

A Sociology of Corruption: Reexamining the Contributions of Syed Hussein Alatas

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Abstract:

This paper examines the problem of corruption not only as a social problem but also as a problem that illustrates certain problems in agenda setting in sociology as an academic discipline. An answer to this question: why corruption remains outside the field of sociology, and who charts the sociological agenda can be found in the works of Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, a prominent Southeast Asian sociologist. He wrote about corruption as far back as in the 1960s. Sociology of corruption is a field that will have his signature. In recent years, a number of new books including an updated version of Professor Alatas's book have been published. For the economists who are too busy living in the certainty of clean models of abstract quality such messy things as corruption threaten the purity of their models. Gunnar Myrdal in his *Asian Drama*, identified the problem of corruption as a serious bottleneck for Asian development. The problem persists 40 years since Myrdal's analysis. In a number of countries in the developing world, corruption is the name of the game. It has become a part of the fabric of society. Yet, sociological theorization and analyses are lacking. This paper examines both the problem and its epistemic status in the tradition of sociology of knowledge.

"By nature, the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief, and the Kling (Tamil) is a drunkard, yet each, in his special class of work, is both cheap and efficient, when properly supervised" – C.G. Warnford-Lock (1907) quoted in Alatas (1977)

When King Pyrrhus invaded Italy, after he had reconnoitered the armed forces that the Romans had sent out against him, he said, "I don't know who these barbarians are"--for the Greeks called all foreign peoples barbarians--"but the organization of the army I see before me is not at all barbaric." The Greeks said the same when Flaminius invaded their country, as did Philip, when he saw from a hill the orderly layout of the Roman camp which had been set up in his kingdom under Publius Sulpicius Galba. These examples illustrate how one must avoid accepting common prejudices: opinions must be judged by means of reason, and not by adopting common opinion. – Montaigne, On Cannibals (1580)

Introduction:

At random, if one picks a newspaper, say, *The Straits Times* (Singapore) of March 5, 2004 one will read, *inter alia*, stories related to corruption – its absence or presence.

“Singapore is still regarded as the least corrupt country in Asia, according to a poll of foreign business executives released yesterday.

On a scale of zero to 10 - with 10 being the worst - expatriates surveyed by the Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy (Perc) gave Singapore a score of 0.5. Japan was a distant second with 3.5, and Hong Kong was in third place with a score of 3.6. Indonesia, with 9.25, was the worst performer.

'Fear of punishment acts as an effective deterrent and the (Singapore) Government is very efficient about policing itself,' said Perc in its report. 'The top-down nature of the anti-corruption fight in Singapore has worked as well as it has not only because the country's leaders have pushed the campaign, but also because they have personally been beyond reproach.'”

Singapore, according to Professor Alatas, is not corruption free. But it is one of the crowning achievements of the leadership of Singapore that they ensured the fact that an entire generation grew up not experiencing first hand what corruption is; a generation that did not have to bribe a single cent to get the services that are due to them. The critics of Singaporean authoritarian style should think again before they invoke the mantra of human rights. Corruption is humiliating for the clients and a violation of their human rights. Preempting corruption contributes to reinstating dignity of the citizenry and their human rights. The cultural argument has some force if it is applied with regard to the responses to corruption. For example, the repressive style of administering rules in China can be understood, if not defended. It may look brutal to the outsiders, especially in the Western eyes, but some drastic measures are needed in a country with a teeming population. We do not have to follow the Chinese style of punishment such as public executions of the corrupt officials. However, one has to consider the simple fact that if the sequence of crime, justice, and punishment is not taken seriously the whole fabric of

society will be threatened. If rule of law has to be more than a slogan, certainty, evenness and fairness in the implementation of rules must be ensured.

