

Towards a Relevant Social Science

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Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science: Responses to Eurocentricism

by Syed Farid Alatas;

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This work a data-rich argument for much needed theoretical, academic and administrative corrections to the currently prevalent western hegemonic social science modes and methods in the world over and the Asian contexts in particular. It is a definitive work that should be prompting further research.

Alatas makes a dispassionate introductory argument for a considered re-look at the prevalence of western sociological, academic and intellectual hegemony. While there may have been politico-historical reasons for this hegemonic representation in the past, there is a need to refashion intellectual traditions today. Therefrom the author moves further with a brief for offsetting the existing western intellectual bias through the ‘revival’ of the non-western native-traditional sociological themes and theories in mainstream teaching, research and as also in the ‘social development and social change’ policies and programmes of the US and its institutions and agencies. Alatas contests and refutes the unjust intellectual stance and stead of the western scholastic community - meaning the German, the French, the British and the American – which, since the past two centuries has either assumed or been wrongly acclaimed as founding ground of .the earliest and the ‘most scientific’ of the social-sciences.

Beginning with a critical reviewing of the earlier western social-science studies and theorizing – that have reference to one or the other non-western societal contexts or thoughts - Alatas reasons that the earliest and the earlier western readings into the non-western Native data were in no way scientific because both the Orientalist and the early European observational, conceptual and theoretical generalizations as regards the Asian

societies of the times can very well be proved to be faulty either on the basis cultural-egocentric prejudices or that of scholarly-insufficiency or inappropriateness.

Pointing to the fact of the perpetuation of the above-said prejudices Alatas cites the fact of the illogical intellectual discounting and dismissal of the Eastern indigenous 'sociologies' by the current western scholars and even worse, by the native scholars themselves, influenced by their western orientation or western dependency. He cites many Chinese, Japanese, Filipino and west Asian scholars of the 19th and early 20th centuries who have put forth their counter-arguments to the 'Eurocentric' bias by way of critiques of the modern western sociological 'classical' treatises of Durkheim and Marx and Max Weber who claim for themselves a very high degree of scientific accuracy. Of these critical scholars Alatas cites Jose Rizal (Philippines, 1861-1896), Benoy Kumar Sarkar (India 1887-1949) and Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) as among those very significant modern non-western sociological thinkers well worth reckoning by the Asian academia.

Logically enough eurocentrism as meaning a predominantly euro-centred cultural and sociological perspective and its formalized academic pursuits in the west and its various colonial non-western contexts the world over is the author's reference point for his discursive thesis. A well-reasoned critique of the pros and cons of the historical imposition of western-specific social science on non-western societies is presented, mapping out an alternative logical-format with various sets of technical terms for furthering the needed revision, revitalization and reinvention of the non-western indigenous social science curriculum so as to make it more culturally real and empirically actual.

In sum the theoretical contents of S F Alatas' proposed alternative sociological discourse stipulates that the new research teaching and applied 'sociological discipline' be indigenous or native in its empirical and historical database. Equally importantly, it is theoretically objective enough to sociologically account for the so acclaimed credits and the critiques of all the known social-science liturgy of other societies, western and non-western alike. Alatas is thinking and aiming at no less than a valid meta-sociology.

It is of particular interest that Alatas' proposed new mode and method 'tool-kit' for achieving the said 'alternative' sociological discourse' is comprehensively *qualitative* and is in consonance with his agenda for a set of alternative non-Western sociological discourses that would not just be more scientific in just an 'objective rational' sense, but be as much culturally relevant and aesthetically complete. The last attribute is perhaps the most difficult to comprehend and attain.

To factorize, Alatas thesis 'Relevancy' is considered as the most crucial factor for both the recognition of the eurocentric-anamolies in the non-western contexts as also towards bettering the discourse towards a higher intellectual plane and a better empirical utility. The factor of relevance Alatas says is different from objectivity in the sense of not being just facts per se, but facts as the prevalent 'lived-in' realities past or present of any given cultural context. And in this sense the concepts relevance and its absence the irrelevance are as much 'inclusive' and 'not exclusive' of the subjective value factor of particular context.

This proposal by Alatas appears to be in virtual opposition to the much advocated and so claimed subjective value-free objectivity or 'scientific rationality', a contention at the plane of Theory of Knowledge proper that Alatas relates to Karl Mannheim.

