited to exchange views about a very challenging topic: 'Azerbaijani Philosophy and Universal Values.'

Fair enough, because Azerbaijan has played an important role in spreading humanistic values and sound thoughts and steadily contributed, throughout documented historical materials, to the universally shared knowledge in many fields. The country is a beacon of debated and controversial ideas that, for decades, have impacted people's mindsets in the region.

However, I am not going to talk about that, being aware that other colleagues have better expertise than me on this specific matter. I would be very at ease speaking about another dimension of philosophical thought—that is, the role of philosophers in dealing with the chaos that is extending in the modern world. A chaos that some, among other thinkers and philosophers, have been somehow involved in and should be held accountable for.

Let us begin with some facts. We are witnessing wars raging everywhere, either through a direct military confrontation or through hidden schemes played by proxy actors and orchestrated by actors who are not only states. These wars are resulting in corteges of refugees, displaced persons, migrants, and intruders, all of whom started the wars in the first place.

Then, we are suffering the consequences of an unprecedented economic crisis as a result of a saccade of the international financial crisis brought about by those who have links with war's merchants and other perpetrators behind the scenes. Forget it about democracy, rule of law, international law, and the narrative about good, bad, and worse in both states and individuals' behaviors.

The picture is actually crystal clear. These actors—either states or non-states—aim at reaching specific objectives throughout the struggle for power on the internal and international

chessboards. The question is, for whom would they be running? If we stick only to the origins of some wars raged over the last twenty years, we would not be surprised to find out that a few philosophers and thinkers have had their share in bringing about the chaos (H. Hami, 2018). This has always been the same old story: a crisis is initiated, and the same initiators are (hypothetically) requested to solve it, which they couldn't, for this wouldn't be their first set of priorities.

People and governments in so-called "developing countries," although aware of the threat, lack the means to fight back. Important segments of the population are even adamant about shaking their dormant minds and accepting some sort of fate-unavoidable-safe haven status quo. They cannot choose again or consider different options. They share the view that the overwhelming universal values in our present world, even though they belittle them, might, in the end, meet their expectations. Meanwhile, they endeavor to promote their own values nationwide and, hopefully, worldwide.

Clash and Dichotomy Rooted in Biased Discourses

In so doing, people and governments ignite clashes, dichotomies, and enmity that, instead of promoting a positive mutual understanding, participate in increasing cultural misunderstandings. There is no need to rehearse what Samuel Huntington, Francis Fukuyama, and Bernard Lewis have disseminated over the last forty years. They participated, indirectly, in the go-ahead wars for the triumph of one culture over the rest, while their first intention (as they stated later) was an attempt to spread values of peace and harmony between cultures and civilizations.

This leads to asking the following question: would it be safe to take for granted what famous (and sponsored) thinkers and philosophers advocate, assuming that they work to highlight and promote human values?

I have been following the debate—nurtured over years—on the topic of enlightenment and its link to democracy and shared values in the Middle East and North Africa. I also paid attention to the same debate in Azerbaijan a couple of years ago, when a few philosophers and political scientists raised the issue of multiculturalism and the diversity of the Azerbaijani culture (I. Mammazadeh, 2019). And I have never felt comfortable with the arguments put forward by different well-respected thinkers—at least when they have adopted a self-defense posture.

One of the reasons that strikes me is *the victim mentality* that the promoters unwearingly display. Instead of emphasizing that the values promoted in their own societies have a universal dimension, they get themselves stuck in the debate of *true self vs. false self*. Furthermore, when these thinkers are faced with the arrogance of hegemonic thoughts in other societies, they try to forge a new identity or go back to history to seek some sort of cultural evidence.

In this respect, it is amazing to meditate on the titles that some authors give to their essays on cultural diversity and pro-national values; the common title would always be 'Plaidoyer, Advocacy, مناصرة' (F. Laroui, 2021), as to prove their own existence. The ironic side of this sort of project is that no one reads it, neither in their own countries nor abroad—especially in the West, the main target they are wishing to hit.

Over the last sixty years, the history of Middle Eastern societies, including North Africa, has been a saccade of hectic epistemological breaks that have undermined confidence in the true

self and squeezed the viability of the false self. Faced with the arrogance of the promoters of a new-rejuvenated hegemonic culture, the new-structured societies have no option but to embrace it and accept it as a fatality.