What is interesting from a sociology of knowledge point of view is not that corruption is rife in many parts of Asia and pretty much under control in Singapore, it is the absence of sociological focus on this seemingly intractable yet ubiquitous problem. Professor Alatas was one of the few scholars along with Myrdal who identified this problem in the 1960s and 1970s. My hypotheses are as follows:

1. Sociology in Asia was simply imitating (or aping, by that I mean copying without thinking) the so-called western sociology. In some cases, sociology was transplanted by the European and American social scientists, in other places local sociologists who were trained overseas came back to teach sociology and applied western sociological problems quite mechanically.
2. Professor Alatas was a lonely voice who remained isolated as he did not share the common paradigm shared by the rest of the social scientific community in Southeast Asia. Even today, an outlier has to face the same fate. It is not the import or relevance of one's views but the topicality of the ideas in terms of dominant paradigms that dictate the acceptability and popularity of themes, topics and research areas in social science. And very often these dominant paradigms are imposed from above from the centers of metropolis.
3. Major events (defined as major by the western governments and media shape intellectual agenda. In the ambit of Cold War, corruption as a social process was not on the priority list of the western governments. A close parallel can be found today. Since the terrorists attack of 9/11, the western world and its allies have suddenly awakened to the reality of Islam as a religion and "Islamic societies". More research money, publications, publication and research opportunities are now available on this topic than any other areas in social science. This is most unfortunate. The autonomy of intellectual inquiry is under serious challenge. As more researchers undertake research on the spread of Islamism, fundamentalism, political Islam and so on as if it is a form of spreadable disease or virus, a whole new intellectual field will be born or similar areas that remained idle or dormant

will return to life. Some old publications will be dusted off and reprints will make it to shelves of the bookstore or libraries.

More Evidence of Corruption:

Let's look at *The Straits Times* of July 18, 2001 one would read the following: "Alleged Corruption: Cops facing sex bribe charges now on trial" (p.H4). Or, let's take the issue of *The Sunday Times* (Singapore) of January 23, 2000 as an example. There are three reports on corruption. One headline reads: "Terengganu BN was corrupt, claims new MB" (p.31). A report followed on the allegation made by the new administration about the previous administration run by the Barisan Nasional (BN). The new Chief Minister or Mentri Besar (MB) as the post is known locally from the Islamist party, The Parti Islam (PAS) claimed that "he had evidence that the previous administration was allegedly involved in some irregularities in the award of government contracts".

Another item on the same day's newspaper captions: "Three-Gorges Scandal: Dam project hit by billion-dollar corruption" (p.18). It read: "Officials uncovered a new corruption scandal, this time involving the high-profile Three Gorges Dam project, where five billion yuan (S\$963 million) in relocation funds was embezzled, state media reported."

And on page 5 of the same newspaper there is a story on former German Chancellor Helmut Kohl. The media is rife with corruption. Three Gorges Dam is not the only corruption story from China, the story of corruption in Xiamen, a city in the south-eastern province of Fujian, one of the four Special Economic Zones revealed a new twist. It was reported that the top leadership in China is worried that so many top politicians may be named in the scandal that it could be even a liability in terms of the Party's credibility. There is a hint of a cover-up (*The Sunday Times* (Singapore) January 30, 2000 p.36). The Finance Minister of Indonesia's three month old democratic government, Mr. Bambang Sudibyo even wondered whether the government has enough power to nail corrupt tycoons tainted by bank-loan scandals (*The Straits Times*, January 28, 2000 p.42).

The media reports – just take the examples of China and Indonesia or Germany – show an intricate relationship between corruption and economics on the one hand and corruption and power politics on the other. The relationship between corruption and politics is interesting because it helps us understand the nature of the state itself. In early July 1999, a controversy erupted in Bangladesh over the corruption report put out by Transparency International, a Bonn based corruption watchdog body. The report ranked Bangladesh as the most corrupt country of the world. Now while the report because of the shaky nature of the data asked to use caution, the anti-government frenzy tended to make it a political football. However, then there was a streak of national pride that led to downplaying the findings of the report.

Ironically, despite media attention, the subject of corruption has received scant attention from the social scientists. Social scientists in the so-called developing countries were too busy pursuing various theoretical models and theories that reeked theoretical fashions of the day were oblivious of the problems that were deeper and complex and were right there at their own backyard.

