Paradigms in Political Science Revisited: Critical Options and Muslim Perspectives

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A CONVOCATION

It is time for Muslim political scientists to come together to debate the state of the art in their field and to define the grounds and terms for its prospective evolution or transformation in the light of alternative perspectives. The underlying assumptions which provide the parameters and the key concepts which they currently apply in the course of their normal practice should no longer be assumed but should be questioned. To do so, they will need to be made explicit and examined in a new light. The developments of the past decade make this imminent in more than one way. In the West the soul-searching among social scientists has intensified and contributed to shaking the profession out of its complacency. The resulting meta-critique has heightened critical awareness.

The decade has also coincided with a dawning epistemic consciousness among Muslims.[1] Conscientious scholars and intellectuals have staked their claims to autonomy on the grounds of a critical disaffection with their field.[2]

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[1]The earliest collective forum where a general critical overview of the disciplines was publicly articulated was possibly at the Islamabad Conference, in Rabi' al Awwal, 1402 (January 1982). See *Islam: The Source and Purpose of Knowledge* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989). Given its origins and orientation, the emphasis was on discussing the education and academic dimensions involved in teaching these disciplines in modern Muslim universities.

[2]*Ibid*. Despite the textbook emphasis, the concern with the dissonance of the epistemic foundations of modern sciences was pervasive as the keynote address by the late M. K. Brohi so succinctly illustrated. pp. 5-12. Perspectives on this disaffection varied: i.e., in political

Perceived disjunctures bred that kind of essential tension which prompted a review of foundational dimensions of consciousness and being. They identified their source in dissonant cultural forces and processes comprising education, socialization and the reproduction of knowledge, values, and symbols as underlying the continuities and discontinuities in the fabric of the Ummah. This constituted the diagnosed malaise.[3] In this process of critical introspection, the idea of the Islamization of knowledge was conceived. Its natural focus was the state of modern knowledge and its modes of diffusion and transmission along the educational and cultural arteries in the Ummah. It contested the myth of modern sciences as value-free, a myth that was particularly dominant within Muslim societies themselves. Claims to value-neutrality were not only questionable as empirical reality, but they were even more dubious and questionable as a moral ideals.[4]

The critical disaffection displayed by the movement of the Islamization of Knowledge towards the dominant conceptions and standards of knowledge in the West, and more particularly towards the way these were being transmitted and diffused in the Ummah were reinforced by more than doubt of prevailing orthodoxy. There was a pervasive awareness of the existence within the Islamic heritage itself of constructive alternatives that were unjustly ignored, neglected, or otherwise left untapped. Critical attitudes within the dominant episteme itself added momentum to the indigenous movement and further reinforced a mounting conviction in the necessity and validity of an Islamic intellectual odyssey to rediscover the elements of a patent Islamic episteme and activate it in the modern context. The challenge for a nascent community of scholarship and intellect at this state is to shake off some of its own developing complacencies and to marshall its energies and creative potential to develop an original intellectual stance beyond its initial diffuse expression. It is in this context that Muslim political scientists are expected to come together

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science one reading took its standpoint from the Islamic legacy ('AbdulHamīd AbūSulaymān: pp. 93-118.) while another developed its stance from an incipient critique of its European legacy (Mahmood Ghazi 121-130); the framework for the alternative episteme received its maiden formulation here in the "First Principles of Islamic Methodology" by the late (*alshahīd*) Ismaʿīl al Fārūqi (15-63).

[3]See the *Islamization of Knowledge: Workplan and Principles* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1982 and 1989).

[4]Coming from the perspective of "natural science", the case made here was all the more compelling. M. A. Kazi, (January 1982) See *Islam: Source and Purpose of Knowledge*, (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1989), pp. 175-187. scholars addressing this perspective too have notably come a long way since then in their confident, competent, and knowledgeable articulations of the Islamic viewpoint. See Munawwar Ahmad Anees and Merryl Wyn Davies, "Islamic Science: Current Thinking and Future Directions" in Ziauddin Sardar, ed., *The Revenge of Athena: Science, Exploitation and the Third World* (London: Mansell, 1988).

periodically to renew their resolve and to reexamine and update their agenda as they look to the future.

Why Paradigms in the Discipline?