The pro-enlightenment philosophers eventually found themselves trapped in their rationale. Of course, they were aware of the fecundity and soundness of many representations of their own cultures, yet they were short on arguments. They were forced to abide by the rules imposed by some sort of 'Catch *me if you can*' and 'Catch up with *me-East*'.

The debate on Orientalism in the academic arena has not ended yet. It is still 'based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and the Occident' (E. W. Said, 1979). Furthermore, the paradigm is still applied to the Western perception of Eastern societies, while, curiously, Orientalism, conducted during the Soviet era, is not taken into consideration.

The debate on the viability of classical thought is also under question. The essence of studies on Orientalism has always been linked to the military ethnography at the origin of colonialism. This perception hasn't changed, even though a slight difference in casting might sometimes be detected.

This raises another question: how to make a difference between the people's cultural need—as an expression of an identity—and their cultural behavior—as a propensity to survive multiple assaults or aggressive narratives aimed at despising them? The answer would be that the fight for true self is being challenged by the dilemma of '*Bitter-end*' and '*Joint Survival*'.

It appears that the promoters of Orientalism are motivated by the bitter-end outcome and not by the joint survival-happy end. The ideas of justice, democracy, equality, and so on go back in history, but their promoters are wrapped in an allegedly best achievement associated with Western civilization. To get the idea through, it is commonly told that the history, cultures, and civilizations of other societies are left aside. Moreover, genuine efforts to include them in universal values are seldom acknowledged.

The victim mentality attitude undermines the propensity of sound philosophers to claim a deserved place in the realm of intercultural dialogue. The same attitude is observed in the "*table rase*" paradigm, which makes a claim about starting everything from scratch. Both perceptions fail to score a potential victory either way.

It goes without saying that the main question pertaining to the impact of the epistemological break witnessed in Eastern societies is still being missed. Indeed, hegemonic cultures, although showing two-faced goodwill and openness, are reluctant to accept a sound debate on topics that involve an existential dimension for both the West and the East.

Sometimes, when a debate on these topics rages, it is scorned by people who are clueless about what they are talking about. To get the debate out of its frame, themes related to religion, faith, secularism, and so on are put on the table in order to be used as some sort of diversion or deception.

Hence, it is thought that the battle should be won through soft power (J. Nye, 2004). I might add, and also, unfortunately, throughout the *bluff culture*. The latter has gained power and influence over the last twenty years thanks to new information technology and communication. Governments and societies are now challenged and cannot effectively combat the biased

information. They are almost unable to dismiss narratives disseminated by the organized crime individuals who accept nothing but anarchy and disorder.

Therefore, how could one speak about a way to shape people's behavior while most of them are addicted to fast-food knowledge? Polls conducted over the last twenty years in many countries have shown how shallow and unaware people have become when it comes to existential issues calling for concentration and follow-up. The amount of information shared around the clock makes it very hard for people to clearly make up their minds. So, they become easily manipulated and used.

In this respect, the most logical reaction would be to promote self-culture and fight all forms of discrimination and adversity targeting national cultures perceived as unified, structured, and immune from outside aggression. And, here again, the same question is raised: which culture, within this hypothetical unified structure and among other dependent cultures, would be promoted?

Issues related to ethnicity, social ostracism, xenophobia, language, and past cultural humiliation are at stake accordingly. As a matter of fact, each national culture is multicultural in its essence, but cultures are, inevitably, subject to the dynamics of sustainability and erosion.

Let me elaborate a bit on the issue of language. A blind question: how do you get others to understand you while you make no effort to promote your own language? And to what extent would you be able to master others' languages to get your idea through their mindsets? It happens that you hear people advocating the need to go back to their roots and seek means to defend their cultural and psychological identity and heritage. Not easy! Lack of means means that sometimes the call is meant to test the viability of a hidden script and not to dig deep.

The Blurred Vision of the (ism) Suffix

It also happens that people add the suffix (*ism*) to their narrative. They combine it with their call for balancing between patriotism, cosmopolitanism, and humanism. The problem is that if they seek universalism, they need to give up some aspects of their personality as individuals and as a group or a collectivity—not to mention ethnic or tribal determinism that are put in the balance.