An answer to this puzzle: why corruption remains outside the field of sociology, and who charts the sociological agenda can be found in the works of Professor Syed Hussein Alatas. He wrote about corruption as far back as in the early 1960s. Sociology of corruption is a field that will have his signature. In recent years, a number of new books including an updated version of Professor Alatas's book have been published. For the economists who are too busy living in the certainty of clean models of abstract quality that such messy things as corruption threaten the purity of their models. Some economists who seek to engage with the problem, corruption is a rent-seeking behavior. But most who tend to neglect it, it is just another externality. Gunnar Myrdal in his *Asian Drama*, identified the problem of corruption as a serious bottleneck for Asian development. The problem persists 40 years since Myrdal's analysis, but in a more acute form much more dramatic form. In a number of countries in the developing world, corruption is the name of the game. It has become a part of the fabric of society.

“Corruption is a form of crime and it should be treated as such,” commented Professor Syed Hussein Alatas, the foremost sociologist of corruption. While talking to the present author a couple of years ago, he stated that his book *Sociology of Corruption* first published in 1976 is being reprinted by Prentice-Hall. The republication in a way signifies a renewed interest in the subject of corruption, especially, in the wake of the deepening of the financial and economic crises worldwide. Before the crisis hit the Southeast Asian region, there was a misperception shared by both lay public and some academics that there are “bad corruption” and “good corruption”. The latter type characterized countries like South Korea and Indonesia where widespread corruption went hand in hand with rapid economic growth. “Bad corruption” preempted economic growth. That notion is now being seriously challenged. Corruption, like crime, is a threat to society and should be dealt with as such. However, there is no point trying to justify it in terms of levels of political economic development or culture. In purely economic terms, corruption raises the cost of doing business. As a recent commentary in *Economist* argued that it follows the style of protection racket of the Mafia. The rate of protection fees keeps increasing to a point where it becomes unbearable for the system. Corruption is corrosive and all efforts must be made to stamp it out.

My first encounter with Prof Alatas took place in 1987 when I wrote a paper titled “How to Think About Corruption in Bangladesh”. A sociology colleague asked me to send Prof Alatas, Head of Malay Studies Department at NUS a copy which I did and then met him. His remarks were encouraging but he asked me to look at actual cases of corruption in Bangladesh. We were talking about corruption way before Bangladesh came to be known as no. 1 in the Transparency International CPI. During that conversation Prof Alatas raised the issue of hegemony of western knowledge. He gave me the example of a western (let’s say an American economist who visits Singapore for a year write a book, Now every one will rush to buy read the book and accept everything unquestioningly but if we write a book after several years of experience in USA people will look at it as a joke.

Of course, there are scales and degrees of corruption. The response of corruption must be proportionate. But there is no point going about viewing corruption as a lubricant in a rusty system. Again Professor Alatas's point is worth recalling. For him, not that a society or administration can be completely free from corruption, the point is how the leadership, the centre of power, responds to it. The key issue here is tolerance. A country like Singapore has a very low tolerance of corruption. In most developing countries the levels of tolerance vary from very high to moderate. Professor Alatas uses the phrase, "tidal corruption" to refer to the situation in some of the developing countries. "It is one that floods the entire state apparatus including the centre of power, immersing everything in its path. It multiplies the number of perpetrators more rapidly than any other type of criminal behaviour, paralyzing the administrative machinery and dampening the enthusiasm of sincere and capable civil servants" (1990:990).

"The present Singapore society is a fertile source for reflecting on the problem of corruption. We mean by the problem of corruption not the mere existence of corruption, here and there. This is present in Singapore. Crime is present everywhere but it is not the same as the control of authority by criminal elements. When we say there is no problem of corruption in Singapore we mean that the authority is not dominated and manipulated by corrupt elements; that it is possible for a generation to go through life without having to bribe government servants in their transactions with the authority; that taxes are properly collected; that the courts are not at the service of the corrupt; that the police perform their duty without bribes; and so do other services for the public." (Alatas, 1989:985).

Yet once in a while international media raise the issue of nepotism in Singapore.

In an interview in Davos, Switzerland with Mr. William Safire of the New York Times Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, the architect of modern Singapore, provided some perspective on the charge of nepotism, which is clearly a form of corruption. In answer to the question of Mr. Safire whether Mr. Lee's son be the Deputy Prime Minister if he were not his son, Mr. Lee replied: "If he were not my son, he would be the Prime Minister." No one

questions the credentials of Singapore's Deputy Minister and many would agree with Mr. Lee's claim.

