



Reconstructing grand theory in Islamic human geography – Some preliminary notes

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Abstract

To have or not to have a grand theory is the question asked and deliberated by contemporary geographers although some or many had already dismissed the legitimacy of the question altogether. This paper addresses the problem of grand theory in contemporary (Western) human geography from an Islamic perspective. It is driven by the hypothesis that the de-legitimation or the debunking of an epistemological grand theory in contemporary human geography is neither absolute, nor final, nor universal. It is essentially a Western scholarship problem presented as if it is universal. It then proceeds to demonstrate how and why an epistemological grand theory is not a problem in the Islamic approach to knowledge. Recapitulating the gist of an earlier attempt, it provides a brief account of how an Islamic epistemology would grapple with three of the main issues and challenges facing a grand theory in human geography, namely, integrating the theoretical with the empirical, unifying multi-scalar analyses, and transcending the divide between the human and the natural sciences.

Keywords: democratisation of knowledge, epistemology, grand theory, human geography, Islamic scholarship, Western scholarship

The plight of grand theory in Western human geography

A lot has happened in contemporary human geography since this author rendered an Islamic evaluation of the capability of a grand theory candidate, structuration theory, to overcome the epistemological impasse in the sub-discipline nearly two decades ago (Buang, 1992). Not only has structuration theory perceptibly dashed the hope that it will practicably transcend the structure-agency dualism that has long bedeviled geographers' effort to arrive at a Grand Theory, but that new epistemological turns have arisen in the late twentieth-century Anglo-American human geography to trouble the possibility for any Grand Theory to even exist.

The 'cultural turn', feminist geography, and post-structuralism, among others, have seen to the invoking of a plethora of new concepts – non-representational difference, discourses, performativity, anti-essentialism, anti-foundation, etc. -- as different ways or sites of looking at, understanding and articulating socio-spatial realities, challenging the veracity of once familiar, high level, representational abstractions such as critical theory, structuralism, structural Marxism, and Structuration Theory. So unraveling has the influence of these new epistemological turns been that according to Gregory (2009 : 316) most human geographers now seem to have come to accept that no single theoretical system can possibly ask all the important and interesting questions or provide all the satisfying answers; that there could be no Grand Theory for human geography after all.

This, however, does not mean that the challenge of finding a Grand Theory has been settled once and for all. Epistemic anxieties, misgivings and dilemmas can be felt to be still haunting the sub-discipline. These may be summarized as follows:

- (a) While the search for grand theory has been criticised for resulting in fixation upon theoretical abstractions the proliferation of which has tended to further remove intellectual enquiries from the empirical world, which, in turn, has threatened to lend the sub-discipline into serious fragmentation, few geographers would advocate a return to the supposedly theory-less world of empiricism.
- (b) While the search for grand theory has been criticised for resulting in totalizing tendencies among some dominant grand theories to annex, incorporate and marginalize other intellectual traditions (see for eg. Castree and Gregory's 2006 critique of Harvey's historico-geographical materialism), the counteraction has not been to eliminate theories altogether but rather to 'withdraw' to what are perceived as less totalizing theoretical encapsulations – such as those 'modest', non-representational form of theorizing that avoids a theory-centred style of research which continually avoids the taint of particularity (Thrift, 2006: 30), or those minor theories which subvert the mastery claims of Grand Theory by 'working in the heterogeneous 'spaces-in-between' different traditions, and by activating the disjunctures and displacements between different voices and vocabularies, to ensure that theoretical work is 'relentlessly transformative' and elaborates 'lines of escape' (Katz, 1996).
- (c) While the search for grand theory has resulted in mounting criticisms with regard to its theoretical and totalizing ambitions, these did not dispel geographers' dream for a grand theory. For instance, Dear (1988) is intent on fashioning a human geography that was at once theoretically engaged and sensitive to empirical particularity. In fact, there is considerable interest in theoretical systems that may transcend the divide between the human sciences and the natural sciences, such as complexity theory described as 'the grand theory to end all grand theories (Manson & Sullivan, 2006:678). Inspired by this Urry (2003) has used complexity to link together the local, the regional and the global in an effort to show how social theory might be constructed there from.

