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Critical discussion

Revisiting Indigenization of Sociology in Iran
An Inquiry into Shariati's Distinction between Subject and Indigenous[1]

Seyed Javad Miri
Associate Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies, Institute of Humanities and Cultural Studies, Tehran, Iran & Visiting Professor of Sociology and Religious Studies, Department of Literature, History of Ideas, and Religion, University of Gothenburg, Sweden
seyedjavad@hotmail.com

Abstract

What does indigenization of social sciences mean? Does it carry a similar meaning to all those who are concerned with this project in social sciences and humanities or does this concept mean something else to different schools of indigenizers? Some would argue that indigenization refers to nativize social sciences in contrast to westernization of knowledge, though the pursuit of knowledge is locally bound, by nativizing social sciences we could overcome western values, which are embedded within occidental frame of references. However, there are others who argue that indigenization of social sciences is similar to the project of Islamization of knowledge which did not yield any substantial results within academic social sciences and will soon fade away. However, this problem is a serious one and if we consider only the Iranian context, we see that the challenges are serious and grave in consequences. Here in this article we shall raise the question that at what level is it possible to talk about indigenization. For instance, if we agree, as Ibn Khaldun mentions, that there could be five levels of knowledge, i.e. demonstration, dialectics, rhetoric, poetics and sophistry, then at which level can we talk about "native" form of knowledge or "local" forms of episteme?

Keywords: Indigenization; Shariati; Sociology; Subject; Indigenous

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مناقشة نقدية

إعادة النظر في أهلنة علم الاجتماع في إيران:
بحث في تمييز علي شريعتي بين «الموضوع» و«الأهلي»[1]

سيد جواد ميري
أستاذ مشارك في علم الاجتماع والدراسات الدينية ، معهد الدراسات الإنسانية والثقافية ، طهران ، إيران وأستاذ زائر في علم الاجتماع والدراسات الدينية ، قسم الأدب وتاريخ الأفكار والدين ، جامعة غوتنبرغ ، السويد
seyedjavad@hotmail.com

ملخص

ماذا تعني أهلنة العلوم الاجتماعية؟ هل لها نفس المعنى لدى كل المهتمين بهذا المشروع في العلوم الاجتماعية والإنسانية أم أن هذا المفهوم متباين حسب مدارس الأهلنة المختلفة؟ قد يقول البعض أن الأهلنة تُحيل على إضفاء الطابع المحلي (nativizing) على العلوم الاجتماعية على عكس تغريب المعرفة كما لو أن مسعى المعرفة محدود محليًا ، وبإضفاء الطابع المحلي على العلوم الاجتماعية نستطيع التصدي للقيم الغربية المتأصلة في إطار المرجعيات الغربية. هناك آخرون يقولون إن أهلنة العلوم الاجتماعية مشابهة لمشروع أسلمة المعرفة الذي لم يفض إلى أي نتيجة ملموسة داخل العلوم الاجتماعية الأكاديمية وسيتبدد قريبًا. ومع ذلك فإن هذه الإشكالية جِدّية وإذا أخذنا في الاعتبار السياق الإيراني فقط يمكننا أن نرى تحديات جادة ولها تبعات وخيمة. يتعين علينا في هذه الورقة أن نطرح سؤال إلى أي حد يمكننا الحديث عن الأهلنة؟ وعلى سبيل المثال ، في حال اتفقنا على ما ذكره ابن خلدون مِن أن هناك خمس مستويات من المعرفة؛ أي البرهان والجدل والخطابة والشعر والسفسطة ، فإذًا في أي مستويات يمكننا الحديث عن شكل «أهلي» من المعرفة أو أشكال «محلية» من الإبستيم؟

الكلمات المفتاحية: أهلنة ، شريعتي ، علم الاجتماع ، الموضوع ، الأهلي

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1 - عُرِضت هذه الورقة البحثية خلال الندوة الدولية بعنوان «علم الاجتماع وسؤال الأقلمة» التي نظمها ركز ابن خلدون للعلوم الإنسانية والاجتماعية بجامعة قطر ، الدوحة ، في 26 أكتوبر 2019.

