

# Curriculum Gaps:

## The Dangers of the Revivalists' Pedagogy

By

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*‘For the only true culture is that of the revolution; that is to say,  
it is constantly in the making’  
- Jean Paul Sartre <sup>1</sup>*

### Introduction

The term pedagogy may be imagined differently by different people. In this essay, pedagogy is referred to as “the broader and more generalized notion of social education which arises from the influence of the educative society where we are educating through using community influence”.<sup>2</sup> The term ‘pedagogy’ used in this essay is thus defined as the “deliberate attempt to influence how and what knowledge and identities [*sic*] are produced within and among particular sets of social relations”.<sup>3</sup> Such a definition of pedagogy, more often than not, comes from the concern as to *how production and dissemination of knowledge, and therefore cultural formations, educate and influence the imagination of the masses*. Such pedagogy— delivered in talks, public and private group discussions, printed and non-printed media, and in educational programs— would, amongst other things, be able to (1) perpetuate, legitimize or challenge an unjust status quo, and (2) promote either a regression or a progression from much needed development of the society and community. It can also (3) provide an opportunity to advance the interests of groups, and thus (4) create a distraction from much needed diagnosis of the real concrete problems of the societies it is delivered in. The experiences these deliberate pedagogical attempts produced can therefore be referred to as ‘experienced curriculum’.

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<sup>1</sup> In the “Preface” to Frantz Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Mannheim and W. A. C. Stewart, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 20.

<sup>3</sup> H. Giroux & R. Simon, “Popular Culture and Critical Pedagogy: Everyday Life as a Basis for Curriculum Knowledge” in H. Giroux & P. McLaren, eds., *Critical Pedagogy, the State, and Cultural Struggle* (New York: SUNY, 1989), p. 239.

## Ideology as a Curriculum Sieve

Each curriculum has its own sieves. These sieves set the tone and shape in which the curriculum is formulated and planned, either consciously or otherwise. These choices though, cannot be assumed to have always been the most progressive one available.<sup>4</sup> For progress to occur, a constant and sober effort to seek possible weaknesses and potential dangers must be vigilantly included in any diagnosis so as to enable further development of all human potentialities.<sup>5</sup>

Islamic Revivalism, as a whole, can be defined as the “reawakening of interest in Islamic symbols, ideas, and ideals subsequent to a relative dormancy”.<sup>6</sup> Revivalism, thus, by its very definition, assumes that the past is better than the present. Following this logic, there is a need to revive elements of the past in the present so as to enable a better future. Such romantic notions, though understandable given Islam's rich history, intellectual traditions, scientific and civilizational achievements in the past<sup>7</sup>, is thus still a regression, regardless of the manifestations it appears in. It is important to note that looking at the past and learning from it is an educationally important element in any development-oriented pedagogy. But, as William James puts it, the value of any subject, and in this case the study of History, “is dependent not upon its content but upon the way it is taught”.<sup>8</sup>

## Curriculum Goals

Each curriculum has its own goals. These goals bring the end in mind, right from the beginning. What does the curriculum of Revivalism aims for? We shall explore a few often articulated goals. These goals are important since, most often than not, they are the main causes as to why new recruits joined any movement. Hence, these are often portrayed in a very positive manner so as to appeal to those who are considering of consuming the knowledge, identities and pedagogical influences of the social education that the curriculum promises.

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<sup>4</sup> Pervez Hoodbhoy has showed “how many a times in history, the philosophical and psychological choices chosen by past civilizations were both directly and indirectly responsible for their downfall”. Read, *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality* (Kuala Lumpur: S. Abdul Majeed & Co., 1992), pp. 118-132.

<sup>5</sup> Read, Azhar Ibrahim Alwee, “The Making of Progressive Religion” in Azhar Ibrahim Alwee and Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, eds., *Islam, Religion and Progress: Critical Perspectives* (Singapore: The Print Lodge, 2006), pp. 1-33.

