



# How is the World Made, and Who Makes It? What Moves the Young? A New Human Factor in a Changing World.

## ■ Ali Harb

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Of what do the young dream now? How do they think? What do they look to? What motivates them in the midst of those rapid changes, sudden mutations and radical transformations?

I will not be simplistic by saying that things are as they should be, nor by welcoming every change that takes place. But I am not an alarmist lamenting past values, as some do. Nor am I blind to the changes so as to deny what is taking place, nor to judge whatever is new as being decadent, degenerate, or negative and nihilistic.

Such a nihilistic attitude backfires. For one would ask: If there is moral decadence and cultural degeneration, how did they happen? How do we explain this decline in the midst of all those propagandists, preachers, leaders and reformers, and after all that praise and glorification of geniuses of philosophy and thought or outstanding artists and writers? How do we explain falling onto the lowest rung of that high ladder of values?

Perhaps the problem lies with what we choose and glorify, and which is not the solution or that which we seek. Therefore, it would be better, both in theory and practice, to read the phenomena and changes that constitute our

world. For what motivates the new generations is not necessarily that which motivated the young of the sixties and seventies in the last century, for example the generation of Chomsky, Sadiq Jalal al-'Adhm, Mahmoud Amin al-'Alim, Sa'd ed-Din Ibrahim and Fawwaz Trabulsi, for each generation has its own sensibilities, conceptions and changing attitudes towards constants and principles.

If I take, for example, a country like Egypt, I think that the majority of the young men and women are no longer attracted by slogans of democracy, reform, development, civic society and human rights; not because those slogans are not correct, but because they have lost their meaning in the Arab world, especially as a result of the obstacles, failure and frustration caused by their propagators. Perhaps what moves the youth these days are other things pertaining to the world of football, song, and the screen, the world of images, design and computer programs, or travel abroad in search of work. Egypt is an example, not an exception.

### **Who Shapes the World?**

The intelligentsia's slogans no longer stir the imagination or stimulate the mind in an original and effective manner. As proof we have the novelist Sun'allah Ibrahim's refusal

to accept his government's prize for the novel, in defense of the collapsing values or in protest against the futile policies, a refusal which was similar to a sound bomb since its effect did not extend beyond the small closed circle of the intellectual élite.

Words have lost their meaning and power and have become undelivered messages that do not attain their aim since they do not express vital issues, live experiences, strong feelings and pressing concerns. They do not define the world or participate in shaping it, for they have become deceiving and false. The reason for this is that the world is shaped and restructured now in an unprecedented different, exciting and unexpected way by forces, ideas, waves, goods, products and patterns of new and different relationships. It therefore needs a new language and different values to be instilled in the old headlines to match the changing values and renewal of forms, styles and norms. For upon entering the age of electronics and virtual reality, the digital human being and the impact of the media, new domains are formed and different human activities change in several fields. It is this change that is behind my articles about the new trends in song, media, realism television and football... For this is precisely what is happening now and what stimulates the new generations, and it is useless to ignore it, burying our heads in the sand on the pretext of defending values and constants.

### **Sports and Civilization**

Sports have become one of the most important productive and influential sectors in industry today. This is why governments allocate to it huge budgets, equal to those of other sectors. If we take football, for example, we find that it is no longer considered a marginal activity aiming to entertain. It is rather a participation in a civilized race where whoever wins proves his merit and his legitimacy between nations. The last live example in this respect is the fact that Greece considered she had performed a great civilized feat after having succeeded in organizing the last Olympic Games (2004), and having won the European Football Cup. Greece felt she had been victorious just as if she had been waging a war. In fact I feel that what happens is quite the contrary: I do not think that people, no matter to what country they belong, now feel the exultation of victory if their country fights another and wins, with the exception of the narrow-minded ideological samples that are full of fanaticism and hostility and look for an enemy to blame for their failure and crises.