Alatas discusses many instances of 'irrelevancy' that is found in the sociological study and research literature of modern non-western societies which, owing to their colonization to the west have had to accept and perpetuate the Eurocentric and the later British and North American sociology. Religion, for instance, has all along been studied in the non-western contexts and so, only on the basis of the Christian Church-centered perspective and juxtaposed with the temple-centered in the non western contexts which is neither philosophically/theologically nor empirically true of either Islam or Hindu-Indic Religions or those of China and Japan.

Alatas analyses the 'irrelevance factor' as being caused by the phenomenon of the captive mind predicament of the non-western scholars. Captive mind, a concept cited by the analyst Syed Hussein Alatas [1950] a Malaysian sociologist refers to "an uncritical and imitative mind dominated by an external source whose thinking is deflected from an independent perspective" and by this definition the 'irrelevancy' fault a consequence of the captive mind is as much a fact of all the various contexts and levels of academic and

authoritative western-initiated sociological work such as problem selection, conceptualization, analysis, generalization, description, explanation, and interpretation.

Alatas also speaks of serious adverse consequences of intellectual 'irrelevancy' in the western hegemonic non-western sociological academic pursuits and activist 'developmental' research and programmes by the US and the NGOs. Scrutinising the issue in the light of Mannheim's Theory of Knowledge perspective and Foucault's Power Theory, Alatas argues for an urgent need for a discontinuation of the intellectually invalid, culturally irrelevant and humanly damaging western-hegemonic 'social scientific enterprise' and to do all the needful for an 'ushering-in' of the more sensible and more sensitive non-western sociological academics and activism. Alatas warns that

[The] 'irrelevance at all these levels leads to a social science, which we understand from the theories of Orientalism. Academic- dependency and Post-colonial Criticism empowers others [Western social scientists, academic institutions, funding agencies, students, etc] and not its practitioners [Third world social scientists or those on whose behalf they speak, that is, the 'natives', subaltern groups, etc.]. Those who are empowered are 'colonizers' 'neo-colonizers'; transnational capital and authoritarian states, whether this is done through the denigration of natives or the worship of capital.

Alatas duly acknowledges and cites the works and earnest critical attempts of many modern-day social scientists of Southeast Asian contexts that have confronted a western-thesis or have themselves put forth claims and suggestions for 'alternative social science'. Thoughts and thesis of Alatas Sr. – father and uncle, sociological thinkers in their own right - have been cited as source, support or substantiation for the author's more formalized proposal.

In the Indian context Alatas briefly discusses the contributions of Kosambi as regards his critique on Karl Marx and the 'Orientalist-approach' in general and that of Andre Beteille as on his disagreement with Dumont's sociological thesis *Homo Heirarchicus* where Beteille objects to the westerner's faulty assumption - that the factor of hierarchy is exclusively an Indian social-fact in contrast to the social equity factor which he similarly claims to be an exclusive western-characteristic. Alatas gives credit to M N Srinivas for his valuable 'indigenous' sociological concept 'Sanskritization' which he firmly believes has the potential for being developed into a larger theory. Alatas cites Binoy Kumar

Sarkar as a very relevant indigenous sociological theorist particularly as a 'contemporary' of Durkheim-Marx-Weber.

The Khaldunian Theory is what Alatas finds as an achieved instance of a credible alternative Asian social science discourse. This histo-graphical work of the Arab scholar Ibn Khaldun [1332-1406], who lived and wrote before August Comte, is a meta-sociological theory spanning wide with issues like Man-Ecology relation, social development and state-formation in very general terms and that on the basis of specific cultural [indigenous] data.

In total agreement with the need for the said paradigm shift and in admiration for S. F. Alatas' plea towards the same, I leave the reader with the author's own note:

It is necessary that there be an active minority of social scientists in each of the major universities in Asia, who are concerned with some of the problems that have been raised above, who are interested in revisiting the diagnostic and prescriptive literature of the past, and who have the interest and will to generate new concepts, categories, methods and techniques, and research agenda.

The quest for relevant social science is a liberating project. It is a historically located, contra-colonial and neo-colonial discourse. Its critical and emancipatory tone is a very strong reason to maintain its allegiance to the project.

