

Shifting Discourses in Social Sciences: Nexus Of Knowledge And Power.

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Abstract – This paper explicates the general development of social sciences discourses in the developing societies in general and the Malaysian experience in particular. The basic premise of this paper is that all civilizations have potential sources of social science theorizing. Developing societies have often relied on Western or Eurocentric knowledge as a consequence of colonization process, intellectual imperialism, as well as forces of modernization and its dependencies, as well as globalization rhetoric. Specifically the paper attempts to elaborate on the impasse in social science as it relates to domination of Eurocentric knowledge and the marginalization of local knowledge. What has led to this situation and how can it be overcome? Our approach to power and knowledge involves a multi-scalar analysis of the functioning of power relations that impinged on the social science discipline as experienced in the developing societies, with particular reference to Malaysia. This approach offers a better understanding of the social sciences contextual development and its institutional capacity for self-empowerment in localizing knowledge. In framing this paper, insights on captive mind by Alatas and the notion of modern power by Foucault are utilized.

Keywords – social sciences, captive mind, modern power, localization of knowledge, Malaysia.

I. INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of modern science in the West, its orientation has dominated the intellectual landscape of the world, both in the natural science and social science disciplines. To a large extent much of the Western discourse of social science knowledge has been viewed and taken for granted as universal knowledge. However recent developments within the social science fraternity have witnessed changes not only within the Western mainstream discourse but also outside the mainstream. Within the Western epistemology the shift from positivist to post-positivist critical school has seen the proliferation of approaches and methodologies contesting the stability of its conventional paradigm. Amidst this bandwagon effect within the Western context, movements from outside namely non-Western alternative discourse have appeared to further pose challenges to the dominance of Western discourse in social science disciplines. As such the key questions that this paper explores are: what are contexts and reasons for the state of dominance of Western knowledge in the developing countries? And what measures have been taken towards remedying this situation?

In framing this paper, the relationship between knowledge and power, and insights on captive mind by

Alatas and the notion of modern power by Foucault are utilized. This paper argues for a shift from a partial version of globalization of knowledge (read as Western universal claims to knowledge) of social science to a state of localization of knowledge (read as local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, decolonized knowledge etc). This is based on the basic premise of this paper that all civilizations (read countries or local areas) have potential sources of social science theorizing that can provide alternative discourses as local knowledge relevant to their context [1]. As such with the addition and complementary role of localization of knowledge one can fulfill the need for a comprehensive globalization of knowledge. Currently the popular version of universal Western knowledge is wrongly promoted as global knowledge and only reflects partially the global scope (i.e. Western context only), due to the unequal power relations in knowledge creation.

This paper begins with the issue of social science impasse in knowledge domination, followed by the framework of knowledge and power, the state of affairs of social sciences discourses in the developing societies, and finally steps/measures taken to overcome the dominance of Western discourse.

II. THE SOCIAL SCIENCE IMPASSE

This section attempts to elaborate on the impasse in social science as it relates to domination of Eurocentric knowledge and the marginalization of local knowledge. During the post-colonial condition, the rubric of modernization and capitalist development path has brought about pervasive social change processes that developing societies have experienced. These processes have brought about many problems, as well as provide opportunities. In order to understand the problems that beset the developing societies, one can find the reliance of developing countries on Western knowledge where such discourses were prevalent in the social scientific community of these developed societies. Besides that, social science was institutionalized in the West and became available to the wider world community at large. Developing societies in post-colonial conditions were also preoccupied in survival issues and fulfilling mundane basic needs. Inevitably, as a consequence of this situation, developing societies were basically emulating and copying Western knowledge by way of verifying theories and concepts in social science literature, without much questioning or critically examining the assumptions and the underlying ideological framework.

There were discontent in the developing society's scientific community as to the inadequacy of social scientific concepts and its associated modernist discourse [2]. This impasse is not only at the level of understanding appropriate social scientific concepts but also appropriate development approaches suited to the developing society's context. What actually went wrong?

