



Occidentalistics

Hasan Hanafi, founding father of "occidentalistics" or occidentalism?

Reviewed by

Wolfgang G. Schwanitz*

Some scholars insist on a rigid separation between so-called serious research on the one hand and on investigations into more popular topics on the other. However, because of both fields vary and fluctuate under the influence of each other, fresh impetus to scholarship often results from popular publications and, more important, some traditional ways of thinking among esoteric circles easily vanish as scholastic filigree work is penetrated.

Orthodox scholars are suspiciously watching some unconventional ideas of the lively pen of Hasan Hanafi. This professor of philosophy at Cairo university has been editing publications on tradition and modernism since 1980. They include five volumes about dogma and the revolution (1988) and eight volumes on religion and the revolution (in Egypt).

At the beginning of the same decade he founded *Al-Yasar Al-Islami*. Although this journal of the Islamic left came out only once, it nevertheless anticipated tendencies flourishing on the banks of the Nile at the end of the 1980s, when the Soviet Union as well as Eastern Europe disintegrated and a historic set of values died. Suddenly, some leftists found themselves grouped with those they used to call "enlightened believers." This situation has influenced social sciences in the Orient, which are beginning a kind of philosophical reconnaissance.



Hanafi's booklet on *The Right And The Left In Religious Thinking*, Cairo/Damascus 1996

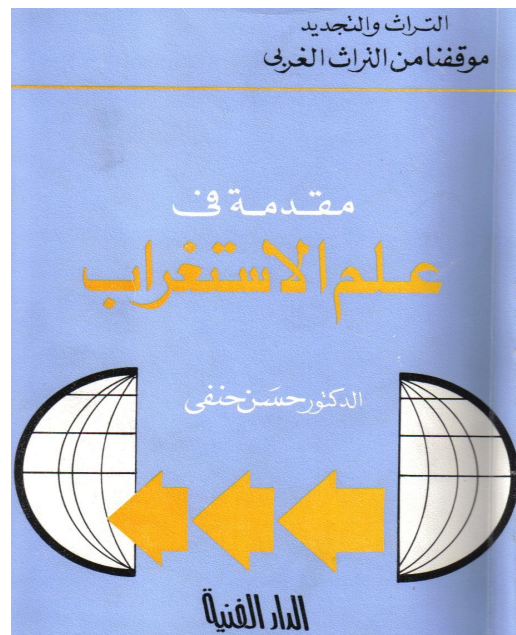
The year 1960 entered history as the "African year" because more than a dozen African countries gained independence then. Afterwards scholars of the continent like the Egyptian Anwar Abd al-Malik or the Senegales Sheikh Anta Diop in addition to Palestinians living in the United States like Edward Said and Hisham Sharabi, reproached European scholars for "orientalism:"

Not only had the European folklorists paved the way for colonization; even now, despite the removal of the superstructure of colonialism and the recent independence of more than 100 countries, Euro-American supremacy continues to dominate scholarship, glorifying the past (*orientalizing the Orient*) and falsifying the present.

Then discussions started about "orientalistiscs" and orientalism (and, according to Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, on "ontological orientalism in reverse"). So it was only a question of time before the tables were turned.

Now under the heading "Inheritance and Renewal," which refers to his own heritage, foreign heritage and recent world, Hasan Hanafi introduces "occidentalistics." Although the Egyptian who considers himself a Muslim of the Left translated his basic term into English as "occidentalism" (p. 22), the word "occidentalistics" more closely corresponds to his conception: research into Western civilization within the Orient to enable the social scientists there to rise of being an object of orientalism to devising a subject of their very own - occidentalistics, the exploration of the civilizations of the West.

It makes sense to promote a home-grown rereading of sciences in the Orient, a self-confident philosophy of history and of a redefining of their own paths of development, which are rarely explored. Secondly, the appearance of a multiplicity of philosophies in Europe may be expected. Therefore, this work resembles a first swallow circling occidental skies over Euro-American centered social sciences. Philosophers from Marx to Weber actually did ask why oriental movements had not led to occidental rationalization, but they were not able to get to the bottom of the questions. That will be possible only after the South makes its own researches into (world) history, first on its own and then with the North. Both must be reconsidered and developed.



