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Al-Farabi: the history and modernity

A prominent thinker of East, Abu Nasir al-Farabi was born in 870 in Farab city (now famous as Otrar), situated at the place of Aris river flowing into Syr Darya river (which corresponds nowadays to Otrarskiy region of the Eastern Kazakhstan). Al-Farabi gained fame as a great intellectual, encyclopedic scientist and philosopher.

At this period of time material and spiritual culture of Central Asia and Kazakhstan peoples has accomplished noticeable richness – especially with its tremendous architectural masterpieces in cities combining arts with architecture principles. Such monuments of those times as the treasure of Amurdarya, the golden decoration assembles from Issik, the Hellenic sculptures and ritons – special horn-like vessels made of ivory featuring - found in Old Nisa, the beautiful images of polychromic writings in Balalik-Tepe and Ajina-Tepe, the library of Otrar (that was considered the second after legendary Alexandria library as far as the number of its writings was concerned), Pejikent, Afrasiab and Shahrstan's luxurious palaces were so splendid and aesthetically complete as to be even today impressive on our feelings. All they are persuasive evidence of geniuses of the region's peoples. The developments in abstract thinking and philosophizing of this peoples were also proofed by the Zarathustra ideas and number of other religions spreading in the region, as well as the first chronicles being created, folk arts and poetry being flourishing.

From the middle of 7th century Central Asia and part of Kazakhstan were included in the huge Arabic Halifax. The pinnacle of the cultural development of this enormous region was reached in 9-11 centuries with the works of its thinkers and scientists becoming golden legacy of the world culture. The powerful cultural activity of the epoch consisted of philosophy and science, both of which enriched arts and poetry of Firdousy, Balasaguni, Rudaki, Hisrow, Hayam and was able to convey the aesthetic element. It is worth mentioning that it was Al-Farabi who became one of the first intellectuals to elaborate this synthesis of the aesthetic and the rational and even to bring first foundations of the modern scientific method.

The famous Kazakh scientist and investigator of al-Farabi works A.H. Kasimjanov said that “it was the Arab scientists who opened track to the scientific method of experimentation and measurement used in today's sciences. A. Gumbolt in turn regarded those who represented the science at that time and in that geography, including Al-Farabi, as actual creators of natural sciences”¹.

¹ A.H. Kasimjanov, Al-Farabi. – M:Misl, 1982, p. 159

It was Al-Farabi who by the virtue of his original ideas left indelible traces in the Medieval epoch writing in such spheres as the classification of sciences, logics, the theory of music, the critics of astrology, theoretical medicine, mathematics and political science. His views were lately borrowed by the following philosophers – such as ibn Sina and ibn Rushd – and afterwards became of great influence on the philosophy of Spinoza, affecting by the former the French philosophers. Therefore it could be assured that the philosophy of al-Farabi played a huge role in the development of social and philosophical ideas not only in the Near East or Middle East, but in Europe, too. As academic M.M. Hayrulaev points out, “the philosophy of al-Farabi was of decisive influence on the development of advanced social and philosophical thought in Northern Africa and “Arabic” Spain from 11th to 13th centuries, the prominent representatives of which Ibn Baja, Ibn Tufail and Ibn Rushd were”².

The name of al-Farabi has acquired wide popularity in most European countries even between 12th – 13th centuries as scientists started translating his philosophical treatises to old Hebrew and Latin languages. But it was the middle of 19th centuries that the cultural legacy of the thinker was not only published but exposed to scientific scrutiny as well. The mediaeval Europe got acquainted with classic ancient philosophy by the virtue of al-Farabi’s works to a marked degree. It is only during 12th century that his “Classification of sciences” was translated to the Latin language two times. In the period between 12th and 17th centuries that such works of “Alfarabius” as “About the meaning of the Intellect”, “The sources of questions”, “About the ways to happiness”, tritises on logics, comments on “Physics” and “Poetics” of Aristo and other were translated to the Latin for many times. Some tritises of al-Farabi came to us only in Latin translation without its original Arabic texts remaining³.