Alatas sought to conceptualize corruption historically, by questioning a simple-minded Marxist explanation. In his words: "The economic system of (its) ASEAN countries is capitalism. The degree and manifestation of corruption in Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore differs greatly. In Thailand, The Philippines, and Indonesia, corruption is rampant. In Malaysia it is not rampant, and in Singapore it is hardly noticeable. The differential development of corruption in these countries cannot be explained by the capitalist system. Furthermore, capitalism in Western European countries is not associated with corrupt governments. Consequently, here capitalism by itself cannot be the cause of widespread corruption.

This type of widespread corruption I have called tidal corruption. It is one that floods the entire state apparatus including the center of power, immersing everything in its path. It multiplies the number of perpetrators more rapidly than any other type of criminal behaviour, paralyzing the administrative machinery and dampening the enthusiasm of sincere and capable civil servants. (990)

The inadequacy of the historical-context approach as presented by Marxists and certain functional sociologists is apparent from their failure to explain both corruption as a universal phenomenon affecting all complex social systems in all ages and its different manifestations within the same system at different times. The Marxist analysis does not descend to a level sufficiently microscopic to see the operation of hitherto neglected organisms. It is at this level of analysis that we find the significant causes of corruption, the most immediate and decisive, the leadership and their cliques. (990).

Alatas provided a conceptualization of corruption that aimed at universality (1986:21). He finds a close parallel between corruption in Latin America and corruption in Southeast Asia. He sincerely values the importance of empirical data with regard to corruption. His main comment on my paper *How to think About Corruption In*

Bangladesh” was that I need to provide more empirical data, more cases of concrete corruption. He recognizes the problem of doing empirical research on corruption because the data are not readily available. When Prof Alatas and I had these conversations, Transparency International was yet unborn. TI was set up only in 1999 based in Berlin. Alatas has no aversion of so-called Western research method, what he emphasizes is taking the context or milieu into account. Nor is he happy with the idea that some corruption such as bribe is good as a lubricant for business. He talks exception to Weiner’s politics of scarcity thesis.

Alatas conceptualizes corruption by drawing upon the work of Wang An Shih (1021-1086), the great Chinese reformer. For Wang, corruption was rooted in bad laws and bad men. Alatas finds Wang’s analysis “extremely instructive” . Wang classified human beings into two groups, the morally mediocre and the morally high. Changes of fortune did not affect the latter. The danger comes when the moral mediocrities gained control of government. ..In the last analysis the two absolute prerequisites against corruption were power holders of high moral caliber, and rational and efficient laws. Neither could function without the other. Both had to be present for any effort to be successful....The problems confronted by Wang An Shih in eleventh century China have again emerged under a new guise in contemporary Indonesia and many other Asian countries (Alatas, 1986:6-7).

Ibn Khaldun (1332 – 1406), a scholar and a man of action sought to eliminate corruption in his capacity as a judge but failed. Khaldun considered the root cause of corruption to be the passion for luxurious living within the ruling group. It was to meet the cost of luxurious living that the ruling group resorted to corrupt dealings. (Alatas, 1986:7-8).

Alatas identifies three types of corruption: bribery, extortion, and nepotism. (1986:9). And he refers to Wertheim in that discussion who argued that extortion and embezzlement are important aspects of public corruption. Lest it might give one an impression that Alatas was using his teacher’s framework, it is important to remember that the first contribution of Alatas on corruption goes back to a short article that he

published in 1956. In that article, "Some Fundamental Problems of Colonialism" he identified three types of corruption. "One comprises bribery, theft, embezzlement, extortion, and so on. The second is political corruption involving both individuals and groups. This type of corruption usually takes the form of striving for party or individual interests without moral considerations. The third type of corruption is the weakening of the moral impulse expressed by an attitude of comparative indifference towards corruption itself and other vices. Colonialism has helped to generate the second and the third type of corruption in no small degree. (Alatas, 1956: 9-10).