I may refer to four specific examples to corroborate the above-mentioned narrative. Firstly, I start with Morocco. A debate has been raging for decades about the place and role of the Amazigh language in the education system, given that the majority of Moroccans are of Amazigh origin. The Amazigh language was recognized in 2003 as a national language, and this was confirmed in 2011 by the New Constitution. Pending the whole process, prior to this recognition, Amazigh activists first failed to come to an agreement on the form of the alphabet. They were obviously politically motivated.

At the end, they agreed on the *Tifinagh** alphabet instead of the Arabic script. Two decades have passed, and the process is almost a failure, even though a law was adopted in 2019 confirming that the Amazigh language was to be written in Tifinagh. Not only is Tifinagh hard to learn, but also the didactical and methodological requirements make it difficult to hire good teachers. Efforts are being undertaken now to cope seriously with this issue.

The long episode about Tifinagh is a normal continuation of the debate that had stirred the academic arena for decades (Mohamed A. Jabri, 1986-1985, محمد عبد الجابري). It had been concentrated on the dichotomy and complementarity between pan-Africanism, pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism, secularism, westernization, and easternization. The issue of language had been the main obstacle to moving forward.

More confusing is that when Arab scholars talk about the Arab contribution to universal values, they, inadvertently, make people think that they refer to the Arabs as an ethnicity, while, in fact, they mean the whole heritage written in the Arabic language. It is well known that a great deal of the Arab and Islamic heritage was mostly made by non-Arab authors, but Arabic was a common language used back then (A. Benmakhlouf, 2015).

One of the topics that enlisted anthropologists' attention in North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe was the work of Mohammed A. Lahbabi, resulting in his controversial and yet pertinent paradigm called Muslim *Personalism* (M.A. Lahbabi, 1964). Lahbabi dealt with the complex concept of the person from the perspective of Islamic sources and compared it to the perception of men in Western anthropologies.

Lahbabi insists on the importance of the self and its relation to others. This means that the self cannot be dissociated from others because the chemistry of complementarity transcends the temptation to isolation, psychological dissonance, and identity crises. Therefore, to him, *one-sided culturalism* couldn't be but a charade.

Secondly, I mention the case of Egypt. Indeed, in the aftermath of the 1979 signing of the peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, some Egyptian intellectuals started to voice the singularity of Egypt within the Arab and Islamic world. They called for Egyptianization to make their case.

Reference was also made to the pharaonism movement that had originated between 1923 and 1930 to highlight the pre-Islamic past of Egypt as a main component of the Mediterranean civilization. The move was meant to fight back against those who challenged the country for defending its national interest and recovering parts of its territory lost during the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

Thirdly, I mention the case of Azerbaijan. Scholars in Azerbaijan have based their arguments on multiculturalism as a coherent paradigm through which the interconnection of cultural traditions of the past and present accounts for the most in forging the Azerbaijani personality. *Azerbaijanism*, as it is perceived nowadays, would be a socio-political trend, clearly distanced from pan-Turkism, pan-Islamism, and pan-Iranism? (Yusif Huseynov, 2020).

Indeed, the country has witnessed periods of a rise in traditions rooted in fire worship, Christianity, Islam, and, alternatively, Soviet and Western influences. This is being perceived as a means of strength and a good argument to highlight Azerbaijan's contribution to universal values.

However, the main aspiration of most of these scholars, at the time of the inception of the Enlightenment, has been to singularize the Azerbaijani school of thought (Z. Aliyeva, 2019). Scholars and pioneers that are praised by the Azerbaijani academic mainstream include Abbasgoulou agha Bakikhanov, Mirza F. Akhundzade, Zakir J. Mammadov, Shahvad Jafarov, Hasan bey Zardabi, and Narimam Narimanov Heydar Huseynov, to name but a few.

This is a quite legitimate claim that would, nevertheless, be challenged by another claim—that is, the aspiration of the same mainstream for universalism. The same universalism that had been promoted centuries earlier by Nizami Ganjavi, Muhammed Fizuli, Mahmoud Shabistari, Imadeddine Nasimi, etc.