Theories and concepts from the West do not appear to meet or explain the state of affairs in the developing societies. The normative concerns of people in question are not addressed, instead presuppositions from the West does not cohere with the needs of the developing societies. The developing societies were still suffering and experiencing underdevelopment even though numerous concepts and theories have been promulgated. Questions arise as to whether it is simply because the domination of Western ideas as a consequence of the training acquired by local researchers, or simply lack of creative locals to venture into developing local knowledge and address local issues and formulate appropriate local social action. Another concern is the false belief that only Western concepts and theorizing are universal, and therefore ought to be tested and proven before theorizing is done. This was because the deductive convention that was prevalent in the academia then requires the coverage of literature which inevitably was dominated by the written tradition of the West. As a consequence the natural outcome of this process is the insidious citation of the literature from the West and the consolidation of the Western knowledge and further dominance of Western knowledge is reinforced. How can the developing societies overcome this impasse of the social scientific concepts and framework?

III. POLITICS OF KNOWLEDGE: NEXUS OF KNOWLEDGE AND POWER

To understand the state of social science knowledge development in the developing societies, the relationship between knowledge and power is explicated. Knowledge is known to shape power as illustrated in the following quote:

Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, 'becomes true.' Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation and the disciplining of practice. Thus, 'There is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations'[3]

Since the developing societies are dependent on Western countries for knowledge transfer and imitation, this relationship is itself suggestive of the power of the Western countries over the developing societies, particularly in dealing with discourses relating to social science and technology. Foucault offered methodologies in examining power and power relations by reexamining the 'foundations' of critical modern thought and the conditions through which modern societies operate [4]. This approach is relevant in looking at "how the subject is constituted in power relations" [4] where developing countries are often found to emulate

Western and modernist thought without realizing the epistemological foundations underpinning some of the models. Foucault's "contribution to social theory provides both methodological and substantive challenges to the social science" [4].

However, what Foucault was trying to argue is not the hard power (sovereign power) that the Western colonizers have been able to subjugate physically the developing societies, but the soft power (or modern power), in a more pervasive and subtle manner [5]. According to Foucault this modern power or commonly referred to as disciplinary power, operates in a capillary-like nature, where power "reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, their discourses, learning processes and everyday lives"[6]. Though subtle, this disciplinary power functions to control, i) with technologies of regulation and surveillance, ii) changing patterns of thought and behavior through techniques of training, iii) rational rather than ritual in orientation, and iv) tend to take place within specific institutions [7]. The infiltration of this disciplinary power illustrates the role of core states or developed states, that even after the decolonization process they still have control over developing states in the realm of ideas and institutional practices. This domination of the subconscious is captured vividly by Syed Hussein Alatas in his concept of captive mind [8]. Basically captive mind represents the extension of colonial mentality or categories by the recipient country in relation to the application of social sciences from the developed states or the West, without adaptation or critique of the adopted concepts and methodologies, suggesting the continued domination of Western ideas.

Syed Hussein Alatas's goal was to seek for an indigenous social science discourse that accounts for a socio-historical context, dismissing the imitation of Western concepts by indigenous scholars [9]. Syed Hussein Alatas asserts that captive mind of the subject is not necessarily intentionally imposed by the colonial or Western discourse but the subjects (colonized or developing countries) themselves submit unconsciously, or are unaware of their own captivity [9]. This idea in another sense coheres with the notion of cultural hegemony as espoused by Gramsci's notion of how domination and control are achieved by consent. Foucault uses the notion of govern mentality to specify the complex tactics, procedures and apparatuses that dominant modern states used to control and influence the conduct of individuals by using truth, knowledge, and political economy, rather than force [10]. Thus, the art of governing by nurturing voluntary compliance in subjects is achieved through modern or disciplinary power.

In fact Foucault's notion of modern disciplinary power can be extended as a dominant force through various processes of institutionalization and normalization within the political, economic, as well as cultural sphere. These processes have profound and long lasting effect in constraining alternative forms of discourse and knowledge amongst the developing countries. However Foucault is aware that dominance of knowledge can lead to contestations [4]. This suggests that the dominance of

mainstream Western discourse of knowledge can lead to subjects seeking alternative discourse which can act as a destabilizing power of the dominant Western discourse. This counterforce provides hope for the insertion of localization of knowledge in the universal or global knowledge frontier. Thus, Foucault approach offers a better understanding of the social sciences contextual development of domination as well as its institutional capacity for self-empowerment.