Introduction

What does indigenization of social sciences mean? Does it mean the same thing to all those who are concerned with this project in social sciences and humanities or does this concept mean something else to different schools of indigenizers? Some would argue that indigenization refers to nativizing social sciences in contrast to westernization of knowledge, though the pursuit of knowledge is a locally bound enterprise, so by nativizing social sciences we could overcome western values, which are embedded within occidental frame of references. However, there are others who argue that indigenization of social sciences is similar to the project of Islamization of knowledge which did not yield any substantial results within academic social sciences and soon, in my view, will fade away as a disciplinary enterprise. Krishna Kumar[1] differentiates between three types of indigenization: structural, substantive and theoretical. Butthe call to indigenization in Iran by those who define this concept in terms of Islamization of Western Sciences seems to be the *rejection of western social sciences* on the basis that these forms of knowledge are not consistent with the Islamic worldview. Here we can mention few scholars such as Khosro Bagheri, Hamid Parsania, Akbar Mirsepah, Hossein Panahi[2], and many others who distinguish between two domains of knowledge, i.e. the realm of essence of knowledge and the realm of existence of knowledge. Then based on this distinction they argue that disclosure is the basis of knowledge in religious form of understanding but the basis of disclosure in positivist discourses is different than the religious framework.

In other words, the proponents of indigenization of sociology discern between western science and religion of Islam an unbridgeable divide, which cannot be overcome. This view has strong supporters among many scholars in social sciences who, have *seminary backgrounds* and do believe that university, as a center of modern knowledge should be subjugated under the parameters of jurisprudential principles - which, in their view - are tantamount to Islam as a religion. However, I think within the Iranian sociology there are other voices as far as indigenization are concerned which differ from these post - revolutionary positions such as the position of Ali Shariati whose ideas in regard to indigenization has not been seriously inquired upon and those, such as Mehrzad Boroujerdi[3], who studied Shariati's views in terms of social sciences, have not understood correctly Shariati's conceptualization of indigenousness.

Ali Shariati and the Question of Indigenization

In *Alienated Human Being*, Ali Shariati uses the Persian word *Bomi*, which could be translated into English as *native* or *indigenous*. This book is consisted of 11 chapters and all of

1 - Krishna Kumar, "Indigenization and Transnational Cooperation in the Social Sciences," in *Bonds without Bondage: Explorations in Transnational Interactions*, Krishna Kumar, (ed.) (Honolulu: East-West Centre Book, 1979), pp. 104-105.

2 - Ebrahim Barzegar, "Rahyafte Bomisazi Ulum Ensani," *Ravesh-Shenasi Ulum Ensani*, No.63 (2010), pp. 29-54.

3 - Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The tormented triumph of nativism* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1996).

them seem to be written during the years of 1968 to 1969. Shariati's grand thesis is *existential re-turn to authentic self* and in relation to this project he speaks of the concept of indigenous framework but it seems he is employing this concept in a dialectical fashion. He states:

"… before any act and prior to any conviction, and even before adherence to any ideology … I urge you to re-turn to our-self. I said … we should re-turn to our-self … but this is not tantamount to being regressive or … turning into blind worshipper of the past or becoming superstitious … or reactionary … I am not inviting you to turn to the past or even become a racist and brag about the supremacy of our race. I am not talking about these nonsensical vanities. When I speak of re-turn to the self … I refer to self-discovery; to re-turn to your-self is not a call to a reactionary tribal form of community surrounded by our indigenous framework. No! This is not my vision of existential re-turn to our authentic self."[1]

In other words, Shariati is of the opinion that by the rise of Colonialism the world has been divided into two grand camps of *human being* and the *indigenous being*. But what does Shariati mean by these concepts? He refers to the subject-object relation between the western and the restern worlds in the global context where:

"… the human being who has a subjectivity and his subjectivity is the norm and the western human being is the one who thinks and chooses and the restern being is an empty vessel which could be filled in any way and … in any fashion that the western human being deems right. As Sartre once said: the world is divided into 5 hundred millions human beings, on the one hand … and one billion and a half million indigenous people …"[2]

Shariati seems to employ this term "Bomi" (Indigenous) in a dialectical fashion which means if the restern being is deprived of his/her own history, culture, religion, tradition, intellectual backgrounds or in one word what makes up one's subjectivity then this kind of being is an *object of the western subject*. However, the question is how to dissociate from this subject-object or master-slave and human being-indigenous being relationship? First of all, it should be noted that Shariati, as Frantz Fanon rightly argued, is of the conviction that humanity at large would suffer when the relation between people is set up in terms of oppressor and the oppressed as in this kind of relationship it is not solely the oppressed who loses her/his humanity. On the contrary, in this form of relationship both suffer and we should realize that when Shariati talks about breaking the ties, which make a human being into an indigenous being, he is thinking of soteriological path for humankind at large. In his view, humankind has not been yet realized in a complete fashion so the question is how can we realize or actualize humanity? In Shariati's view:

"Humanity could be realized when the indigenous people who are now empty vessels and

1 - Ali Shariati, *Alienated Human Being*, Collected Work: 25 (Tehran: Sherkat Entesharat Qalam & Bonyad Farhangi Shariati, 2012), p. 349.