Fourthly, the saga of international prizes attributed to writers from different walks of life and cultures. It is very seldom that a prize, like the Nobel Prize, is given to authors for their outstanding contribution to enhancing sound knowledge of native cultures and civilizations. These prizes are often politically and ideologically motivated. If, in the past, the role of ‘*Dissident Culture*’ was highly appreciated in advancing the process of democracy and human rights, however, questions are legitimately being raised about its real impact on the future of societies to which the winners belong.

Some writers, for the sake of being internationally recognized, are requested to abide by strict applied standards. This would mean that they’d avoid dealing with subjects that would upset the potential sponsors of different prizes. When it does happen, a work is praised; it doesn’t take long to get the picture; the message behind it and the objective assigned might have been ordered or whispered.

Nevertheless, it would be fair to say that no ill-behavior should be stated as long as academic researchers, including philosophers, are driven by the breeze of well-doing. The search for a perfect truth that would apply everywhere is a utopian claim. Academics would be well inspired to refrain from being emotional and stay away from comparing the best and the worst in any culture.

Furthermore, it would be wise not to waste time in efforts to adjust or conciliate between irreconcilable matters such as science and religion or faith and reason for the sake of meeting general people’s expectations and making amends for opportunities lost.

The Egyptian, Moroccan, and Azerbaijani cases are a clear indication that scholars of these countries may drain their energy if they keep attempting to put patriotism, nationalism, modernization, easternization, westernization, globalization, interventionism, isolationism, etc., in the same basket. Chemistry wouldn’t work because the sponsors of ‘monitored’ knowledge, who nurture different agendas, wouldn’t ultimately commend them.

As for the international prizes, there is no doubt that they are politically oriented. When the winner hails from a developing country—or a country that is framed as authoritarian—the conspiracy theory is at stake, no matter what the opposite arguments would pretend.

What else? We are witnessing again the rise of new ‘intellectual prophets’ with despicable agendas. On a daily basis, they use no brakes to assault us with expressions (aiming at being accepted as new paradigms) such as the New Post-Covid Order, the Clash of Identities, the Erosion of Multilateralism, the Triumph of the Enlightened Nation-State, and the Erosion of the State-Actor.

Some among these intellectuals are now unmasked, for they had championed military interventions, ethnic cleansings, and even genocide, pretexting that democracy and human rights, according to Western standards, should prevail at any expense. They refuse to admit that democracy and human rights can’t flourish in a permanent state of instability, disorder, and hegemonic cultural aggression that they promote around the clock.

Notes

Aliyeva Zohra, 'Enlightenment Movement in Azerbaijan', *Postmodernism Problems*, Vol. 9, No. 3, 2019, p. 429–439.

Benmakhlouf Ali: 'Pourquoi lire les philosophes arabes, l'héritage oublié', Albin Michel, 2015.

Jabri Mohamed Abed: محمد عابد الجابري: 'نحن والتراث، قراءة معاصرة في تراثنا الفلسفي'، الطبعة الرابعة، دار التنوير للطباعة والنشر، لبنان، 1985

Jabri Mohamed Abed: محمد عابد الجابري 'بنية العقل العربي'، مركز دراسة الوحدة العربية، بيروت 1986

Lahbabi M. Aziz, 'Le Personnalisme Musulman', PUF, 1964.

Laroui Fouad, 'Plaidoyer pour les Arabes: vers un récit universel', Mialet Barrault, 2021.

Hassan Hami, 'Le système international en transition, prolifération des acteurs et désordre programmé', Editions et Impression Bouregreg, 2018.

-Huseynov Yusif, 'The Philosophical Worldview of Mollanasraddinists as the Embodiment of Modernist Ideas in Azerbaijan', *International Journal of Psychological Rehabilitation*, Vol. 24, Issue 09, 2020.

Mammazadeh Ilham, 'Philosophy of the Approach to the Interaction between Cultures' Vol. 9, No. 3, 2019, p. 349–360.

Nye Jr., Joseph S.: 'Soft Power, Means to Success in World Politics', Public Affairs, New York, 2004.

- Said Edward, W.: 'Orientalism'. Vintage Books, New York, 1979.

*Tifinagh is an alphabet derived from the old Amazigh script. The origin and significance of the world are controversial. It would mean 'our invention' and it is used in Morocco, Algeria, Morocco, Mali, Niger, and Libya through a form called New Tifinagh.