A. Localization of knowledge as empowering

Localization of knowledge entails knowledge derived from social theorizing obtained within local historical and cultural context. This local sphere can be a locality or national sphere other than the mainstream or exogenous discourses and/or other forms of non-dependent knowledge systems. Syed Farid Alatas has provided a broad view of alternative discourse (read as localization of knowledge) as encompassing indigenizing knowledge, decolonizing knowledge, endogenous intellectual creativity, and autonomous social science tradition [11]. Syed Farid Alatas refers to these alternatives as a “turn to philosophies, epistemologies, histories, and the arts other than those of the western tradition” [11]. Here we might add the civilizational wisdoms, local cultural values and precepts as possible sources of social theorizing in the process of localization of knowledge.

In order for the local knowledge to be part of the universal knowledge, it has to enact alternative (read local) social theorizing that provide a platform for the emergence of new knowledge, either challenging or contesting existing universal knowledge. Once the local knowledge has managed to destabilize existing universal knowledge, it will be able to gain power or empower as part of universal social science. Thus this knowledge-power matrix as espoused by Foucault can be both constraining and liberating to the developing societies [4]. The hegemony of Western centric discourse through modern power (i.e. disciplinary power) experienced by developing societies has constrained further development of local or alternative discourse. But one can also posit the potential for local knowledge to liberate by acquisition of power by destabilizing the mainstream universal ideas from the gaze of the contemporary Western discourse. Thus the local knowledge can empower local capacity by providing agency for local action that can sustain long term development.

IV. STATE OF AFFAIRS OF SOCIAL SCIENCE DISCOURSE

Our approach to discuss the state of affairs in social science discourse utilizes the relationship of power and knowledge at different levels. This involves a multi-scalar analysis of the functioning of power relations that impinged on the social science discipline as experienced in the Western world and developing societies.

Social sciences and humanities have witnessed epistemological and ontological shifts in viewing their subject matter. Approaches in social sciences and humanities entail perspectives, theories and methodologies. These approaches encompass a better understanding in a subject

matter. Early approaches characterized by positivist and objectivist views have been challenged by the contemporary subjectivist and constructivist approaches. These contemporary approaches have given greater emphasis to non-essentialist, anti-foundational, hermeneutic and agency viewpoints. Social sciences and humanities as a broad non-physical science discipline has experienced paradigm shift from modern to postmodern social theory, positivist to post-positivist views, and structuralist/realist theory to critical theory [12].

These broad shifts are also encountered in individual disciplines like sociology, geography, international relation, language and others. The shift from disciplinary to interdisciplinary approaches complements the area studies approach as these issues and phenomena are not single subject matters but entail multiple dimensions and disciplines [13]. Responding to problems and contemporary social transformations require widening opportunities for interdisciplinary approaches. Interdisciplinary approaches entail the integration of different disciplines into cohesive framework to tackle issues and social action. This is a challenge for the social sciences and humanities to bring in strength from diverse discipline into this framework. Most of these approaches has witnessed the adoption of western epistemology and basically transported it to the developing societies.

The various disciplines in social science practiced in the developing societies have mainly borrowed knowledge and technologies from the Western discourse (read Euro-American or more specifically Anglo-Saxon tradition). This is because of various reasons : 1) most developing societies were either colonized directly or dependent on Western powers for political support, 2) even after post-independence era, the dominance of Western powers through varying international institutions has made possible the transfer of Western knowledge and education to the recipient developing societies, especially the Anglo-Saxon tradition dominance through the linguistic dominance of English language and the United Nation’s agencies network, 3) modernization and industrialization strategies modeled after the Western capitalist path in developing countries required the acquisition of knowledge and education from the Western tradition, 4) the psychological state of low self-esteem amongst the academics, bureaucrats and business elites in developing societies resulted in their unconscious submission to the Western prowess in written tradition and technological edge.