This is the case especially in the European countries where competition is civilized and peaceful. Even in the United States the opposition to the war that the American administration is waging against terrorism is

increasing day by day, in spite of the mobilization and charged atmosphere and the administration heaping up pretexts and justifications. This is a new reality taking form which reverses the belief in victory in war, according to Saddam Hussein's logic, and which will become an obsolete language, because the language of the future will change the meanings of victory and success, of competition and progress, applying them to peaceful and developmental areas. Whatever the case may be, the world of sports offers a model of cooperative management that is less aggressive and more peaceful, and thus is an ideal or a lesson that can benefit the leaders and great men in this world.

### **The New Trends**

We notice that the song programs have invaded the young people's imagination today, as can be seen from the new trends of song with their new symbols, clips and methods; or as can be seen in the new programs like *Super Star* or *Star Academy*, and as well as what is called Reality Television which is one of the results of the image invading the scene in most countries and societies.

How else could we explain the great numbers of young people rushing to participate in the song contests, hoping to win, or at least hoping to appear in the picture and on screen, even though in a negative way.

This activity has today become the strongest incentive and drive for the youth in the Arab countries. It has become a new drug replacing religion, or competing with it in obsessing the minds and attracting the young men and women.

The song programs offer various possibilities of reflection, expression and action:

First, they turn the life of the participant upside down, even if he/she did not win the first place, as was the case with the participants in the *Super Star* series and other similar programs. The participant is made and produced the way stars are produced, thus he/she leaves the program unlike the way he/she joined it, whether in looks, appearance and clothes, besides the experience, skill, developing his/her capacities and exploiting their talent.

Secondly, the television channels participate in affording opportunities of exchange and collaboration in the Arab world. They have created a space for discussion which the advocates of Arab unity and the theorists of Arab nationalism have failed to do. In fact those people have completely destroyed the idea of discussions, whereas the television channels, through their programs, debates and artistic, literary and political interviews, participate in expanding the opportunities of unity, without theorizing



and exaggerating. For successful work, in any Arab country, whether it be an intellectual debate or an artistic program, is no longer of local interest, but rather a common Arab act of development, efficient and effective, and opens to the Arab community horizons and paths to the future more than it pulls them to the past, as do the heritage dinosaurs and the new conservatives who call for modernity and progress and who are afraid of globalization and scared to lose their identity and particularity.

Thirdly, but not lastly, the artistic programs offer the participant the possibility of expressing him/herself in the midst of the social and political pressures and restraints. They also create job opportunities which governments have failed to provide. The Jordanian Diana Karazon's success in the first round of *Super Star* was an example with respect to the Jordanian girl and created a loophole in the wall guarded by the Islamic fundamentalists who oppose art and song, and who confiscate the freedom of thought and speech.

Another example is that of the Libyan Ayman al-Attar, the winner of the second round of *Super Star*. Through decades Libya has isolated herself from the changes and developments outside, living behind an iron curtain. Ayman al-Attar hammered a nail into the wall so as to participate in lifting the siege around his country. For the first time we see on television crowds in Libya expressing their feelings and voicing their thoughts. Thus one program succeeded in doing what thousands of articles and speeches about democratic freedoms, civil society and human rights have failed to do.

This is a contemporary fact: The screen shapes the world through its images just as it opens doors and creates opportunities. Thus we see how weak and even ridiculous is the opinion of those who believe that the new programs distract the youth from national duties and crucial issues which their supporters have excelled in losing. This is what a person who thinks in a simplistic, unilateral, tyrannical or terrorist way would say, mixing between various domains. However, the one who has a structural mind sees that each of these domains and requirements does not cancel the other, since each of them has its own specification and characteristic, as well as its own influence and interaction with others.

In Spain, for example, the song and art programs do not prevent hundreds of thousands of people and youths from acting and demonstrating against the government in order to replace it. So let us not blame others. The source of the crises is not the new programs but the police of doctrines and the protectors of the unchangeable constants.

### Multi-faceted Dimension

There are famous thinkers, the most prominent among them being the philosopher Jean Boudrillard, who consider globalization a fatal epidemic that eliminates the differences between societies and annuls cultural characteristics.

