

# The Methodology of Sociological Criticism in Iraq

Huda Amer Ali, Thanaa Mohamed Saleh

Department of Sociology, College of Arts, University of Baghdad

Email: huda.ali2201@coart.uobaghdad.edu.iq

---

## Abstract

In the period preceding the establishment of the first sociology department at the University of Baghdad, the works of Abdul Fattah Ibrahim and Abdul Jabbar Arim played a significant role. These scholars are regarded as pioneers of this pre-foundational phase. Although they did not conduct any field research, the methodologies they advocated for analysing and critiquing Iraqi social reality were well-defined. In Abdul Fattah Ibrahim's first specialised book on sociology, he presents Darwin's theory of evolution as "the foundational principle upon which modern sociology is based." He defines sociology as "the study of society in its evolution according to the law of the survival of the fittest, with the goal of enhancing its ability to endure."

**Keywords:** society, criticism.

## 1. Introduction

### First: The Borrowed Methodology in the Pre-Foundational Phase

In the period preceding the establishment of the first sociology department at the University of Baghdad, the works of Abdul Fattah Ibrahim and Abdul Jabbar Arim played a significant role. These scholars are regarded as pioneers of this pre-foundational phase. Although they did not conduct any field research, the methodologies they advocated for analysing and critiquing Iraqi social reality were well-defined.

In Abdul Fattah Ibrahim's first specialised book on sociology, he presents Darwin's theory of evolution as "the foundational principle upon which modern sociology is based." He defines sociology as "the study of society in its evolution according to the law of the survival of the fittest, with the goal of enhancing its ability to endure."

As we observe, Abdul Fattah Ibrahim's definition of society carries a distinctly evolutionary perspective. He sees society as either a collection of individuals or society in its absolute sense. This society is based on a set of economic, psychological, and social factors, forming an organic bond among individuals that creates strength and the capacity for development and survival.

Ibrahim also believes that the primary aim of the social components upon which society is built is "to increase the social system's ability to compete for survival. This is the clear purpose of economic and political systems, as well as the principles of ethics and social organisation."

Although Ibrahim did not persist in adopting the evolutionary perspective, his inclination towards a historical materialist interpretation rooted in Marxism became evident in his later writings, particularly in his book "Society and Marxism." In this work, after introducing the topic and principles of Marxism, he was captivated by its materialist approach and the rejection of metaphysical explanations for understanding society. He concurred with Marxism on the idea that material existence shapes the levels of reality. Furthermore, he critiqued the notion of social reality as an organic unity, aligning with Marxist thought in asserting that reality is cohesive on one hand, yet simultaneously in a state of continuous change and development on the other. This viewpoint is reflected in his endorsement of the fundamental issues of Marxism, as outlined by the author himself, which are (6):

1. Material reality and the relations of production form the foundation of society.
2. Intellectual and spiritual changes are rooted in transformations within material reality.
3. Changes in social reality occur through a dialectical process.
4. Alterations in the relations of production can be measured with the same precision as the data in the natural sciences.
5. Nonetheless, in adopting a materialist interpretation of society, it is crucial to acknowledge that all causes and reasons for changes in social reality stem from material conditions, rather than relying solely on experimentation and testing as one would in the natural sciences.

Finally, Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim adopted the principle of Marxist praxis, which emphasises the connection between thought and action. This principle asserts that an individual, while striving to change material reality, simultaneously transforms themselves and their subjective reality.

In reviewing the writings of Abdul Jabbar Arim, the influence of positivist methodology—primarily in its French form and occasionally in its American variant—becomes increasingly apparent. Arim defined sociology as "an objective science with its own theories and research methods, focused on studying society and uncovering the laws that govern its direction and development." He maintained that social research methods should be informed by the empirical approaches used in the natural sciences. Additionally, Arim believed that the primary goal of sociologists is to understand the inevitability of social laws that...

"It governs society and its issues, and understands their progression within a framework of causal logic by relying on statistics rather than solely on theoretical thinking, which lacks empirical evidence (9). According to Abdul Jabbar Arim, one of the primary objectives of sociology is to study society objectively through scientific methods and to strive to uncover social laws in both normal and pathological cases of social phenomena (10). Arim posits that adopting a positivist methodology is a critical necessity, stating that 'this approach is essential for identifying the problems of Iraqi society and its cultural and value conflicts' (11). Among the most significant aspects of positivism in Arim's writings and his conception of sociology is his assertion that 'the

most important area of sociology is the study of social problems and the investigation of their social causes for the purpose of reform' (12). This perspective aligns with the foundational views of the American school of thought, as noted by Arim, which includes figures such as Parsons, Merton, Davis, and others who sought to connect their research to identifying social problems and proposing reformative therapeutic programs."

