

Malaysia: Thoughts of the late Syed Hussein Alatas

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Jan 23, 2007, is the day my grandfather passed away. Fourteen years have passed since then. Four years ago, I wrote a piece on the occasion of his tenth death anniversary. The piece was more personal than academic, focusing on the impact he had on me.

This time, I would like to share his thoughts on intellectual development in the Third World and what was needed to create a more progressive society. In particular, I will focus on his ideas for what we may call the School of Autonomous Knowledge.

The School of Autonomous Knowledge can be defined as a school of thought where theory building, concept formation, application of methods and recognition of definite phenomena are undertaken in a way that is relevant to a specific society and in contradiction to Eurocentric, nationalist or sectarian interests.

Embedded in this school is an autonomous social science tradition, which I will discuss towards the end of this piece. Alatas' ideas for such a social science tradition can be located in his thoughts as he was observing the backwardness of developing societies at both the political-economic and knowledge production levels.

The latter led him to think of the problem of the captive mind in developing societies. By the captive mind, Alatas was referring to the mindset of scholars in developing societies who uncritically accept Western scholarly literature without being discerning or selective in their reading.

When discussing social problems unique to their society, captive minds lack the ability to think critically or on their own and are instead held "captive" by Eurocentric ways of thinking. The problem of the captive mind is unique to the non-Western world.

While captive minds exist in the West as well, social scientists there are hardly trained in non-Western sciences or trained by non-Western scholars in non-Western languages. Hence, a captive mind in the West does not exist in the context of domination by the non-Western world.

Alatas divided the problems of any community into two categories: the subjective and the objective. While subjective problems concerned the individual, the objective referred to problems that were found beyond the individual. The captive mind was the most pressing subjective problem in Asian societies.

On the other hand, corruption was the most pressing objective problem in its many manifestations. For Alatas, solving the subjective problem of the captive mind was a prerequisite to dealing with objective problems such as economic underdevelopment and the attitude of political leaders towards corruption.

Alatas noted that the backwardness of Asian and African societies was caused more by subjective

factors than objective problems. Objective problems, even if seemingly insurmountable, could be overcome if society could restrict the influence of the captive mind.

Although the captive mind was originally used to talk about academic dependency on Western scholarly literature, it has also manifested itself in more practical areas of life such as development planning, local politics and religious affairs.

A captive mind in the area of development planning adopts the language of “change” and “efficiency” when thinking about economic development, while dehumanising students and workers as “human capital” useful only as input in accelerating economic growth.

Lessons on how to be a good, ethical human being are foregone as countries in the developing world simply ape development models in the First World in the narrow pursuit of economic growth.

Syed Farid Alatas (personal communication, January 2021) also expanded the concept of the captive mind by noting its manifestations within political and religious institutions in Malaysia. In the political realm, racial exclusivist mindsets within some segments of the Malay scholarly community constitute a blind imitation of the discourse of ultranationalist Malay parties and politicians.

Whatever hatred ultranationalist parties may spout is simply repeated by scholars and others without questioning the origins of such hate speech. In the religious sphere, the anti-Shia discrimination and stereotypes prevalent among some Sunni Muslim scholars is the result of an uncritical acceptance of anti-Shia hate speech disseminated by religious authorities. In these examples of local domination, there is no attempt or wherewithal to think critically about race or religion. Instead, the opinions of a few are adopted wholesale.

Regardless of where and how the captive mind manifests itself, what is needed to counter it is the creative mind. Only the creative mind can overcome local and international forms of domination and facilitate the emergence of intellectuals and progressive leadership to create a more progressive society.

The desired outcome of such an emergence for Alatas was socialism. His book “Islam dan Sosialisme” was written during a time when socialism was dismissed as atheistic and un-Islamic by segments of the Islamic resurgence movement during the 1970s.

Yet, an equal outrage against the excesses of capitalism did not exist. This section of the Islamic resurgence movement was held “captive” by the capitalist model while disregarding any alternative framework for nation-building.

Alatas showed that Islam and socialism were not very dissimilar; Islam contained many socialist elements such as treating people equally regardless of gender, religion, or socio-economic background.

Harnessing the creative mind and restricting the influence of the captive mind should lead to the development of an autonomous social science tradition. Only such a tradition can foster the creative mind. Writing in the context of Asian societies, Alatas defined an autonomous Asian social science tradition as the “linking of social science research and thinking to specifically Asian societies”.

This means raising problems, creating concepts and applying methods in a creative manner where one may be influenced by but is not intellectually dominated by another tradition. Such an endeavour has to take into account the specificities of an Asian society.

However, having a creative mind does not mean being antagonistic towards the West. Quite the

contrary, a creative mind engages in a process of selective and independent assimilation of knowledge from the West.

A creative mind also aspires to higher intellectual standards by comparing the local and regional social sciences with those in the West. Alatas himself rightfully acknowledged the contributions of the West insofar as Western socialism fought for the rights of vulnerable workers, opposed imperialism and advocated for a more equal distribution of wealth.

Building upon his clarion call for an autonomous social science tradition, Alatas' intellectual endeavour included the founding of the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore in 1967.

On one level, the department was meant to be an important platform for scholars to discuss the developments and problems of the Malay world, a region of historical and sociological significance.

However, more importantly, Alatas sought to encourage the development of alternative and multi-disciplinary approaches to the Malay world in terms of its history, economy, politics and society.

This meant a critical application of concepts, theories and methods suitable to the region rather than a blind imitation of ideas adopted from Western scholarly literature. We can say that the Malay Studies department was a kick-start to the development of a school of thought that we may today call the School of Autonomous Knowledge.

Although Alatas did not speak of a school of thought, his ideas for an autonomous social science tradition have influenced scholars for two generations. Scholars of the Malay world such as Chandra Muzaffar, Shaharuddin Maaruf, Syed Farid Alatas, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Norshahril Saat and Azhar Ibrahim are all part of this autonomous social science tradition in their various fields and can be said to represent the School of Autonomous Knowledge.

Subsequently, young scholars of my generation in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and beyond are incorporating this critical tradition in their scholarship as they embark on dissertations and other projects.

The influence of Alatas' thought is not limited to this region. Just as the Frankfurt School and Chicago School have influenced scholars beyond Europe and North America, so too has the School of Autonomous Knowledge influenced scholars beyond the Malay world in regions such as Africa and South Asia.

Finally, we can also say that the School of Autonomous Knowledge is likely the only school of thought in the human sciences to have emerged in the Malay world.

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