Hanafi's *Introduction Into Occidentalism*, more appropriate translated as *Occidentalistics* though it does not exist, Cairo 1991

Hanafi's first chapter deals with the essentials of his proposed "occidentalistics" as an answer to Eurocentrism and other Western domination. The next three sections review European consciousness, its structure and some outstanding schools of thought from Kant and Hegel to Marx. Chapters five and six examine ideas from Europe and their limits in the twentieth century. The final remarks illuminate, historically and philosophically, this "we and the others" concept as well as European influence on the world of thinking in the Orient.

A very rare self-criticism (pp. 778-91) concludes this seminal work of the author, who hopes his book will give impetus in certain directions (p. 50-56). This is my **summary** of his thoughts:

Contents and structures of European consciousness should be relativized and in their influence reduced: one's own should be emphasized. This puts European consciousness into its historical dimension and not outside history, which moves inevitably in one possible civilizing direction. European consciousness is neither considered an experience alone nor a single way of civilization but only one of parallel periods and ways in history, starting with Egypt and China up to other civilizations of the ancient Orient.

European civilization created a philosophy and methodology of history determining directions, covering also the so called nonhistorical discourse in other civilizations and giving birth to Marxism as historical materialism as well as sciences like sociology, cultural criticism and anthropology in their capacity as the first sciences focussing their creative forces on themselves.

But "occidentalistics" does now prove that consciousness outside Europe, although called non-historic, is really able to venture into European consciousness and turn to history again. Perhaps the ancient peoples of the Orient are more entitled to be aware of history than others, comparing their roots to those of the young peoples of the Occident. For what are five centuries of European consciousness since the age of Reformation and Enlightenment compared with more than 3000 years of oriental consciousness in Egypt or China?

The West will be reduced to its natural boundaries, its cultural imperialism will be stopped, European philosophy will be returned to its local origin, thus ending an overflow due to colonialism and media dominance. Because yesterday, in the era of European leadership, something special and unique became something general and dominant, such relations should turn dialectical today.

The fairy-tale of one world culture vanishes as peoples recognize their authentic features, inasmuch as each population not only finds its genuine civilization and its specific consciousness but also perceives its own unique knowledge and peculiarities. Applying European sciences in their historical birthplace develops innate creative force elsewhere. Relations between center and periphery are no longer those of a recognized main civilization and a denied fringe civilization.

Many civilizations will prosper and global centers diversify. All will have similar standards. There will be exchange and interaction without one large bloc forcing the other small one to abide by its rules of culture and thinking.

Ways are opening up for the creative forces of non-European nations to throw off mental servitude. Thus the intellectual abilities of the peoples grow as well as their means and methods. There is not one single way for all nations nor a creative force without liberation from guardianship nor indigenous productivity without the search for identity as well as the search for its picture in the other's mind. Originality is more than folklore and outward features; it determines levels of mental paradigms and modes of communication.

History is discovered anew and the highest level must be reached in equality with other civilizations in the framework of the Occident. The West should not be the navel of the world anymore because each civilization leads in certain periods. Yet European civilizations make such claims while consigning other civilizations to oblivion.

Authors usually dedicate one-quarter of their books to 7000 years of history and three quarters to no more than 500 years. Oriental winds of change and "occidentalistics" lead to a new philosophy of history and, maybe also to a new era. Geographical discoveries marked its beginning 500 years ago and the restriction of Europe to its natural boundaries will be the end. A reborn civilization takes the stage.

If you look behind the geographic and other more schematic terms for underlying patterns and problems, you will discover some profound ideas in Hanafi's thick book. The question is: Will Hanafi not only be the founding father of "occidentalistics" but of occidentalism too, as some Euro-Americans foresee?

HASAN HANAFI: *Muqaddima fi 'ilm al-istighrâb* (An Introduction to "Occidentalism"). Cairo: ad-dâr al-fannîya lil-nashr wa-l-tauzî'. 1991, 882 pages. Bibliography and index. ISBN 7 53142297 7, in: Middle East Policy, Washington DC, III (1994) 1, pp. 173-75, ISSN 10611924

*Dr. Wolfgang G. Schwanitz, Research Center Modern Orient, Berlin, Germany