The grand theory in Islamic epistemology

The main problem with the search for grand theory in Western geography, to be sure, is not because it is unnecessary but that it has much to do with the continuous failure to arrive at a single or tightly bounded set of methodological and theoretical principles that would provide unity, intelligibility and coherent explanations to the disparate material studied regardless of the kind of phenomenon investigated. This would entail an epistemological framework that can integrate the theoretical and the empirical; unify analyses of the micro-, the meso-, and the macrostructures into a coherent whole; and transcend the divide between the human sciences and the natural sciences. Let us see now if Islamic epistemology can do the job.

Integrating the theoretical with the empirical

The Islamic method and principles of transmuting the scattered facts of the world into coherent explanations are by integrating field observation with introspection:

Do they not travel through the land, so that their hearts (and minds) may thus learn wisdom and their ears may thus learn to hear? Truly it is not their eyes that are blind, but their hearts which are in their breasts (22 : 46).

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَتَكُونُ لَهُمْ قُلُوبٌ يَعْقِلُونَ
بِهَا أَوْ آذَانٌ يَسْمَعُونَ بِهَا فَإِنَّهَا لَا تَعْمَى الْأَبْصَارُ
وَلَكِن تَعْمَى الْقُلُوبُ الَّتِي فِي الصُّدُورِ ﴿٢٢﴾

The Quranic verse outlines the methodology of seeking truth or knowledge. This consists of an empirical method (for “travel through the land” denotes fieldwork and field expedition as well as a hermeneutic/interpretative method. The verse instructs the researcher to gain truthful knowledge through empirical investigation (*mulaahazah*): one cannot engage in armchair scholarship. But empirical investigation alone is not sufficient : it must be reinforced with introspection and an incisive, profound, refined, and critical interpretation of the empirical data. The shortcoming of many scholars is their failure to recognize the truth of the matter for various reasons such as prejudice, bias, reluctance, ignorance, stereotypes (Buang, 1992:11), politics and power play, etc.

The empirical and positivist mode (*mulaahazah*) just cited is but one mode of knowledge in Islamic epistemology. Other modes are *badaahah* (reasoning with self-evident truth or common sense and *tajribah* (reasoning with human experience (Ghorab, 1981). These two stipulate that we can recognize the truth if we care to reflect upon what is real in human living and if we are not making it unnecessarily difficult for ourselves to be realistic about it. We can then perceive that, for instance, living in human society is structured by its mode of economy and politics. That the Quran itself contains numerous economic guidelines, such as forbidding the institution of interest, is further proof that Islamic epistemology does recognize the reality of the economic mechanism in human social life. This reality is not in any way diminished or affected just because the mechanism is abstract. And, as the Quran (933:42) informs us, the operating reality of such a mechanism can be apprehended through a reflective study of its empirical consequences.

The integration of the empirical with the actual and the real is possible in an Islamic epistemology due to the presence of a principle which unifies and transcends the peculiarities of differing approaches to knowledge: the unity of knowledge or the unity of truth. In Islam, this unity devolves from Allah’s absolute unity and is convertible with it (Al Faruqi, 1988). He is the Creator of all reality as well as all truth. In other words, He is the Reality. And, according to the Quran, this reality can be apprehended in more than one way. As a result, an Islamic epistemology has no difficulty in integrating the empirical with the rational and the intuitive, for they are regarded as sectional views of reality when taken in isolation and, when taken collectively, they complement each other in producing a total view of reality.

By contrast, in the operationalisation of grand and not so grand theories in Western human geography , there seems to be a lurking skepticism about the ability of pure thought to guarantee the validity of the truth asserted as the abstractness of the truth is not submissible to direct sensing.

The case of the Islamic epistemology is different. Espousing the view that the nature of the ultimate reality is spiritual, it builds in itself the facility of another mode of reasoning called intuition. Thus the path of knowledge begins with the concrete empirical, passes through the abstract theoretical, and ends up in an affirmation of the intuitive. In an Islamic epistemology (Quran, 22:46), the “heart” (*qalb*: pl *qulub*) is a kind of an inner intuition or insight which brings us into contact with aspects of reality other than those open to sense perception. Islam regards it as a mode of dealing with reality which represents yet another level of human experience having the capacity to yield knowledge by interpretation (Iqbal, 1934:15).