**\*\*Secondly, Ali Al-Wardi and the Methodology of Social Understanding\*\***

What exemplifies the richness of Ali Al-Wardi's social thought is his unwavering stance as a diligent, free, and critical researcher. He boldly engages with vital studies, provoking heated questions, adventurous interpretations, and the fierce critiques and battles he has faced. Al-Wardi has granted himself, along with his innovative methodology, the freedom to explore the phenomena of Iraqi society without the constraints of dogmatic or philosophical shackles. These attributes signify a remarkable additional legacy, yet what truly sets him apart is his development of a unique dialectical critical approach. He emphasises the pivotal importance of this methodology in studying Arab and Iraqi society (13).

Al-Wardi notes that he has critiqued two distinct methodologies in the examination of social phenomena or issues: one ancient and the other modern. He refers to the former as the rationalist approach, which views society through an idealistic lens—a perspective that has historically dominated the thoughts of philosophers and intellectuals, with the notable exception of Ibn Khaldun and a select few others.

Al-Wardi critiques the "rational methodology" for its disconnect with modern scientific approaches, suggesting they are fundamentally opposed. He laments that some educated individuals still fail to grasp this reality, mistakenly believing that these methods are interchangeable or yield the same results. The theoretical musings of rational thought cannot contradict the findings of science. Rationalists often inhabit intellectual ivory towers, and when they encounter everyday life, they view it with condescension, dismissing common practices and beliefs as ignorant. They assume that the ordinary people are misguided due to their ignorance and poor reasoning, and that they could improve themselves through better use of their intellect.

Dr. Ali Al-Wardi's careful, impartial examination in his social studies shows his mastery of scientific research methods. He employed a qualitative approach, capturing social phenomena in their natural context and focusing on personal perspectives, experiences, and narratives. Al-Wardi admired dualistic theories, such as Ibn Khaldun's concepts of Bedouin and civilisation, Sumner's notions of primitive and civilised societies, and Sumner's theory of response and challenge. He adapted elements of these theories to fit his research on Iraqi society, using them as methodological tools. Yet, his approach was not limited to dualities but was centred on three main principles.

Al-Wardi's research methodology is characterised by a social interpretive approach that moves beyond historical events to explore their ongoing processes, impacts, and continuities into the present. When Al-Wardi investigates specific historical incidents or social phenomena affecting society, he carefully selects elements that align with his research framework, thoroughly examining their historical roots and their influence on both past and present. For instance, in his analysis of tribal, ethnic, and sectarian conflicts, he contrasts historical and contemporary

contexts. Michel Foucault referred to Al-Wardi as a "social excavator," highlighting his ability to unearth hidden and obscure social phenomena that, despite their peculiar or unusual nature, possess significant general and comprehensive relevance.

Some considered it trivial and unimportant (16). Therefore, in summary, Al-Wardi's references were derived from most of his information and ethnographic materials from various sources, methods, and research techniques, which can be summarised in several points (17)

1. Al-Wardi relied on books of history, heritage, literature, and Arab social philosophy, as well as foreign books, especially those written by travellers and Orientalists, and on scientific propositions, documents and memoirs

2. He utilised his methodology by benefiting from his direct and indirect personal observations, as well as through his field studies and scientific journeys in many countries around the world, and through his continuous interactions with the general public. He was accustomed to frequenting markets, courts, and prisons, in addition to attending gatherings of scholars, writers, religious figures, craftsmen, and others. He believed that sociology is a humble science that derives its information from the common people, including the lowly, criminals, and the mob, because "these are the ones who reflect the social values in society."

3. The research and theses of students at the University of Baghdad were significantly beneficial and contained precise field social information. Additionally, the students came from various Arab and foreign countries, representing different social classes and levels, which made their theses rich in useful information about the social conditions characteristic of their countries.

4. In 1960, Iraqi television held a seminar with Al-Wardi titled "You Ask, We Discuss." This seminar garnered reactions and objections that revealed various aspects of social, political, and even psychological issues, which Al-Wardi took as a general reference for understanding the nature and specificity of Iraqi society. In conclusion, within the various schools of sociology, Al-Wardi adopted the interpretive approach attributed to Max Weber, the well-known German sociologist, whose methodology is based on forming an "ideal type."