It is obvious now that influence of al-Farabi on the European science had showed itself through his followers ibn Sina and especially ibn Rushd. The teachings of the latter formed basis for new French and Italian philosophy of 13 and 14th centuries. Such great persons of Medieval Eastern European Philosophy as R. Bacon or D. Scott used to benefit from the treatises of al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Rushd and other muslim philosophers when writing on different issues. The works of al-Farabi would attain such level of authority as to be model for the treatises of Spinoza⁴. I. Madkur also mentions the ideological affinity of these two thinkers regarding such issues as the role of reason and the prophecy⁵. Also there is a lot of similarity between the two in respect with social and political issues, for example, in the issue of attaining the common-for-all happiness, of goals, functions and the forms of governmental management and other issues. Spinoza, just like al-Farabi, proceeds in his ideas from the “natural” nature of man and think that the meaning of state be providing each man with the capacity to use its reason and attain

² M.M. Hayrulaev, The worldview of al-Farabi and his importance in the history of philosophy. – Tashkent, 1967, p.325

³ R. Walter, Arabic Transmission of Greek Thought to Medieval Europe. “Bulletin of John Raylands Library”. Manchester, 1945, vol. 29, N 1; N. Re s c her. Studies in Arabic Philosophy. Pittsburgh, 1968, p. 149

⁴ Academic B.G. Gafurov, A

⁵ I. Madkur, La place d’al-Farabi dans l’ecole philosophique musulmane, Paris, p. 207-208

freedom and happiness⁶. It is also worth mentioning astonishing likeness between the notion of the society of al-Farabi, which considers the latter to be oneness of individualistic humane desires and the idea of “the social contract” of J.-J. Rousseau. Nicholas, Shelling, Bergson and Steiner could spoke of “the intuitive knowledge” centuries after al-Farabi had done. Nicholas, Leibniz or Spencer were to speak of man like a microcosm and cosmos like a man only hundreds of years after al-Farabi had done. As for his consistent ethical system of views built exceptionally on the reason, it was only in early 18th century that something alike had been worked out in the philosophy of I.Kant. It is also important to mention that almost all the westerns knew about the ideas of Aristo in the Medieval period was due to those works of al-Farabi, ibn Sina, ibn Rushd which transfer and commented on the Aristotelian legacy.

In this sense it could be easily argued that al-Farabi became the connecting bridge between the cultures of the West and East. It is his works that inherited the main part of the ancient legacy but even developed and enriched it.

Famous kazakh investigator of al-Farabi works A.H. Kasimjanov mentions that “The inheritance of al-Farabi which encompassed diverse cultural traditions is the best disproof of the europocentrism and asiocentrism ideas’ consistency, for it is mutual ideas-borrowing and joint influencing, following of each other, struggle and so on that takes place in the advance of different cultures, it is not a simple analogy. This interrelations weren’t of some abstract mutual nature but, more importantly, lead to tangible growth and affluence of each one”⁷.

According to another famous kazakh philosopher A. Nisanbaev, “Al-Farabi made the greatest credit in solving the problem of understanding, founding and realization of the cultural dialog between the antiquity and the Arabic-speaking mideavel East. He had a talent to organically combine incongruent cultural traditions ” He was able to work out a new method which allowed him to include these traditions in a constructive dialog. This was the method of commenting of the Second Teacher”⁸.