I, however, do not agree. On the contrary, I consider globalization to be a new kind of creativity, production, communication and exchange. It is a historical change and a mutation in civilization, as much as it is open to various interpretations and possibilities, or lines and choices.

Therefore it all depends on the way globalization is understood and dealt with or exploited, just like any other big event or new invention. We could deal with it in a negative way resulting in corruption or violence, as happened in America with those who dealt with electronic equipment at the expense of material production; or as does the Qa'ida who use the internet to facilitate their terrorist operations. However, the means and products of globalization can be used to prompt development, as in Malaysia which exploited the possibilities accompanying globalization in order to move from being marginalized into being a successful example of development and pass from a pre-modern society into an extremely modern one.

Then, too, globalization as a digital and technical revolution has offered unprecedented possibilities for plurality and diversity, or for interaction and hybridization in various fields of material and symbolic production.

This is what happened in poetry, the novel and art in general. In the past the number of poets was limited, just as there were leading poets considered to be the reference or monopolizing stardom. Today, however, there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Arab poets with a diversity in talents, visions and styles.

Naturally, this also applies to songs that have increased in number, developed and spread, thanks to the numerous satellite channels. As proof are the endless numbers of male and female singers. Diversity is not restricted to single art, for art is now practiced in plurality, where a single program includes singing, dancing, acting or mime, as was seen in the *Star Academy* program. Here the Egyptian Muhammad Attieh did not win because he had the best voice, but because of his multiple talents, excelling in more than one art. Even poetry is being influenced by this new reality where poems are recited to the accompaniment of wonderful music and sung by beautiful singers, as the poet Adonis has begun to do.

This is no longer the time when a singer would sing

standing still for an hour, but rather an accelerated, intertwined, moving era for multifold, hybrid and dynamic work. This is what explains mingling dancing with singing, and the emerging phenomenon of video clips as well as that of Reality Television.

We can also give examples of diversity in other fields, as with political and social activists all over the world. Here we notice that globalization has now created opponents that are like it. In the past world opposition was of a unilateral doctrine, camp, party, opinion and voice, as was the case in the Soviet camp. However, as is seen in the Porto Allegro conferences, opposition today is compound, plural, hybrid and rich since it is composed of groups and people belonging to various sects, trends and attitudes.

This is also seen in the seminars held to study present issues and global affairs, whether in Rio de Janeiro or Beijing, Barcelona or Alexandria, Tunisia or Beirut. They are universal seminars, not only because of their themes and contents, but due to the fact that the participants belong to various countries and nationalities, or have different specialties and trends. Therefore, dealing with globalization as if it were a scarecrow or an epidemic or absolute evil, shows an attitude which is simplistic, exaggerated and blind, as well as intellectual terrorism.

Thus we are facing a global reality becoming more and more hybrid and open. It is the point of no return, as is shown by the increase in mingling, diversity and uniqueness, the increase in universal globalized businesses, programs and activities. They are all compound in structure, pluralistic in dimension, dynamic in their rationale, and hybrid in their identity. This means a rupture in the unilateral centralized logic, to be replaced by a diversity in references, models, programs, shapes, patterns and methods.

This new reality is what scares those with a theological, unilateral centralized mind, with a mentality to glorify, praise and sanctify, and who call the cultural output and its producers geniuses, giants, scholars, heroes and leaders, as witness the names and titles given to personalities or symbols in this field or that: X's century, X's era, Master of knowledge, Lady of the screen, Star of the Orient, master of literature, prince of poets, initiator of modernity, instigator of revolution, creator of the novel, etc... But what is being produced and formed breaks this imperialist, élitist and narcissistic logic. For what is being formed now of diversity and uniqueness or fragmentation and separation means that this is no longer a time when an artist, writer or philosopher dominates an era as being the only one in his field or domain. Anyway, what did those working in culture and writing gain from this ideal-

ization besides additional discrimination, disparity, tyranny and violence, the pharaohs of politics being equal to the patriarchs of culture?