The conception of theories in Western human geography seems to point to the inadequacy of pure thought as a mode of dealing with social reality. The reality to be apprehended and comprehended requires an additional method. Yet, what more can be offered by philosophies and ideologies which are secular, alien, and even hostile to a religious mode? Typical of the secular worldview is the belief that an extension to the intuitive would cause irrationalities, religious or otherwise, to enter its epistemologies and render them unscientific. It is taboo.

Unifying multi-scalar analyses

An Islamic epistemology unifies analyses of the micro-, the meso-, and the macrostructures into a coherent whole by the benefit of its own version of theistic essentialism and foundationalism. In an Islamic epistemology it is necessary to recognize the existence of the profoundest reality behind social reality in order to comprehend the reality of the structures and mechanisms that generate phenomena. But this Islamic “essentialism” is not Christianity’s anthropomorphic God or the scholastic cosmology which “tries to reach the Infinite by merely negating the finite. For the Infinite reached by contradicting the finite is a false Infinite, which neither explains itself nor the finite which is thus made to stand in opposition to the Infinite. The true Infinite does not exclude the finite: it embraces the finite without effacing its finitude, and explains and justifies its being” (Iqbal, 1934 : 28).

Nor is the supreme reality the scholastic teleology which infers the existence of a “skilful external contriver working towards a pre-ordained end and on a pre-existing dead and intractable material the elements of which are, by their own nature, incapable of orderly structures and combinations” (Iqbal 1934:28). To endow the world process with purpose in this sense is to rob it of its originality and its creative character. God is an organizing and not a formless principle of unity, a synthetic activity which holds together and focalizes the dispersing disposition of the living organism for a constructive purpose. To predicate this power to a finite humanity is to fail to acknowledge the finitude and creature status of the human species.

By contrast, Western human geography has dispensed with the imperative of any essentialism and foundationalism (Barnet, 2009: 210, 262). These are pejorative words nowadays. This is understandable not only in the context of Western theistic notions of essentialism, but also because humanism, which has been called upon to assail structural over-determinism (as in the case of structuration theory for example), has its own finitude, however knowledgeable and capable human subjects are. For how do we account for consequences which are not intended by human authors in the first place? Similarly, alluding to contingencies, and to the newly introduced postmodernist, post-humanist and post-structuralist ‘displacements’, ‘disjunctures’, ‘erasures’, ‘performativity’ (Gregory, 2009:316) etc. in order to account for those unintended, unauthored and other spaces-in-between consequences only leaves us with a sense of incompleteness, inconclusiveness and deprivation as to what and who the actual final arbiters are. Nor does settling for complex multicausality (Wiarda, 2008), critical realism or neo-American pragmatism dispel the curiosity about the Cause of causes.

Consider, for instance, the statement made by Urry (1985): “The social world should be seen as comprised of space-time entities having causal powers which may or may not be realized depending on the patterns of spatio/temporal interdependence (between them)”. From the point of view of an Islamic epistemology, the statement is problematic, incoherent or meaningless if space-time entities, the accordances of causal powers to them, the contingency of the exercises of these powers, and the enactment of time-space coincidence necessitated by the contingency are not predicated on the idea of God as the ultimate reality.

By involving God, however, we will not be causing humanity to vanish in the face of God’s immanence. We, the finite egos are part and parcel of Him – the Absolute Ego. Our life is organic to His being. But this does not mean the loss of our egohood or freedom. God has of His own accord chosen human beings, the finite egos as participators in His life. An Islamic epistemology therefore has no difficulty in reconciling real space and time (they are the possibilities of the

Ultimate Ego) with the regional ontology of human spatiality. Indeed, conceiving space as a necessarily dynamic and infinite continuum because it is a possibility of the profoundest reality is the very essence of an Islamic epistemology. It is thus to God's immanence that micro-, meso-, and macroscales of social realities are to pertain, and it is to His transcendence that we are to attribute or predicate the holistic and coherent linkages of these multiscalar constitutions of social realities (Buang, 1992:14).