<sup>6</sup> Mir Zohair Husain, *Global Islamic Politics* (New York: HarperCollins College Publishers, 1994), p. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Read, Syed Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam, with a Life of the Prophet* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2000), pp. 348-374.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Mannheim and W. A. C. Stewart, *An Introduction to the Sociology of Education* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1964), p. 23.

a. *Notion of Progress*

Revivalism starts with pointing out to the fact that many Muslim nations lag badly behind the rest of the world in their economies. As such, Revivalism greatly influences the way education is imagined. For progress to occur, education cannot just be imagined as a means to increase knowledge or to prepare citizens for the Hereafter, nor just for the industries too.<sup>9</sup> Neither can education be used for the deliberate ‘massification’<sup>10</sup> of the community. Instead, education must pay more attention to the development of the critical consciousness<sup>11</sup> of the community it wishes to educate in order for progress to occur. But with the absence of any real diagnosis, such critical consciousness is still unobtainable.

The ‘commodification of religion’<sup>12</sup> too often occurs in the name of progress. Today, consumption of religious symbols and items is an industry of its own. We also have industries that utilize religious symbols to boost sales. The *halalness* of products become a rallying point for the consumption of anything ‘Islamic’.<sup>13</sup> This includes ‘Islamic’ version of Barbie dolls, complete with *pardah*, as well as women garments and fashion industries that adhere to various shades of Islamic interpretations. The fashion industry is, after all, one of the major driving forces in consumerism and the consumerist society.<sup>14</sup> Consumption seems to be legitimized by the Revivalists as an important component in economic development and is thus greatly utilized as a pedagogical tool.

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<sup>9</sup> On this issue, Syed Hussein Alatas opined: “They regard education primarily as means of increasing knowledge or as training for a profession. Education is not geared to produce the new man.” Read, *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), p. 78.

<sup>10</sup> A massified society is one in which a people, after entering the historical process, have been manipulated by the elite into an unthinking, manageable agglomeration. It stands in contrast to *conscientizacao*, which is “the process of achieving critical consciousness”. Read, Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum, 2005), p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> “Critical consciousness means that one questions, and one does not take things for granted... Criticality is not cynicism. It fosters a dialogic spirit. It is an experience of learning through examining, sharing and suffering. It is intense. It is passionate. Not surprisingly, criticality leads to profound humanism – commitment to a life-long project that is free from exploitation, domination, injustice and violence. In other words, critical consciousness requires an intensely thoughtful, passionate, and philosophic mind.” Avjit Pathak, *Social Implications of Schooling: Knowledge, Pedagogy and Consciousness* (Delhi: Rainbow Publishers, 2002), p. 239, cited in Azhar Ibrahim Alwee, “The Evaluation of Madrasah Education: Perspectives and Lessons from the Experiences of Some Muslim Societies” in Lai Ah Eng and Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, eds., *Secularism and Spirituality: Seeking Integrated Knowledge and Success in Madrasah Education in Singapore* (Singapore: Institute of Policy Studies and Marshall Cavendish Academic, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> “Perhaps the greatest tragedy of modern man is... his manipulation by organized advertising, ideological or otherwise.” Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum Books, 2005), p. 5

<sup>13</sup> Consumption, thus, has really been strongly integrated into all aspects of our life – from our birth to our death, ‘including, but not limited to, education, leisure time activities, the popular arts, the home, travel, and personal imagination. Read, Joel Spring, *Educating the Consumer-Citizen: A History of the Marriage of Schools, Advertising, and Media* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), p. 1.

<sup>14</sup> Joel Spring, *Educating the Consumer-Citizen: A History of the Marriage of Schools, Advertising, and Media* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2003), p. 1.

### *b. Notion of Religiosity*

Another starting point where Revivalist thinking starts is at the fact that many Muslims now have become ‘westernized’. This is done whenever Muslim communities exist as a minority in a bigger society. The decrease of the use of religious and cultural symbols and the increase in the abandonment of religious practices and rituals immediately becomes the perceived culprit of any problem the community faces: from teenage pregnancies and teenage gangsters, to even the under-performance of students in national examinations. Hence, Revivalism’s portrayal of a glorious past that is often imagined without problems of their own, initially, brings temporary relief to their everyday despair. Later, that relief becomes addictive and develops into a strong longing for the achievements of the past, their symbols and cultural practices. By their logic, these symbols and cultural practices are defenses to the onslaught of the values that they hold. The religious elites– not satisfied with their own culture that seemed to have failed to defend their values– starts to import alien Middle Eastern cultural symbols, and prescribe them to the masses as indicators of religiosity.<sup>15</sup> Members of the community longing for progress and not equipped with the necessary critical consciousness have no alternative but to agree to this prescription.<sup>16</sup>

## **Resulting Pedagogies**

It is necessary to mention now that there are real unintended consequences of any curriculum.<sup>17</sup> These are known as curriculum gaps and they frequently exist mostly due to the different and incorrect interpretation of the aims. The experienced curriculum of the Revivalists is of no exception. What is of concern is when these consequences cause more harm than good; for the implications are real. The result of the curriculum is education for the masses through the use of community influence. This social education arises from the influence of the educative community that has been socialized to subscribe to the Revivalist’s ideology.