### **The End of the Élite**

Gone is the time when the cultural élite were the custodians of minds and of the matters of truth, justice and freedom. This prophetic and narcissistic role which made its representatives consider themselves the conscience of nations and the minds of humanity, has been shaken due to the mutations, regressions and failures, starting with the collapse of the socialist camp and passing to the crisis of the new liberalism, to the failure of the Arab civilization project, to the dilemma of modern secularism, and going from the preemptive wars of the neo-Conservatives to the wars of the fundamentalist terrorists.

Today the élite can do no more than produce their isolation and weakness as long as they think in a backward, idolized, unilateral, utopian and tyrannical manner, as do the neo-Conservatives in the face of changes. Therefore the élite is no longer able to carry out their cognitive and ethical authority over people. Gone is the time when the intellectual could think for others and formulate their requests or defend their interests, as has gone the era of blind crowds who sacrificed their lives for leaders, or the country's flag, or revolutionary slogans.

Therefore, it is actually very late to talk about the fall of the élite. With the age of universal information, global network, knowledge economy, media workers, and dependence on mental forces and creative capacity in work, we have entered "the deliberating society" which is not composed of the élite and the crowd, or of the leader and the people, but rather of productive fields, active sectors and multiple legitimacies, where none have more right than others to common values and democratic freedom. Thus each is connected to truth in as much as he/she can create facts and produce truths, and each is connected to justice according to his/her share in work and production, and each has his/her share of freedom in as much as he/she shows authority and efficiency. Thus the dualism between the élite and the people is broken, and the gap between academic knowledge and general knowledge is filled, in as much as the various fields and sectors are open to one another in order to transfer skills, exchange expertise and debate common affairs and issues.

Thus in a debating society every individual shapes his/her own life so long as he/she has a specialty, and every citizen shapes his/her surroundings and society so long as he/she is productive or creative in his/her field. Each sector, in turn, is capable of dealing with its problems thanks to the specialization of its people and their participation in field work, and each sector participates in the devel-



opment of its society depending on the skills and expertise which enable it to mingle with other sectors in order to discuss the solution of problems or the development of resources and wealth.

We are now faced with the emergence of a new human factor that does not derive its legitimacy, or positive and constructive impact from its beliefs, sect or social class, but from what it specializes in and masters, or from the work and industries it excels in and completes. Thus, besides the "citizen" who enjoys his civil freedom by participating in the election of his representatives and equality before the law, we have the "performer", the specialist who knows how to exploit his capacity to create and transform, with the help of others and their participation, through work and productivity or through participating in public and particularly media debates, whether on the level of sector or state, or even on the regional or global level. Thus it is impossible to go back to the model of the "believer" or the militant who has joined a closed brotherhood or an iron ideology, unless in a way that is weak or caricatured or destructive.

Thus profession is beginning to dominate identity and to be man's/woman's passport to the building of self and the making of life. Therefore it is no longer a question of élite and people, or élitist and popular, but a matter of a space now being formed in which the élitist, tyrannical and bureaucratic relations are being replaced by another kind that are horizontal, average, exchanging and debating relations. This does not mean that élitism has disappeared. It has come to an end as a symbol and value, just as it has lost its credibility and legitimacy. Therefore wherever it is found acting with the same mentality, logic and slogans, it is the cause of more backwardness and deterioration.

### **The Image and its Effects**

It goes without saying that we are now living in the society of the image and the scene, where the world has become exposed to flagrant nudity via multimedia: the channel, the network, the screen, the live and speaking image, as well as the cameras planted in corners, squares and public places. We cannot overlook the fabricated virtual images, for they present an enormous capacity of forming and reforming in a more complex, structured and broad manner, in a way that makes the administration of the world depend on the production of information and the structure of the image.

Whoever does not appear today in an image is less effective and charismatic, even though he might have won the race to be a star. As an example is the person who won in *Superstar* or *Star Academy*. He/she practiced his/her stardom while participating in the program, but this stardom decreased after he/she left. The image shapes the

world and rebuilds it. This is the reason for the effective role of those working in the audiovisual media, besides those working in programming and the production of excessive effects.