The political-economic dependence of developing countries on the Western countries has consequently led to the dominance of the Western discourse on knowledge. The developing societies (read including Eastern societies) went on an emulation mode in copying in somewhat ‘lock-stock-barrel’ fashion the concepts, theories and methods adopted from the Western counterpart [14]. The lack of representation of developing scholars and their contribution to new knowledge amongst the scientific community [15] is not only frowned upon by Eastern and Southern counterpart, but also within the Western context as well. Critical feminist epistemology and social epistemology have tended to

question the universalizing tendencies of scientific discourse of the West and the exclusion of local and subjugated knowledge as a consequence of linguistic and dominant power relations in the production of knowledge, some of which are often linked to market and state influence of the developed states. One can trace the root of the emulation models on modern thought of post-colonial state in most developing countries to the dominance of the pragmatic-analytic tradition of Anglo-Saxon tradition (particularly the nexus of US, Britain and Australia) in the global academic arena. It was only in the postwar period (i.e. WW II) that the West witnessed shifts in paradigm and integration of continental European historical and philosophical discourses. The offshoot of this integration is the nurturing of the Marxian critical tradition of Frankfurt School that led to establishment of critical theory. This critique coupled with the postmodernist movements has led to the reformation of social theory from within the West in the form of dialectic with the Anglo-Saxon dominance and its hegemonic role in academic discourse. What most developing countries like Malaysia have done was that they had played to the mainstream gallery by reinforcing the dominant and hegemonic structure of Western discourse. This state of affairs was portrayed as a condition of academic imperialism by Syed Hussein Alatas [16]. Syed Farid Alatas went further to spell out that the academic imperialism exist within a structure of academic dependency that links the Western and developing societies scientists in an uneven and unequal manner, where even academic recognition (i.e. prestige value in journals) is sought from the West [17].

Meanwhile, the social science academia in the developing world were enacting boundaries and distance from examining its own cultural-history, and even suspicious at its own status [18]. This led to the domination of Western concepts, which were received with ease without adequate critique or adaptation for relevance, whilst indigenous concepts were not taken on board [18]. The marginalization of local knowledge is as a consequent of what was referred to as the subjects' captive mind by Syed Hussein Alatas earlier [8].

V. RESPONSE FROM THE MARGIN

The response from the developing countries and scholars from the margins can be viewed from a macro level context, as well as contribution from individual key scholars and schools and the Malaysia experience with reference to a response from one university in particular.

There are two counter-current streams of thought that is running through in the social science discourse in the developing world, namely at: i) the conceptual and theoretical level, and ii) at the practical and experiential level. Firstly, are the misgivings and apprehensions amongst the scholars from the developing world about the universal conception of social science promoted by Western academia and their market dominance through the Anglo-Saxon English linguistic dominance and also the willing submission of scholars from the developing world by embracing and emulating concepts from the partial West (i.e. Anglo-Saxon tradition) without localizing or indigenizing

cultural context. Secondly, there is a reexamining of development and modernization ideals and paradigms, in view of the devastation it has impacted upon local communities in the developing world, especially as a consequence of the unquestioned premise of capitalist development as the cornerstone of global development discourse [19]. This universalizing discourse though has brought material benefits in the short run, but has ramifications to local cultures and ecologies in the long run. The overwhelming marketization and commoditization process of the developing economies has reenacted debates on the relevance and appropriateness of Western models to local contexts, which has led scholars exploring Eastern precepts or other alternatives as local or regional knowledge systems. This was found as necessary to harmonize with the local cultural and ecological environment.

Some of the key currents in the developing world are led by thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Syed Hussein Alatas, and Edward Said, as well as schools such as Subaltern school, area studies and comparative studies. Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* was one of the early works in the developing world to examine the complicity of local or native with the colonized or dominant power [20]. He posits the role of languages (i.e. French as medium of knowledge) in the Black's dilemma of marginalization in Africa. The acquisition of foreign language over local language provides power and creates cultural difference and power imbalance. By embracing the foreign language as in the case of Algerian experience, Fanon suggests the local's complicity with the privileging of the foreign language and the eventual subordination of local or native language.