The originality of their stance within the discipline is contingent on their ability to articulate a distinctive perspective drawing on Islamic sources. The latter include the pristine originating, authentic and authenticating sources embedded in the living *Wahy: tanzīl* and *sunnah*, as well as in the historical legacy of the Ummah up to and including its present. This calls for evolving a discursive tradition drawing, in the first instance, on the Muslim historical experience and political context and illuminated by a developing intellectual Islamic sensibility. The challenge to Muslim scholarship and intellect is not only to conceive of the possibility of this alternative perspective, but to formulate this conception at successive levels of refinement to diversity its articulation and relate it to multiple contexts. This will evidently occur in the course of dynamic interaction in a setting which is already structured and tempered by the prevailing language, norms and modalities of an existing political discourse. We refer to this structured dimension of the prevailing discourse as a paradigm. This is because a paradigm suggests an implicit normative and cognitive order that organizes our thinking in a certain field and provides it with foundations and a framework while also setting its parameters and its boundaries. As such, concepts, theories, perspectives, and worldviews, as well as the beliefs and values implicit in them, are all constitutive of a paradigm to the extent that they contribute to the disciplinary matrix, the exemplar, research programme, or to the tradition that structures the discipline.[5] As such, paradigms ultimately refer to tacit constructs that can be conceived at difference levels of social reality and that assume different forms.

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[5]The literature on the "paradigm debate" is immense, but we can basically distinguish between two kinds, that coming from a history and philosophy of science perspective, and that coming from within political science. Principal examples of the former include T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962); Imre Lakatos & A. Musgrave, ed., *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1970); Frederick Suppe, ed., *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Urbana, Illinois, 1971); Stephen Toulmin, *Foresight and Understanding: An Inquiry into the Aims of   Sciences* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1961) and *Human Understanding*, vol. 1, (Princeton, 1971). The literature in political science is more diffuse; among its direct topical contributions are: Sheldon Wolin, "Paradigms and Political Theory" in P. King, and B. C. Parakh, *Politics and Experience* (Cambridge, 1968), Thomas Spragens, *The Dilemma of Contemporary Political Theory: Toward a Post-Behavioral Science of Politics* (New York: Dunellen Co., 1973), Maria Falco, ed., *Through the Looking Glass: Epistemology and the Conduct of Political Inquiry* (Washington, DC, 1979); and John Gunnell, *Philosophy, Science and Political Inquiry*; Other titles used more extensively in this paper will be cited below.

It is in this sense that there is a need for examining paradigms in political science, as well as paradigms in politics. Probing the field at the paradigmatic level is one of the most challenging, and effective ways to come to grips with basic questions and to cultivate a critical sensibility. The challenge and effect in this particular instance would be to participate in the current discourse and seek to contribute to it, without being submerged in it. We too could observe the rules of the game at this state, as they have been set by others, without abandoning that margin of autonomy and integrity which would enable us to take the creative initiatives to restructure the discourse and orient it beyond its present bounds. Is such an aim justified and on what grounds do we stake our claims?

I shall merely suggest that the imminence of a paradigmatic shift in the social sciences, including political science, is only accentuated by a pervasive sense of dissatisfaction in the field. Despite the mood of despair, an orientation or readiness to adapt to or to adopt new ways of thinking is also perceptible. In these circumstances, the prospects for generating or regenerating an Islamic paradigm in the field are particularly alluring—and imminently plausible. The rest is a matter of critical reflection in the light of a familiar passage which can be recalled to advantage in this context:

> "The transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm. Rather, it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications..."[6]

Paradigms, it is maintained, are essentially intellectual constructs to deal with social realities. It is granted that the latter are amenable to their own generating mechanisms which constrain and limit the validity and power of a given paradigm and it is conceded that social realities may therefore not be simply the function of paradigms. What, then, does this mean for our venture into this debate as Muslims coming from a novel perspective? Here I would suggest that the reconstructive potential of a perspective that addresses both levels, the epistemic and the socio-historical, is immense. Clearly, at the latter level, a vital Islamic impulse is at stake in much of the contemporary social and political fermentation in the Muslim Ummah-a telling indicator of the enduring relevance of the Islamic perspective to social realities.

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[6]Thomas H. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolution*, 2nd Edition, Enlarged (Chicago, 1962, 1968).

The fact that this intellectual revival taps the same impulse is equally compelling. In both instances, this perspective appeals to a reconstruction of fundamentals in mind and society.