There are some who fear the domination of the image and its function at the expense of critical awareness, analytical thought and rational discourse. Undoubtedly, the image is not equal to a text in its conceptual power and cognitive effects. But it surpasses it in psychological effects because it possesses its own charm and seduction since it is related to the world of form, color and sense, whereas the text requires a mental process of abstraction and deduction. That is why images are used as means of clarification and information in education or advertising.

Yet here, too, one must not simplify and alarm, for the image as incident is merely a possibility. All depends on how it is interpreted and narrated, or how it is used. For on the level of interpretation it can be put to use negatively and harmfully or positively and usefully, just like the text and discourse.

I do not believe that the image will destroy the book, as is claimed in the Arab world so as to camouflage problems and conceal evil. For books are still distributed in the world by the hundreds of thousands, or rather by the millions, ranging from Marquez's novels to Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code*, and the adventures of Harry Potter. Therefore, the claim that the image will replace the book is a lie and a cultural scandal in the Arab countries.

On the other hand, if the image conceals and deceives it is equal in this respect to discourse which is not less concealing and misleading, especially when used as a sacred authority or a rigid belief or a final theory. Humanity has suffered and is still suffering from the hegemony of the doctrinal speeches which participated in producing closed societies and human herds led by blind faith and extremist impossible and destructive solutions. On the contrary, the spread of images played a positive role in undermining the closed and totalitarian regimes, as was the case in the socialist regimes and the third world countries. Today the new propagandists among the fundamentalists and religious clerics try using both weapons to the utmost, and in the worst way: the doctrine and the image, the message and the network, thus combining the evils of both, the evils of the closed ideologies and those of the clear image.

But there is a second face to every coin. When the Jihadists use the satellite channels to broadcast their ugly savage practices, such as decapitating the innocent people they had kidnapped, this will contribute to destroying the religious claims and undermine the meaning of the-

ology, as much as it will offer the possibility of freeing the minds and bodies from the tutelage of those who give themselves divine qualities or claim a relation that connects them to God, and who believe they are God's successors or representatives or prodigies, or are speaking in His name and carrying out His verdicts.

No matter what, the problem lies neither with the image nor with the text, neither with the visual network nor with the written press, because these products have their own capacities. Thus their benefit or harm depends on the way they are used and the mechanisms operating them. Therefore what matters is what kind of relation there is with the meaning, as much as with the management of issues and projects, or identities and desires.

### **Risks and Solutions**

Undoubtedly the phenomena and trends taking place in various fields are not the promised paradise, since there is no paradise, to start with. And those who are awaiting it will no doubt be disappointed and will have to wait far too long. In fact, these fast moving times will soon surprise them with something they do not like or will provoke in them fear and terror.

The purpose of these words is not to deny facts so as not to make the situation worse. They aim at getting us used to reading fully what is going on so that we may better understand and analyze and interfere, using prudence and careful consideration. This requires being trained to think, breaking away from worshipping forefathers, fossilized forms and tastes, or the intimidating names and models.

Not all that is happening is positive, for it has its negative aspects, its mishaps and dangers. This is the case starting from the sailing boat to the spaceship, from papyrus to the digital code, from ordinary mail with its mechanical speed to electronic mail with its light speed; in short, from the simple slow tools that are primitive in structure, motion and effect, to the tools that are complex in structure, extremely fast and exceedingly efficient.

But there is a second face to every coin: We live in an age of speed, surrounded by images, constantly expecting change, using the tools and means that become more efficient and effective the more complex they become. Yet all this has many drawbacks as well: First of all, it makes private life unbearable because it becomes exposed and bare, or under constant supervision and pursuit. Then it also means a quick rise and just as quick a fall, as we see with the lives of stars. This is why stars are quickly eclipsed. And no wonder, for whatever is light and quick is as temporal as it is ephemeral. Thirdly, it means that the devices might be exhausted before having achieved the goals, as it also means possessing a

capacity to act and affect that surpasses the capacity to anticipate and evaluate.