In the course of time European scientists of the second half of 19 and the beginning of 20th century contributed in the studies of al-Farabi works. In the second half of 19th century the German scientist M. Steinshneider published number of works on spiritual Arabic-written culture of the Medieval East; than Fridrih Detriziy published in 1890 arabic texts of eight philosophical treatises of al-Farabi on the basis of the handwrites of the Second Teacher preserved in London, Laden and Berlin. De Bur was another European scientist who studied the philosophy of al-Farabi, having become the author of “The history of the philosophy of Islam” published in German and English languages. There also have been many French scientists who investigated the Medieval Arabic-written philosophy, including al-Farabi works such as I. Forget, S. Dugat, L. Luther, S. Munk, E. Renan, I. Finnegen and others. Especially could be mentioned the work of E. Renan named “Averroes and Averroism” (Paris, 1952). In 1930-1935 famous

⁶ The history of philosophy, I v., M: The Academia of science of the USSR, 1957, p. 420

⁷ A.H. Kasimjanov, Al-Farabi. – M:Misl, 1982, p. 12

⁸ Al-Farabi and development of the Eastern philosophy. – Astana, 2005, p. 110

French orientalist R. Erlanger published in Paris basic treatise of al-Farabi on music “The Grand Book on Music”” translated into French in two-volumed book, which brought a great contribution in the studies of al-Farabi. As we know, the beginning of 20th century the studies of the cultural legacy of al-Farabi continued as a result of renewed interest of the West towards the eastern culture. The works of such acknowledged orientalists as A. Metz, D. Massinon, R. Blusher, A. Masse, F. Gabrieli, E. fon Grunebaum, F. Koplston and many others. Also we cannot but point out to the outstanding contribution made by the Russian orientalsts and philosophers such as I. Krachkovsky, E. Bertels and B. Bartold.

There are great number of literature about al-Farabi published in Great Britain, Spain, the United States of America and other countries. The interest to the cultural legacy of the great thinker of the East is huge all over the world, and, of course, in Kazakhstan. It is worth saying that in 1975 in occasion with the 1100 years anniversary of al-Farabi three international conference have been held in three cities. The conferences were named as follow: the one in Moscow as “Al-Farabi and the world civilization”, the one in Almaty as “Al-Farabi: development of the science and culture in the eastern countries” and the one in Bagdad as “Al-Farabi and the humane civilization”. In these international conferences the tendency into expanding scientific and cultural cooperation between various peoples of the world in the name of integrating everything progressive and democratic existing in the spiritual values of the past could be clearly witnessed. All this will - without a doubt - help out the fuller reviving of the Second Teacher of the East’s legacy. Now there is a large work carried out in our republic Kazakhstan in order to translate and study the philosophical treatises and comments of al-Farabi, the evidence of which could be seen in the creation in 1975 of the center of the studies of al-Farabi’s legacy in affiliation with the Institute of philosophy and jurisprudence directed by the professor of A.H. Kasimjanov. Such famous scientists of Kazakhstan as A. Mashani, M. Burabaev, E. Harenko, K. Tajikova, B. Osherovich, B. Tayjanova, A. Kubesov and number of the scientists from Russia such as B. Gafurov, B. Sagadeev, Yasherovich and others have participated in the centre’s activities. As a result a series of such treatises of al-Farabi as “The philosophical treatises”, “The social and ethical treatises”, “The logical treatises”, “The mathematical treatises”, “The comments on Ptolemy’s “Almagest”, “About the reason and science”, “The historical and philosophical treatises”, “The treatises on the natural science” and “The treatises about music and poetry” were prepared to publishing.

In the framework of the program “The cultural legacy” within a series “The philosophical legacy of the Kazakh people from the ancient times up to the modernity” two volumes of the al-Farabi and another volume of al-Farabi treatises within a series “The world’s philosophical legacy” were published.

In 1991 the name of al-Farabi has been given to the leading university of Kazakhstan – the Kazakh National University. In 1993 in the same university the center of the scientific research of al-Farabi’s legacy was opened and up to now continues its works.

In the conclusion of our report we would like to stress the following idea: the works of gifted persons who gained prominence in some field of human activity if scrutinized carefully exemplifies the entire epoch in which they lived. However Abu Nasr al-Farabi not only represents “the face” of his age but at the same time represents perpetual aspiration of the humanity towards the perfection. The issues arisen by him are still quite relevant for the modern world. The resolution of these issues will aid the further rapprochement of humanity to the ideals of the intercultural dialog between the East and the West.