The way in which this reconstruction is envisaged, the idea of addressing the transition, accounts for the elements of realism and historicism in this perspective. There is little room for either metaphysical speculation, or for a chiliastic agitation for the millenium. But the state of the transition is itself the state of the reconstruction and as such it is bound to and engage all the factors/elements in the situation. The strength, plausibility, and allure of an Islamic paradigm in the social sciences evidently lies in its validity as a mode of discourse, as well as in its viability as a standard of effective action. In a sense, the "context of discovery" is the historical arena itself, while the "context for justification" is inherently generated. This double relevance enhances its reconstructive potential in both areas. Its activation, however, depends on how far enterprising scholars, Muslims and others, are able to articulate and relate this perspective to the times and how effective they can be in engaging the existing paradigms in an evolving discourse.

Let us shift back to the implications of the current paradigm debate from a Muslim perspective and to its potential contribution to the debate. It could be noted that the forum for this engagement may be as broad and diffuse or as concrete and specific as the discourse itself. To take an example from the current debate in the discipline: on one occasion, the search for a "missing paradigm", opened up a debate suggestive of opportunities for engaging the current discourse from a Muslim perspective.[7] Admitting the variety of approaches leading to the nature and scope of the discipline, might it not be possible to arrive at a more coherent conception of the whole by developing a synthesis out of these approaches.

The issues at stake in this debate can be explicitly addressed, or tacitly assumed. Once we are aware of the epistemic dimension of the discipline, the symptoms and configurations of an ongoing debate can be recognized without necessarily articulating them as such. The point provisionally made here however, it that while the current debate in the West proceeds unabated at the epistimec and the methodological levels, it is doubtful that it addresses root issues in the epistme; it seems rather to present us with so many redundant notes on the same scale.

As scholars coming from an Islamizing perspective, we suspect that the paradigmatic debate may not be radical enough, and that in the few instances when it might verge on the radical, it is inhibited in its form of expression.

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[7]This was the theme of the meeting of the Southern Political Science Association in 1978. See W. T. Bluhm, ed., *The Paradigm Problem in Political Science: Perspectives from Philosophy and from Practice* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1982).

In one case, for example, a bold initiative is taken to break the discipline into a perspective which is at variance with prevailing orthodoxies by perceptively exploring neglected strands in the "pre-modern" Western tradition. But the author waxes apologetic in broaching the effort and, in the guise of misplaced objectivity, he invites more ambiguity than illumination.[8]

As Muslim political scientists interacting in this global flux, there is much that we could bring to the debate, whether to sharpen existing perspectives, or to help in formulating alternatives. Our ability, however, to impart substance and direction will be a function of our own vitality in creatively mining the unique sources at our disposal. As guardians of an authentic heritage that belongs to humanity at large we are obliged to take the initiative in demonstrating its meaning and relevance. In so doing, we shall be paving the ground for others to compete in what is ultimately a joint human and intellectual endeavour. Our own history, from a brilliant moment in our past, teaches us that once the standards have been set, they also provide the very logic for an open setting in which everybody may contribute. Contrary to prevailing misconceptions, the "Islamicate" was not a syncretist culture accidentally evolved. Its underlying ethos was firmly grounded in a paradigm of knowing and being that lent itself to the openness and opportunity it assumed.

In this exploratory essay the paradigm issue will be tackled in three separate units. The first depicts the fluidity in the field. It focuses upon situational elements which allow an imminent shift on its horizons. This focus then shifts briefly to the self image and the role of Muslim social scientists to outline some of the logistics called for in approaching the paradigm discourse. In the last unit, the discussion will be even more selective as it addresses aspects of an Islamic perspective, by way of example, to demonstrate the thrust and possibilities of evolving an alternative paradigm. Clearly, this is where the sense and the burden of creativity lie. Yet, the priority at this initial stage of a formative intellectual debate will go to a critical and discriminating assessment and assimilation of the issues currently at stake in Western discourse. Islamization of knowledge, as scholars are well aware, does not take off from a *tabula rasa*, nor does it evolve in a void. In every case, there is a context as well as a text that need to be considered. This constitutes the subject of "Paradigms Revisited."

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[8]Philip Dyer, *The Quest for Political Order* (University Press of America, 1985). The author states "We should not be too complacent in our belief that the modern day has a monopoly on truth" in the area of non-cumulative knowledge (the moral domain). He goes on to argue for the relevance of some epistemic questions which might otherwise be avoided in a materialist sensate culture. In introducing highly pertinent vistas he stresses that it is merely to "raise doubts: and disclaims any other intentions. Given the premise of the endeavor, "to enlighten" in a resistant context, what might be an intellectually laudable stance, lacks verve. It leaves him fighting a retreat with every inch of ground covered.