Frankly speaking, using tools and knowledge that provide the utmost in speed, motion and efficiency means that we are standing on the edge of a precipice, as well as it means that man is surpassed by what he produces and that this might harm him. Thus we enter a society of risk and a state strongly resembling a state of emergency. And we might have gone beyond this to provoke a catastrophe, as man's deeds foretell and forewarn, with violence and terrorism, or death and destruction.

These are the effects of extreme limits or solutions, for an extreme quickly reverses to the opposite. This is the difference.

Amid this crisis and risk we may ask: Who will save whom? And who is worried about whom?

I am not afraid to say that those in charge of managing world affairs or general affairs and desire deliverance and change are the first to be in need of reform and change, because things have gone beyond the violation of values and principles, as witness the chronic crises and sudden catastrophes.

Then perhaps the source of destruction and death might be the very values and principles they claim or call for, so long as they deal with their thoughts, identities and issues with the mentality of someone certain of himself and of what he knows, fully in grasp of affairs, authoritarian and deeming himself divine. Equal in this respect are all adversaries fighting over interests and vanities while claiming to be fighting for ideas and legitimacy, whether it be Bush or Putin, Khamenei or Al-Qurdawi, Bernard Lewis or Hasan Hanafi, Adonis or Chomsky, Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid or Abd Al-Sabur Shahin, Nawal El-Saadawi or Nahla El-Chahal. The writer of this article and his colleagues and adversaries are no exception.

Thus we deny reality in order to conceal our reality, and cling to responsibility and power after having failed to direct the world, or we claim to possess solutions when, in reality, we are the source of the problems. Let us confess that our generation has failed to manage our common affairs and produce civilized, reforming and modernizing projects. Therefore the problem lies in our own thoughts and minds, and not in the fact that our opinions and suggestions are not taken into consideration. It is not logical that we should struggle for so long and have matters get worse.

This is why I consider reversing the issue, or, at least, directing the question to those we apprehend or fear: the



youth and women, or the marginalized and minors, those who live in a hell caused by adults, leaders, chiefs, custodians, guides and those who believe they are divine and immortal with their obsessions, greed, conflicts and wars. Are the young and the marginalized capable of opening new horizons and paths that could help us emerge from the tunnel, by creating new languages, forms, rules, tools and unparalleled fields that would generate new and different relations from meanings and values, relations that would be less deifying of the self, less patriarchal, masculine, authoritarian, extremist, greedy and violent, in other words more pious, modest, feminine, lively and pacific... whether those meanings were related to God or the mind, to truth or justice, to the fatherland or the world?

One does not lose hope reading about that young Algerian woman, Samira Bellil, who died at the beginning of September 2004 after she had been for most of her short life a victim of the low world of those French of Moroccan origin, with all its misery, violence, rape and diseases. However, all was not misery and in vain. For the moment the victim came back to her senses and realized the reasons of her plight, she thought about herself and sought, in mind and deed, to rebel against her situation and change her way of life. One of the things she did was to write down her experience in a book which was published shortly before her death: *In Gang Rape Hell*. Thus Samira Bellil set a good example showing that those who

do not renounce free, independent and critical thinking can open a vent in the dark tunnel in order to change their conditions for the better.

Naturally, one should not generalize. It is not fair to judge all adults and fathers negatively and charge them with being failures. For there are always bright examples that are rays of hope, such as those who resign and do not abuse power, or those who work towards broadening the possibilities of life and enriching it, like Nelson Mandela and Mahathir Muhammad, Bill Gates and Ahmad Zawil. This is what explains the huge crowds that flocked to attend Mahathir Muhammad's lecture in the Alexandria Library in the middle of September 2004. People are thirsty to listen to successful models in construction and human development after having become fed up listening to those who can do nothing but lose causes and harvest failures with their lies of liberation, empty heroisms, used up talk and inept or false recommendations.

Translated by Nazik Yared

#### END NOTE

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