Concomitant with Fanon's discourse, the work of Syed Hussein Alatas in Southeast Asia provides a fervent ground for the Western counter force as captured in his notion of captive mind [8]. Syed Farid Alatas provides a list of writers in South East Asia who were engaged in critical literature towards the Western dominance of ideas following the work of Syed Hussein Alatas, namely Tham (1971), Chung (1989), Purushotam (1992, 1993), Sinha (1999), Wee (1988), Wee, Heyzer & Kwa (1995) and Shamsul (1999) [21]. There were other undercurrents namely the work on Islamization of knowledge by Syed Naguib Al-Attas (1969) that attempts to ground the history of ideas in the Malay Archipelago [21].

Meanwhile Edward Said used the term Orientalism as the title of his book to describe a pervasive Western discourse of misrepresenting the East, shaped by the ideologies of the imperial West since modern era until now [22]. Orientalism in this context refers to the Western discourse for its dominating, restructuring, and authoritative role over the Orient (namely East or developing societies). This coincides with the idea of intellectual imperialism of the West in representing others (namely East or developing societies) in inferior positions. In a follow up book on *Culture and Imperialism*, Said reasserts how imperialism manifests in both the material sphere as well as in the ideational realm [23]. Thus the prevalence of colonizer or Western discourse and knowledge has profound effect on the beliefs, practices, and cultures of colonized nation and contemporary developing nations. Said emphasizes the link between

imperialism and the human sciences, following the footsteps delineated by Foucault who had shown that the underlying foundations of truth of discourse were constructed and circulated by institutions of power.

Following Said's work, a group of Indian scholars led by Ranaji Guha has established the Subaltern Studies Group that attempt to provide a correction to the elite and official version of contemporary historical approach to the viewpoint of history from below that focuses on the masses version at the base levels of society [24]. The Subaltern work together with Said's work launched the postcolonial approach to deal with the social science impasse from the colonial and Western perspective, especially the subjugated and captive minds of the academia, elites and bureaucrats in countries that had attained their independence.

The development of social science along disciplines utilizing social theory and humanities engagement in cultural theory has led to interest in area studies and interdisciplinary posture. Area studies had been developed in the West for international political and economic agenda [25]. On the other hand, area studies in the developing nations have been developed to understand issues and phenomena in the neighboring countries and regions which share similar world view and culture. The involvement in research in this similar area, will aid in enhancing our contextual knowledge. Area studies are essential as there are two different types of area studies; firstly, the Western propaganda area studies to fulfill political and economic agenda, and secondly, developing countries contextual studies for comparative purposes. These studies will enhance local knowledge, sharing of best practices and solutions as well as cross-cultural learning. Area studies have generated context specific knowledge and more recently have contributed towards a broader global agenda to capture a more nuanced network and interactional perspective [13]. A case in point is the exportation of the Grameen Bank model of credit provision to several countries including the developed nations.

The cultural fabric and rich configuration of an amalgam of civilization in Southeast Asian context provide a rich resource for social theorizing. However lack of data in enacting local and historical wisdom prevails due to the prevalence of oral tradition as oppose to written tradition as in other regions. Also the presence of great civilizations and colonial occupation complicates the social and historical fabric. The fluidity of the influences of these civilizations on this part of the world, gives an impression that the varying influence would have provided wisdoms and knowledge that would have existed and sustained a cosmopolitan community. Excavating this history requires some cross-cultural and linguistic exploration across multi-disciplines such as archeological, historical, language, and oral history.