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<sup>15</sup> On this, Paulo Freire cautioned: “...and when men try to save themselves by following the prescriptions, they drown in leveling anonymity, with hope and without faith, domesticated and adjusted.” Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum Books, 2005), p. 5.

<sup>16</sup> “To the elite fell the task of importing alien cultural models; to the people, the task of following, of being *under*, of being ruled by the elite, of having no task of their own.” Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Continuum Books, 2005), p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> “Of course, an educator may be foolish, in the sense that he produces results other than those at which he was aiming...” Bertrand Russell, *On Education* (London: Unwin Hyman Ltd, 1989), p. 33.

The negative attitudes towards science and rational thinking<sup>18</sup> that crept in, in the guise of religiosity, after the legacy of colonization, further cripples the community capacity building and rational thinking. Chandra Muzaffar argues how Islamic revivalism sustains intellectual underdevelopment of the community, as it selects and often elaborates traditions relating to politics, economics, science and education, to be used in this pedagogy, in a very intellectually shallow and superficial manner especially as it is often obsessed with identity and symbols more than anything else.<sup>19</sup>

Yet another danger would be to ethnic relations in multicultural contexts. In the context of the Malaysian society – a society that shares cultural similarities with ours– illustrated how Islamic revivalism impacts upon ethnic relations through religious polarization and exclusivity.<sup>20</sup> This is not surprising as one of the articulated aims of some versions of the Revivalist’s Curriculum is the “attainment of world leadership”.<sup>21</sup>

## Conclusion

It is an undeniable fact that the Muslim World needs change. But this change cannot be just for the sake of change. As this essay had suggested, the type of change required by the community needs to be thoroughly thought through by all levels of the community: from the intellectuals, intelligentsias and the elites, to the educators, the bureaucrats and the masses. The curriculum of change to attain progress cannot be just an imitation of an archaic copy from the glorious past, a carbon copy of those from the colonial oppression, nor a photocopy of today’s oppressive capitalist structure. This curriculum must start with nurturing the ability to think critically so that it empowers its adherents with the ability to critically assess the situations that individual faces daily in the many different contexts.

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<sup>18</sup> “The campaign against reason weakens religion in another sense. The exclusion of reason from religion limits the role of religion on life. Whenever intellectual efforts are made to devise new types of knowledge, social planning or social techniques based on religious philosophy in response to new conditions, problems and challenges not faced before, those who are against reason would oppose these moves as unnecessary and undesirable innovations. Whenever new interpretations are given to religious principles in the light of recent knowledge and discoveries they meet with opposition which relies solely on the ground that reason cannot be applied to religion. When some seek concretely to bring more and more areas of life under the influence of religion through the use of reason, a great many would oppose it.” Shaharuddin Maaruf, “Negative Attitudes Towards Religion” in *One God, Many Paths: Essays on the Social Relevance of Religion in Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Aliran Publications, 1980), pp. 52-58.

<sup>19</sup> Read, Chandra Muzaffar, *Islamic Resurgence in Malaysia* (Petaling Jaya: Fajar Bakti Sdn. Bhd., 1987).

<sup>20</sup> On this, Aziz al-Azmeh opines: “Be it as it may, the fact remains that the rhetoric culturalism, a rhetoric of identities which views difference as antithesis, can only subsist naturally in the context of a revivalism.” Read, Aziz al-Azmeh, *Islams and Modernities* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>21</sup> This is the view of Syed Qutb, who wrote in his famous treatise, *Milestones*: “... it is necessary to revive Islam. The distance between the revival of Islam and the attainment of world leadership may be vast, and there may be great difficulties on the way; but the first step to be taken for the revival of Islam.”

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