Understanding Muslim Technoscientific Identities

With Islamic resurgence, there has been an increased concern that science and technology are not value-free agents that can be appropriated and expropriated without cultural and social violence. There is a complex relationship between culture, religion, and society on the one side, and science and technology on the other, that is far from being value-free. The way people understand and adopt this relationship between culture, science, and technology, can be termed 'technoscientific identities'. This relationship has seldom been explored in the Islamic world.

It can be argued that the resurgence of Islam in the Islamic world has opened up new spaces for the transformation of technoscientific identities, creating a new 'metalinguistic landscape', a landscape of global scope. There are different modalities of discourse that are interacting, each making a linguistic space. Ideas and positions, whether technological or discursive, are formed in these landscapes and affect one another.

Technoscience and Islam in debate

In the late 1800s, the Islamic reform movement Salafiya, facing the onslaught of Western scientific and institutional discursive practices, sought to prevent the perceived marginalization of Muslim tradition. Al-Afghani argued that science in the West is the continuation of the medieval Islamic science and therefore Muslims can adopt it while remaining Muslim and following their traditions. In this interpretation, science and technology are understood as inherently and potentially Islamic. Science and discursive planning, such as Timothy Mitchell's exploration of its impact on the European landscape (e.g., theatre and cinema, the formation of the 'new curious individual' as a knowledge seeker). These debates on the relevance of Western science (such as Darwinian evolution or Galileo's Copernicus) to Islam and the creation of new imaginaries through the work of cultural translation (e.g., theatre and cinema, or the formation of the 'new curious individual') have become indexical of larger global concerns of Islam, whether technological or discursive, as they set the stage for the emergence of the secular state, in the present condition this is happening in different ways. An interesting case is project between Malaysia and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) to open a university of science and technology in that in the initial plans, the university would include the actual physical layout of MIT. The idea behind importing the MIT model as an institution formed through Western epistemology based on instrumental rationality, reflects the view of Western science as embedded in the cultural, social and spatial ways in which it is practised. The theoretical and practical underpinnings of liberal politics, however, what has changed is the landscape in which competing programmes co-exist, namely, the Islamic institutions that have been emerging alongside Islamic resurgence. The apparent lack of understanding of the designers of this initiative, as well as other political events such as the 9/11 attacks, have put the project to the complex of this current landscape of competing discourses.

Linguistic enactments are discursive and performative articulations of ideas that float between individuals and institutions. These articulations, in turn, are indexical of some events, including the demise of medieval Islamic science and the effort to explain its historical and cultural roots; the reform movements to revive Islam and reconcile it with modernity and the attempt to delineate the relationship between science, language, religion, culture, and society. The complex relationship among these categories is what I refer to as technoscientific identities. The problem about which we are theorizing here is how one could understand the landscape in which many levels of discourses, courses, institutions, and individuals are interacting. Current work on the philosophy of language is an important contribution to the study of Muslim technoscience. The relationship of language, culture, and science can be understood as a set of linguistic enactments that construct institutional, epistemological, and cultural bases for science and technology.

Competing discourses

The quest of Muslims in the late 20th century is to find appropriate cultural and institutional discursive planning to interpret the socio-cultural transformations of the West, that is to adopt and reconcile it with modernity and the articulation of these events into institutional settings must be understood in the larger discursive field of many competing modalities. There is a global context for the latter where multi-mediations, actors/institutions/technologies, frame the dynamics of change. This is what is referred to here as the metalinguistic landscape.

Malaysian experiences

To illustrate the ways in which technoscientific identities are shifting, Malaysian experiences of institution building can be considered. The resurgence of Islam in Malaysia since the 1970s has aimed to recast the socio-political structure of the country. The result has been the introduction of religious education and cultural norms, has become a mobilizing force for social change, affecting Malaysia's technoscientific identities. Debates that are indexical of larger global concerns of Islam, such as the episcopal understanding of the West, have been translated into the local context, in the establishment of transnational universities, such as the International Islamic University (IIU), based in the US, the International Islamic University (IIU), and Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ITC). The movement of neo-Islam has been accompanied by the creation of many intellectual, academic, and non-governmental interest programmes, interacting and affecting one another in the metalinguistic landscape. The deconstructive role that the resurgence of Islam has played needs to be theorized in this performative landscape in order to be able to draw constructive programmes. What can the recent debates over technoscientific identities in Malaysia teach us? In this context of different modalities that cut across and also constitute the landscape of technoscientific identities, the Islamic challenge is aimed at the hegemonic discourses of technoscience. The remaking of technoscientific identity is not programmatic. Rather it is a performative act of meaning making, through dialogue among emerging views, a process of revalidating what will be the future of Muslim technoscientific identities.