"It aids in understanding the subjective meanings that individuals ascribe to their behaviours, attitudes, and goals, allowing for an introspection of what lies within their souls. Al-Wardi considers this a suitable method for understanding Iraqi society (18). Max Weber's interpretive approach significantly assists researchers in comprehending society; by observing people's behaviour in various settings, engaging in conversations with them, and paying attention to their thoughts and the meanings behind their actions. In contrast, Al-Wardi developed an ideal type of 'Bedouin' and 'civilisation' through experiments, observations, and historical studies, which enabled him to grasp the Iraqi personality (19). In this context, Al-Wardi critiques Marx's approach, expressing strong opposition to Marxism. In his critique, Al-Wardi asserts that Marxism places excessive emphasis on class while neglecting human nature, which is inclined toward self-interest. He views this as a flaw in the Marxist perspective. According to Al-Wardi, ultimately, a human being remains human, and as conditions improve and individuals free themselves from class exploitation, even when it appears they are striving for the common good, they will continue to pursue their personal interests. These interests are not solely material and

worldly; they also encompass non-material interests. For example, a person may seek to gain God's approval and attain paradise in the afterlife (20)."

"Secondly, the Positivist Methodology of Dr. Al-Tahir: Dr. Al-Tahir did not employ a single scientific methodological tool in his research and inquiry; rather, he utilised multiple methodologies. At times, he employed descriptive statistics when studying agricultural livelihood projects, at other times, he relied on official documents while examining the tribes of Iraq, and on other occasions, he drew on the experiences of various peoples when observing social phenomena, as seen in his studies on rural community development. Despite graduating from the University of Chicago, which is renowned for its symbolic interactionism, and having been mentored by some of its prominent researchers, he was neither negatively nor positively influenced by any of them, nor did he clarify the ideas of this approach. Furthermore, he did not adopt a single social theory to rely on in interpreting societal events, whether to support or reject them (21)."

In addition, Kareem Mohammed Hamza notes in his book "Sociological Mirrors" that Al-Tahir did not write a book on methodology, but he was the first to use social surveys through interviews with farming families in the context of studying the agricultural revolution in rural areas (1971). This was the first study in rural sociology. At the beginning of the 1960s, Al-Tahir presented an important methodological issue that still resonates in the writings of methodology scholars, relating to the cognitive and methodological dimensions of sociology. It is clear that Al-Tahir was influenced by his French professor Girifich, who focused on phenomenology as a cognitive source enriching the subject of sociology, highlighting the debate between integrative idealism and empiricism. It is known that phenomenology has a close relationship with Max Weber's theory of understanding, where the experiences of others become present in our experiences. The developments of actors and their goals are essential for understanding the situation, which later became an important element in the perspective of symbolic interactionism. Clearly, this study was part of Al-Tahir's interest in providing scientific material for his students (22). Additionally, in his study of Libyan society, he employed a micro approach, starting from small units up to larger units or the overall comprehensive development of society. In this context, he also used a comparative method between a stable community in the mountains (the Nafusa community) and the Tuareg community, which is a society of hunting, migration, and nomadism. In the first society, the researcher found a marginal civilisation that combined herding and agriculture, integrated with elements of the natural environment. Regarding the Tuareg, Al-Tahir explored their history, elaborating on the symbols of their daily lives, including clothing, food, and housing, as well as their value systems and customs, deconstructing the social structure characterised by a hierarchical class system of nobles, followers, and then slaves to the society(23).

In this context, Al-Tahir also employed a comparative methodology, examining a stable community in the mountains (the Nafusa community) alongside the Tuareg community, known for its hunting, migration, and nomadic lifestyle. In the first community, the researcher identified a marginal civilisation that integrated herding and agriculture with elements of the natural environment. As for the Tuareg, Al-Tahir delved into their history, providing detailed descriptions of the symbols of their daily lives, including clothing, food, and housing, as well as

their value systems and customs. He dissected the social structure, characterised by a hierarchical class system comprising nobles, followers, and slaves (23).