"To allow these countries to drift in the manner of Europe following the Industrial Revolution would be catastrophic. To allow the negative forces released by colonialism to continue unchecked is an invitation to disaster. The only alternative is the execution of a sound and profound planning.... This should be our answer to colonialism, not demagoguery, xenophobia, not an empty glorification of the past, or bombastic speeches, not an attitude of laxity towards truth and virtue, and neglect of the common welfare. Every problem faced by a society in a given time and place, is an intellectual and moral problem and for this reason our attempt to solve the problems created by colonialism must evidently be based on thought, action and moral values. (Alatas, 1956:10).

From above, it becomes clear that Alatas was examining corruption not just as a problem of governance but sought to view it broadly as a social phenomenon which he sought to explain in terms of other "social facts". In providing a macro sociological and historical framework for understanding corruption he introduced the context of colonialism. However, Alatas's position is not that of nativism; he alerts us to avoid "xenophobia and empty glorification of the past".

It is also evident that Alatas is concerned with universal moral values. He does not show any sympathy for a relativistic position. It is his study of corruption that makes him a universalist.

We could go on talking about forms of corruption and the sociological framework that Professor Alatas introduced to study it. But this would be only a partial understanding of the contributions of a sociologist who developed an original insight into the study of society combining historical sociology, structural sociology and a healthy skepticism towards classical sociologists. His use of classical sociology alerts is at once of the usefulness as well as the limitations. His sociological analyses clearly do not reject the contributions of the giants on whose shoulders we stand, but they portray a less imitative approach. It is important to try to understand the sociological contribution of Alatas both in the area of concrete research on practical social issue (i.e., corruption) and theory. How should we understand social categories? As universal properties; or as particular events? Is there a singular modernity? Or, are their multiple routes to modernity, or multiple variants of modernity? Is there an Asian or Southeast Asian, or Indian tradition of sociology?

Here, it would be pertinent to discuss Alatas's views on the state of social sciences in Asia a subject that he discussed in 1969. "There is only a small minority among Asian social scientists who feel the need to develop an autonomous a creative social science tradition relevant to Asia as well as to the general development of social sciences. The great majority of them are merely extending the use of the social sciences current in Europe and America without the necessary adaptation which the very scientific consciousness itself, if present, would dictate us to accomplish. There is here not only a cultural lag in the domain of intellectual consciousness, but also an indication that in the world of learning the Asian scholars are still under intellectual domination." (1969:2).

"We need a sociology of social scientists in Asia. We have to subject their scientific thought and activity to an analysis of the kind developed by the sociology of knowledge." He argued that Asian social science can be interpreted as what the economists call "demonstration effect". "The demonstration effect is actually part of a more general tendency called by psychologists and social anthropologists "diffusion"" Like demonstration effect, "The main drive in assimilation of social science knowledge from the West is the belief in its utility and superiority". Other similarities with demonstration

effect are: (a) frequency of contact, (b) weakening or breakdown of previous knowledge or habit, (c) prestige accompanying the new knowledge, (d) that it is not necessarily rational and utilitarian. The spread of social science knowledge in Asian countries takes the form of an uncritical demonstration effect. Alatas points out that even some Western scholars such as Gunnar Myrdal stressed the need for the creation of an autonomous social science tradition in Asia and other developing regions. (1969:3). An American scholar also pointed out “that traditional concepts and theories have lost their relevance. To some extent the current disenchantment with the rate of economic development in many countries is the result of the inadequacy of theoretical frameworks to diagnose the nature of the problem and to prescribe appropriate course of action” (Kapp, quoted in Alatas, 1969:4).

Alatas was not so much concerned with the Western versus Eastern economists, his critique was basically directed against those works that lacked rigour. For example, Alatas took Kuznets to task for offering propositions that were not “empirically verified in a reliable manner” (1969:6) as he compared it against the work of Gerschenkorn. “Unlike the comparative study attempted by Gerschenkorn, based on definite historical cases, utilizing numerous historical data, offering conclusions derived directly from those data, Kuznets’ comparative study has not been very helpful. It does not reveal to us the interplay of variables in the process of development. The general summary conclusions are useful only to the uninitiated.” (Alatas, 1969:6). Alatas raised the interesting point that the work on origin of capitalism in the West is based on reference to concrete historical and sociological data, but not the works on Asia by the “absentee foreign scholarship”. (1969:7).