Transcending the divide between the human and the natural sciences

In an Islamic epistemology, the recognition of God as a centralizing entity permits the divide between the natural and social worlds to be transcended; and the whole gamut of complexities that characterise this binary relationship (that secular complexity theory tries to handle as in Manson and Sullivan above) explained.

It begins with the stipulation that to God nature (including space) is not a mass of materiality occupying a void but rather a structure of events, a systematic mode of behaviour. "Nature is to the Divine Self as character is to the human self...(Iqbal, 1934:54). Space and time are possibilities of the Ego, only partially realized in the shape of our mathematical space and time. Space, time, and matter are interpretations which thought puts on the free creative energy of God. They are not independent realities existing *per se*, but only intellectual modes of apprehending the life of God. The world of matter, therefore, is not a stuff co-eternal with God, operated upon by Him from a distance as it were. It is, in its real nature, one continuous act which thought breaks up into a plurality of mutually exclusive things. The universe is not an 'other' existing *per se* in opposition to God. It is only when we look at the act of creation as a specific event in the life-history of God that the universe appears as an independent 'other'. From the standpoint of the all-inclusive Ego there is no 'other'. In Him thought and deed, the act of knowing and the act of creating, are identical.

In Islam, Divine knowledge is not passive omniscience as in pre-Einsteinian physics. Nothing is more alien to the Quranic outlook than the idea that the universe is the temporal working out of a preconceived plan (Iqbal, 1934). Instead, Divine knowledge is creative omniscience in the sense of a single indivisible act of perception in which God is immediately aware of the entire sweep of history, regarded as an order of specific events, in an eternal 'now'. The world-process, or the movement of the universe in time cannot be conceived as a line already drawn. It is a line in the drawing - an actualization of open possibilities. It is purposive only in the sense that it is selective in character, and brings itself to some sort of a present fulfillment by actively preserving and supplementing the past.

"Nature...from the human point of view...is an interpretation which in our present situation, we put on the creative activity of the Absolute Ego. At a particular moment in its forward movement it is finite, but since the Self to which it is organic is creative, it is liable to increase, and is consequently boundless in the sense that no limit to its extension is final" (Iqbal, 1934: 54). The universe, according to the Quran, is liable to increase (the Quran, 51:47). It is a growing universe and not an already completed product which left the hand of its maker ages ago, and is now lying stretched in space as a dead mass of matter to which time does nothing, and consequently is nothing. 'He (God) adds to His creation what He wills' (the Quran, 35: 1), including the dissolution of the present universe(s) and the recreation of new ones (the Quran, 29: 20).

As to the human life, the creative energy of the Ultimate Ego, in whom deed and thought are identical, functions as ego-unities. The world, in all its details, from the mechanical movement of what we call the atom of matter to the free movement of thought in the human ego, is the self-revelation of the 'Great I am'. Every atom of Divine energy, however low in the scale of existence, is an ego. But there are degrees in the expression of egohood. Throughout the entire gamut of being runs the gradually rising note of egohood until it reaches its perfection in man. No doubt, the emergence of egos endowed with the power of spontaneous and hence unforeseeable

action is, in a sense, a limitation on the freedom of the all-inclusive Ego. But this limitation is not externally imposed. It is born out of His own creative freedom whereby He has chosen finite egos to be participators of His life, power, and freedom (Iqbal, 1934).

Conclusion

To recapitulate, the search for a grand theory is the search for “a single or tightly bounded set of methodological (and theoretical) principles that, once found, would provide unity and intelligibility to the disparate material studied. When located, such principles would function as a kind of philosopher’s stone, transmuting the scattered base facts of the world into the pure gold of coherent explanation. No matter the kind of phenomenon investigated, it could always be slotted into a wider theoretical scheme. Nothing would be left out; everything would be explained’ (Barnes & Gregory, 1997:64). Based on this prescription, this very preliminary write-up has opened a small epistemological window as to the possibility of an Islamic Grand Theory. Further elaboration is definitely necessary but will have to be done elsewhere.

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