Dr. Ma'n argues that the lack of clarity and stability in Dr. Al-Tahir's sociological works stems from their failure to adhere to a rigorous scientific methodology. This methodology should involve techniques of induction, deduction, critique, evaluation, and the appraisal of social works, whether global, Arab, or Iraqi. Instead, Al-Tahir's approach appeared inconsistent, oscillating between conflicting theoretical frameworks. At times, he embraced conflictual-dialectical thought, while at other times, he adopted functionalist perspectives, and at yet other moments, he leaned towards idealistic thought.

And sometimes it adopts sensory and utilitarian thought, ultimately characterised by generality, comprehensiveness, and superficiality, far removed from the analysis and evaluation that are among the essential and fundamental requirements of a researcher and thinker. (24) Meanwhile, Dr. Hadi argues that most of what Dr. Al-Tahir wrote relied on historical and comparative methodologies, as well as statistical methods in the study he contributed to regarding the living project. Perhaps the important addition of Dr. Al-Tahir is that his style varied between high abstraction, especially in what he wrote about sociology in relation to phenomenology, empiricism, and the sociology of theatre, and between significant simplification, particularly in what he wrote about youth and marriage, comparing Iraqi girls with foreign ones; however, he was not successful in that comparison (according to Dr. Hadi). (25) Thirdly, the interactive dialectical methodology of Dr. Hatem Al-Kaabi. Kareem Mohammed Hamza describes Dr. Hatem Al-Kaabi as a distinguished professor, as he is the only one who adhered to his knowledge approach as an interactive-symbolic one, having written on various topics within this school, focusing his interests on theoretical studies. It is said that he conducted only one field study, yet despite his intensity and high rigidity, he listened to students and engaged them in discussions about scientific topics. Al-Kaabi is credited with being a pioneer in sociological production, as everything he wrote follows a specific knowledge and methodological framework that can be identified; it is an interactive-symbolic approach with a conflictual aspect. He employed the case study method in his studies, including a case study of the leadership of X, [and a study of social movements revolving around the awaited saviour. (26) In the first study, he focused on a social movement led by an African American named (one). Dr. Al-Kaabi summarises that study by stating that it tells the story of two leaderships, namely the leadership of (Fred) and the leadership of (elder). The former progressed from a street vendor to an official leader and then to a prophet or awaited saviour, reaching the peak of sanctity among his followers, where he became a god. As for (Ajh), the poor destitute who attended elementary school for only half a year in the first grade, he became a preacher and assisted (Fred) in his mission when he was...

(One) a messenger until when the other became a god and disappeared, he became (the elder) a prophet and is now called the prophet (elder) Muhammad, who has recently claimed divinity, as I have been informed. Dr. Al-Kaabi confirmed that studying this situation involves some conclusions and theoretical implications, and among those conclusions that can be taken as theoretical hypotheses, as Dr. Al-Kaabi emphasised, are the following:

1. Social interaction is creative; rituals, ceremonies, values, symbols, ideas, hopes, expectations, leadership, and new personalities have emerged that these individuals had no prior experience with.

2. Leadership is a role formed in the process of interaction among a group of people in a shared social situation, where this social interaction results in the formation of two social roles that gradually become specialised based on the mutual connections between those performing them. These two roles are the leader's role and the followers' role. Each of these roles has a conduct determined and governed by a range of influencing factors, including the nature of the social situation in which people live and the ongoing social interaction among them. The role may become absent or cease under certain circumstances that resist or eliminate it, as well as the morale of the followers on one hand and the personality of the leader on the other. The essence, source, and foundation of leadership reside in the souls of the people and what they feel regarding their basic needs.

(27) The other study is a study of social movements revolving around the awaited saviour, 1966, which is one of the important and intriguing synthetic studies. In this research, Al-Kaabi was able to present a synthetic overview characterised by strong and fluid style, a topic that has not been previously addressed by any of the pioneers in the Arab world. In this study, he employed a comparative method between Iraqi society and others. The term "awaited saviour" is a concept he borrowed from the scholar Ralph Linton, who stated that the social circumstances prepare people to expect a new era that satisfies their needs and ensures their stability and happiness. In this regard, researcher Ralph Linton affirms in his study on this topic that movements hoping for the appearance of an awaited saviour have emerged in several societies during times of distress, misery, and hardship. Linton sees that these movements resemble some popular movements that have emerged...