In another context, he criticizes Herskovits for viewing entire indigenous tradition of Africa as an undifferentiated single tradition. His second criticism is inadequacy of data or data-driven knowledge. When Herskovit alleges that the Sudanese are not punctual, he, according to Alatas, did not consider that as Muslims they are very punctual with regard to breaking fast or performing Friday prayers, so a Sudanese is not entirely devoid of the sense of punctuality (1969:10). Alatas then refers to a chapter of the Quran “Al-Asr

(The Time) and then refers to the Hsiang-yin or incense seal in China as an ingenious device to measure time. Here he quotes from the Transactions of the American Philosophical Society.

What is striking his breadth of knowledge as well as his originality of ideas and his penchant for interdisciplinary analysis. In another context, he wrote about the need for bringing the social sciences to bear on the interpretation of archeological evidence to build historical knowledge based on data.(1964:31).

The issue of western hegemony was developed in his article on captive social science – social science is dominated by the west but then there is a complicity of our acceptance.

In an article written in 1969, Alatas stated: “An uncritical imitation pervades almost all the entire domain of the scientific intellectual activity. All its major constituents such as problem setting, analysis, abstraction, generalization, conceptualization, description, explanation and interpretation, each and everyone of them, has been affected by this process of uncritical imitation” (1969:4).

Critique of an uncritical imitation should not be confused with a wholesale rejection of the so-called western social science. In discussing economic development, Alatas enumerates the following “determinants of economic development”: (a) the historical-sociological, (b) the geographical, (c) the strictly economic, (d) the political (e) the psychological, and (g) the representational aspect, in terms of both positive and negative collective representations” (1965:7). Alatas takes a holistic position that is not too different from that of Fernand Braudel. He specifically mentions Weber’s contribution in this regard, especially the point of collective representation or broadly the cultural factor. His “historico-sociological” factor has close parallel with what Skocpol and other contemporary historical sociologists would call comparative-historical or comparative-social structural approach.

The theoretical point is: can we divide the world neatly between the west and the east? No. the geography of east and west keep changing.

Sociological traditions are often centered around national traditions which allows us to speak of a German sociology as opposed to Korean sociology. In the same vein, we often talk about continental sociology, i.e., European versus North American, or Asian sociology. Or one could talk about sociology in ideological terms, at least, that was the sociological milieu within which I had had my first exposure to sociology. Dhaka University sociology department was the oldest sociology department in what became Bangladesh. Unlike sociology in Singapore which was born in the same year as Singapore, the country itself, sociology in Bangladesh predates Bangladesh. Sociology came to Dhaka, thanks to UNESCO, in 1956. Bangladesh was born in 1971. In Dhaka University those days, one marked a clear distinction between Bourgeoisie sociology versus Marxist sociology. Needless to say, all young Bengalis – myself included - belonged to the right kind, i.e., the Marxist camp. In this intellectual tradition of taxonomy, what is the point of looking critically the sociological oeuvre of a single sociologist? This paper clearly bucks the trends and explores the sociological contributions of one sociologist, Syed Hussein Alatas. But why? This paper is an attempt to answer that question.

From WMD to a wider vision of sociological tradition. No, WMD does not mean weapons of mass destruction or deception. This means White, Male Dead aka Weber, Marx and Durkheim. The point is that there are multiple traditions in sociology, sometimes, individuals represent and are carriers of traditions. Young Marx wrote, and Braudel quoted him approvingly, “society is thinking through me”. In a Mannheimian sense, it is very important to consider what would now be called, the social embeddedness of knowledge, even if we look at the individual but it is also plausible to look at the individual author as a representative of “embodied history” as opposed to “objectified history” to borrow a phrase from Bourdieu. Sure, it is impossible to separate the sociology of Syed Hussein Alatas from the biographical and intellectual experience, his training in Holland under Professor Wim F. Wertheim and so on. But here the main purpose of looking into his work is to see him as an exemplar. There are two broad areas of sociology in his work: studies of corruption for which he was a pioneer; his other