A. Malaysian Undertaking and UKM Experience

In the Malaysian front, Abdul Rahman Embong depicted that the development in social science in Malaysia was based on colonial thinking and knowledge systems [26]. In the early 20th century, the establishment of University of Malaya in Singapore by Stamford Raffles focused on early social science disciplinary studies such as economics, sociology,

history and geography, giving greater focus to material aspects of development issues. However, there were ideas that had emerged during the 19th century with Munshi Abdullah's contributing to the informal sphere of social and political front[26]. These indigenous ideas and knowledge had indirectly contributed to the enhancement of local knowledge. During the post-independence era in the 1960s, renewed debate on social science in Malaysia was led by Western and local scholars who were still influenced by colonial knowledge and methodologies. In 1974, a landmark seminar attempted to initiate indigenous ideas and confront future challenges amongst the local social scientists [26]. This group of local scholars was primarily led by Marxist-trained and Marxist influenced anthropologists and sociologists who were involved in development issues. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of applied social science disciplines such as political science, communication, psychology, development studies, etc. The evolution of studies in social science and humanities in the 1990s were still bounded by Western epistemology, resulting in dialectics of counter-currents. Debates on post-colonial knowledge polemics emerged in developing countries to overcome post-modern epistemic challenges posed in the West. Into the millennium, these currents are still ongoing.

The question begets as to what extent the Malaysian experience, being a developing nation and still in the transition phase, can be transplanted into the other developing nations. This necessitates comparative studies with the other developing nations who are in similar phases of development and cultural practices. These cross-cultural learning experiences will further consolidate the area studies suited to developing countries research agenda. As such, future studies warrant in-depth research in this direction. As noted earlier Southeast Asia provides a fertile ground for such cross-cultural understanding and enacting appropriate social action relevant to the experience of this region.

In response to this need, Malaysian research universities such as UKM (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) have embark on collaborative efforts in the field of social sciences and humanities with the Southeast Asian countries through joint-research and bilateral seminar platforms such as SKIM conference (with Universitas Padjadjaran, Bandung), SEBUMI conference (with Universitas Indonesia), SERUMPUN (with Universitas Hasanuddin), UKM-MAHIDOL conference (with Mahidol University International College) and others, besides attracting postgraduates research students from the region. The belief is that these efforts will yield greater understanding and solutions attuned to the regional cultural context.

Besides that inter-disciplinary research on issues and phenomena warrant greater attention to multi-dimensional framework and contextualized in cultural-whole (is there such term? Just checking – Marlyna) approaches so as to localize knowledge outcomes. The establishment of social science research centers in UKM for example has been tailored towards this end. Several research centers were put in place with specific focus namely:

- Institute of The Malay World and Civilisation (ATMA) : Malay civilisation and thoughts

- Institute for Environment and Development (LESTARI) : Environment and development
- Institute of Islam Hadhari (HADHARI) : Islamic civilization
- Institute of West Asian Studies (IKRAB): West Asian region
- Institute of Ethnic Studies (KITA) : Ethnic studies
- Institute for Malaysian and International Studies (IKMAS) : Globalization and transformation
- Institute of Occidental Studies (IKON) : Occidental civilization

Future deliberations in Malaysian studies and wider regional studies should intensify intellectual discourse and debates at conceptual level. Social science and humanities approaches should place more emphasis on cultural dynamics and the role of institutions in enhancing human values. For example in the arena of environmental studies, the need for coupling local knowledge with the global knowledge on environmental degradation was highlighted by Backstrand as a necessary path for sustainability, where local “placed-based” knowledge provides alternative perspectives to the global “universal” knowledge [27].

VI. CONCLUSION

Social science disciplines are confronted with the moral dilemma of fulfilling their duty or role as a science for the understanding of the social world and for seeking to solve practical problems [26]. This requires adaptation of concepts and theories from universal knowledge (not necessarily Western oriented) and at the same time enacting new knowledge from local world view and wisdoms that are attuned to the local historical and cultural context. For social science to remain relevant and practical it has to imbue the normative and natural realm of knowledge.

Instead social science discourse and knowledge in developing societies appear to be dominated by Western knowledge. Contestations from within the Western realm as well as developing societies appear to provide a remedy to the contemporary situation, but somewhat at a slow pace and operating in the margins. The nexus of knowledge and power that reins in favor of the Western discourse appears to be numbered, in view of the critique from within and without. With the complementary role of localization of knowledge, one can see the need for a comprehensive globalization of knowledge that is currently skewed in favor of a partial universal knowledge premised on Western epistemologies and ontologies. The alternative (read local) social theorizing provides a milieu for the emergence of new knowledge.

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