According to Linton himself, the so-called "magical folk movements" represent a form of escape from reality, which is an irrational escape. In any case, the idea of this research asserts that groups, as a result of their cultural interactions (for example, due to migration), experience a disruption in their social structure. Here, the idea of a saviour who restores that balance begins to emerge. Such a crisis, according to Al-Kaabi, is the reason for the emergence and proliferation of religious groups in the United States between the two World Wars. It is also the reason behind the rise of many new church groups and religious organisations among some of the lower-class individuals who have been affected by urban life, as their traditional rural ties, familiar values, and ways of living were torn apart.

The research concludes by stating, "I must emphasise that the principle of cultural and social interaction alone does not seem sufficient to explain the emergence of this type of movement; rather, persecution, injustice, discrimination, and vile intolerance against any group are significant factors that can motivate this group to sometimes lean in this direction." Additionally, Al-Kaabi studied phenomena that had not previously been thoroughly examined in scientific research, such as the concept of fascination, trends, and the unclear usage of certain words, movements, or gestures in Iraqi society. Al-Kaabi's language carried many academic techniques, which made his works analytically and methodologically impactful in field studies, more so than in popular dissemination. However, they had a direct influence on the phenomenological

interpretation of statistical results, despite Al-Kaabi being an adherent of the symbolic interactionism school in interpreting the statistical facts derived from field surveys.

Dr. Ma'n Khalil Omar notes that Dr. Al-Kaabi focused on the cognitive content of his approach regarding conflict interaction, which represents a new trend in the theory of symbolic interactionism. This is because most theories of symbolic interactionism have overlooked or neglected the phenomenon of social conflict. Furthermore, he did not follow his colleagues, such as Al-Wardi, Al-Tahir, and Abdul Jabbar Areeem, in studying rural issues with a focus on analysis and nomadism. He also did not address the topic of Iraqi identity, nor did he display quantitative or statistical analysis.

He stated that it is a mistake to believe that social sciences are similar to natural sciences, as Lindberg and others have done, for instance, by emphasising the statistical method. Additionally, Al-Kaabi criticised some researchers who insisted on the descriptive method exclusively. However, after this criticism, Al-Kaabi does not specify a particular methodology or research method that he adheres to, even though he had mentioned in the list of his works prepared for publication that he has a book on research methodologies (31).

## WORKS CITED

- The book "Introduction to Sociology," which is the first specialised book in sociology in Iraq, was published by al-Ahali Press in Baghdad in 1939.
- Abdul Fattah Ibrahim, \*Introduction to Sociology\*, op. cit
- Abd al-Fattah Ibrahim, \*Society and Marxism\*, p. 18.
- Ibid., p. 18.
- Abdul Jabbar Arim, \*The Nomadic Tribes in Iraq\*, op. cit., p. 4.
- Abdul Jabbar Arim, \*The Problem of Contemporary Arab Society\*, previous source,
- Abdul Jabbar Arim, \*The Problem of Arab Society\*,.
- Ali Al-Wardi, \*A Study in the Sociology of Islam\*, p. 17.
- Ali Al-Wardi, \*A Study in the Nature of Iraqi Society\*, previous source, p. 403.
- A Hundred Years with Al-Wardi\*, previous source, pp. 223-224.
- Ibrahim Al-Haidari, Al-Wardi, his personality, methodology, and ideas, previous source
- Kamran Rabiei, Understanding Iraqi Society: A Reading of Ali Al-Wardi (1913-1995), Faculty of Arts, Department of Sociology, Tarbiat University, Tehran, Iran.
- Ma'n Khalil Al-'Amar, Pioneers of Sociology in Iraq, Previous Source, pp. 108-109.
- Kareem Mohammed Hamza, Sociological Mirrors, previous source, pp. 93-95.
- Phenomenology, or the science of describing phenomena, was mentioned as a term in the book "The New Organon" by Francis Bacon (1764) and appeared in the writings of Kant and Hegel. However, Edmund Husserl was the first to use this term to designate an entire philosophy that rigorously and systematically embraces those meanings, especially in relation to the meanings or methodologies in sciences for the purpose of clarifying and defining them (Dr. Murad Wahia, Philosophical Dictionary, Cairo, Dar Al-Thaqafa Al-Jadida, 1979, p. 321).
- Abdul Latif Abdul Hamid Al-Ani, "The Pillars of Sociology," Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyya, 2016, Baghdad
- Kareem Mohammed Hamza, "Sociological Mirrors," previous source, pp. 135-152.
- Hadi Saleh Al-Eissawi or Hatim Al-Kaabi
- Hadi Saleh Al-Eisawy, "Horizons of Sociology in Iraq," previously mentioned source, p.