2 - Ibid.

tamed loudspeakers of that 5 hundred millions who consider themselves the master of the world and rule as obermenschen and treat the restern people as second-hand beings and indigenous untermenschen … then in this kind of relationship there is no hope that humanity could be actualized as the relation is not between equals … . But the question is how this indigenous man could become a human being with an authentic subjectivity."[1]

This is a very important question as far as the process of self-actualization is concerned as in Shariati's view the state of indigenousness is equal to some form of alienation as though being indigenous is tantamount to lack of an authentic form of subjectivity. In other words, the western human being is considered not a *secondhand human being* because he is able to *think* and to *choose*. These two qualities are pivotal elements of a human, which equip her/him to understand, and to rule and the western human being is equipped by these universal qualities but the indigenous being is devoid of these qualities. In other words, when you are deprived of these faculties then you cannot have a comprehensive understanding of your own condition and when you do not know where you are then others would draw the roadmap for you. This is another way to say that the relationship between the western and the restern world is based on subject-object relationship. However, the question Shariati asks is how could this restern entity, which has been suppressed to become in the state of an indigenous being (i.e. an object of the western subject), emancipate from this suppressive state of tutelage? Shariati's reply to this question is "human self-consciousness". Allow me to elaborate on this topic as this is very deeply related to his lifelong project of *existential re-turn to our authentic self*. Shariati holds that emancipation from the indigenous state of being is possible when the indigenous man reaches to the state of "human self-consciousness". This is not only an illusory or mystical realization but it means that a nation (or a culture) and people re-connects with its own history and the sources of the past.

"…Which passed the test of time … and based on those inspiring sources man could become a gentle-man. But when I speak of history, I am not referring to exhumation of the dead corpses; … on the contrary, when I talk about history, it means that we cast our eyes at fundamental sources where … the true essence of our humanity and our culture and our ethical basis and humanity spring therefrom …I am not calling upon you to regress to the past but I am urging you to bring the past to the present and reconnect to that universal basis which make up our humanity."[2]

Here we can see that Shariati, on one hand, is calling upon the restern nations to reconnect to their own history but, on the other hand, warns us that this re-appropriation of "our own culture" (our native or indigenous traditions) should not be in a fetishistic fashion. On the contrary, Shariati's call is neither a salafi project nor a fundamentalist indigenizing or nationalistic

1 - Ibid.

2 - Ibid., pp. 349-350.

nativizing or even fanatic Islamizing mission. His is a reform-oriented approach that sees universal values in the indigenous culture and therefore reconstructs them in contemporary fashion but knows that there are detrimental aspects (not only in the western traditions but even) in the indigenous forms of life and culture as well as traditions. However the question is how could we:

"…Overcome a superstitious tradition, even many diseases and incompleteness in our own history … in our own society … in our own souls? When can we get rid of these defects?"[1]

In other words, Shariati does not accept the division of the world into western subject and restern objects (or indigenous objects who lack authentic subjectivity) but at the same time he does not glorify a regressive re-appropriation of the indigenous tradition on the pretext of opposing the west. Then what does he mean by self-realization and return to self? Is this not a call to nativism as many have tried to interpret? Shariati argues that the meaning of return to self is:

"… to dis-cover the self as a human subject … i.e. to realize that authentic quality and essence which made us as human beings and not an enslaved entity at the disposal of the master …When I say return to the self, I refer to a form of culture which was universal and could induce the spirit of humanity … and enabled us to be an inventive and productive human being at spiritual and material realms …In other words, when we have these qualities as indigenous people then we won't be empty-handed before [the western world who rule over us] … when someone is empty-handed and attempts to enter an alliance with another person who is full-handed then this unity would be costly for the indigenous people and nations … . We can unite with the western man when we have a sense of subjectivity … a standpoint … an authentic vista … not as an object or a slave in alliance with a master …"[2]

Here we can see that Shariati is employing the concept of "indigenous" in a different fashion than those who argue for an indigenous culture, indigenous tradition, indigenous science and indigenous sociology in Iran. In his view, indigenousness is a state of being that is devoid of subjectivity, which needs to be rectified, but this could not be achieved unless a sense of self-consciousness occurs. However, what is awareness in Shariati's view? This is a good question as he holds that the western master is who he is, due to the fact that he is able to *think* and to *choose*. Thus the indigenous person who is in the state of an object at the disposal of the master needs to realize his own slavery but what does it mean to be-come aware? Shariati says:

"…Awareness means to have the right to choose and the power and ability to create … once the indigenous cultures and traditions [and emerging nations] *… got these qualities then*

1 - Ibid., p. 350.

2 - Ibid., p. 350.

we can come back to rebuild future humanity …"[1]

Now at one level, we can see that in the Shariatian form of social theory the concept of "Bomi" (indigenous) is not a very positive state to be as it demonstrates an oppressed form of social being. To put it differently, the indigenous state of being is tantamount to an unequal power relation where the western subject is *obermenschen* and the restern being is *untermenschen* and surely between them there would not be any dialog. Nevertheless, at the same time, it seems Shariati is interpreting the concept of indigenous in a positive fashion but the productive dimension which he associates with the indigenous tradition (and the call for return to its authentic roots) is based on a delicate assumption that in the Iranian (or Islamic tradition) there are aspects which are of universal nature. In other words, this universality of the indigenous traditions is why it should be rescued and revived so the restern object can regain his/her self-confidence and thus be able to establish his/her own subjectivity (and viewpoint/perspective) on life and the world-as without subjectivity there would not be any formidable nation.

Now that we have established this outlook on indigenousness, we can reflect upon the significance of Shariati's definition and the consequences of his approach for the field of sociology. To put it otherwise, in what sense Shariati's definition could be of importance to sociological discipline? I think what Shariati says about the universal dimensions of indigenous tradition (vis-à-vis the Eurocentric vision of intellectual traditions, in general, and sociology, in particular) could be employed in terms of conceptualization of the concept of *classics* in the discipline of sociology and social theory at large. What do I mean by this? I simply refer to the technologies, which make a classic, and turn them into sociological classical thinking within western (and even western-oriented) academia. If we look at the sociological pantheon then we see that the mainstream sociology is based on *Eurocentric classics* and there is no reference to restern classics. How could this academic imperialism be justified? If we take the Shariatian perspective on the division between *ensan* (subject) and *bomi* (object) then we can explain the state of affairs in a more eloquent fashion by arguing that classics are those thinkers and theorists who make the parameters of understanding, ideas, ideals, possibilities, forms of analysis, patterns of arguments, methodological parameters and conceptual frameworks. In this sense, the western *homoacademicus* is, in Shariati's parlance, ensan (subject) and the restern *homoacademicus* is, in Shariati's perspective, bomi (object) and therefore unable to make parameters of understanding, ideas, ideals, possibilities, forms of analysis, patterns of arguments, methodological parameters and conceptual frameworks. Thus based on Shariati's conceptualization of the indigenousness if the restern academics aspire to reach equal footing with the western colleagues in sociological discipline they surely need to return to their own intellectual traditions as without this return:

1 - Ibid.

"…We are just imitating the European human being … and he views us as an assimilé … This is to argue that a being without any essence … is not a being but an entity which has no freedom to think … no guts to use his own power of choosing … and a person in this state of being … is unable to build a civilization …"[1]

In my interpretation of Shariati's conceptualization of indigenousness I see him as a non-*Eurocentric classic* within sociological tradition who has not been recognized within Eurocentric pantheon of sociological discipline. In other words, when I talk about the importance of indigenous intellectual traditions, I mean a form of engagement outside the western parameters of classicality. By that, I mean that there are possibilities of classicality without Eurocentric vision of sociology and social theory, which has been excavated less, and this archaeological excavation in the fields of ideas could be at both contemporary dimensions and historical realms. For instance, I can refer to two historic-sociologically significant figures in the Islamic traditions, i.e. Abu Reyhan al-Biruni[2] and Ibn Khaldun[3] and two contemporary social-theoretically important intellectuals in Iran, i.e. Ali Shariati[4] and Allama Mohammad Taghi Jafari[5]. These four examples could be employed as models for expansion of the classics of sociology and at the same time as a fashion of recognizing the universal relevance in a local tradition. In other words, we do not need to exclude ourselves from the mainstream sociological traditions but inclusion into the discipline should not be at the expense of disconnection from the best of our own indigenous intellectual traditions.

1 - Ibid., pp. 348-349.

2 - Akbar S. Ahmed, "Al-Beruni: The First Anthropologist," *RAIN,* No. 60 (1984), pp. 9-10.

3 - Syed F. Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldun: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

4 - Seyed Javad Miri and Dustin J. Byrd, (eds.), *Ali Shariati and the Future of Social Theory: Religion, Revolution, and the Role of the Intellectual* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

5 - Seyed Javad Miri, *Alternative Sociology: Probing into the Sociological Thought of Allama M. T. Jafari* (London: London Academy of Iranian Studies Press, 2012).

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