contribution was social epistemology, the idea of captive mind. Are these two contradictory positions? No. In his work on role of religion in Asian development, captive mind and so on, he is making a case for what – later on came to be known as multiple modernities. That is, one can be modern without being western to the dismay of modernization theorists for whom modernization was a code word for westernization, more suitable for a post-colonial world. Yet, his approach to corruption is premised on some level of universal and invariant definition of corruption. If we do not start with a clear definition of corruption, and start off with the premise of relativism we could endlessly argue that what is corruption from your point of view is an integral part of my cultural practice. Take the example of anthropologist who came to the Andamans and found that he natives started helping themselves with his belongings. He understood why previous visitors to the island, the missionaries and so on characterized that islanders as thieves, etc. He began to understand that the absence of private property in their culture is the reason for their behavior. Fine. But this would not work in a modern society. No court will accept this argument from a defense lawyer. If among people stole their brides, in modern society that will be interpreted as kidnapping and jail terms will await the hero, the bridegroom.

Universalism is not a problem but the universalism has to be true universalism not western science dressed as universalism. We need to engage in a dialogue with the external and the internal. The engagement has to take place at several levels. Between theory and research – concepts and empirical data, between academia and policy makers, between the state and the civil society, between the scientists and the lay public. The more dialogues we have the better off we are. In this dialogue of course, intellectuals have a great role and responsibility.

Prof Alatas has given considerable amount of thought to the question of intellectuals and the role in Asia. Sociology straddles the third culture between science and art. CP Snow's celebrated two culture theory has outlived its utility. Sociologists as public intellectuals. In his own sociological research and activism, Alatas has demonstrated how these two roles can be fused. His point that political leadership that lacks ideals is an important

point. Many of the countries where corruption is minimal are countries characterized by leaders with high moral standings.

In his trail-blazing *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, Alatas stated: “It is the thesis of the book that the image of the indolent native was the product of colonial domination generally in the 19th century when the domination of the colonies reached a high peak and when colonial capitalist exploitation required extensive control of the area” (1977:70).

Edward Said in his *Culture and Imperialism* identified two works: Ranajit Guha’s *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement* published in 1963 and S.H. Alatas’s *The Myth of the Lazy Native: A Study of the Image of the Malays, Filipinos, and Javanese from the 16th to the 20th Century and Its Function in the Ideology of Colonial Capitalism* published in 1977 as belonging to the genre of post-colonial specialist scholarship. “Both these books, the former by a Bengali political economist, the latter by a Malaysian Muslim Historian and social theorist, show their authors’ assiduous archival research and scrupulously up-to-date documentation, argument, and generalization”. (Said, 1993:296).

...Alatas’s book, as startlingly original in its own way as Guha’s, also details how European colonialism created an object, in this case the lazy native, who performed a crucial function in the calculations and advocacies of what Alatas calls colonial capitalism. This native, subjected to astringent rules and an exacting discipline, was meant, in the words of Sinbaldo de Mas, a Spanish official who in 1843 was entrusted with keeping the Philippines as a Spanish colony, to be sustained “in an intellectual and moral state that despite their numerical superiority they may weigh less politically than a bar of gold”; (Alatas, 1977:56); this native was talked about, analysed, abused, and worked, fed with bad food and with opium, separated from his or her natural environment, covered with a discourse whose purpose was to keep him or her industrious and subordinate. Thus says Alatas, “Gambling, opium, inhuman labor conditions, one-sided legislation, acquisition of tenancy rights belonging to the people, forced labor, were all in one way or another woven into the fabric of colonial ideology and given an aura of respectability. Those outside it were derided”. (1977:96).

According to Said: “One of the sharpest attacks in Alatas’s *The Myth of the Lazy Native* is against those Malaysians who continue to reproduce in their own thinking the colonial ideology that created and sustained the ‘lazy native’ idea. In passages that recall Fanon’s strictures against the national bourgeoisie, Alatas shows how residues of colonial capitalism remain in the thought of the newly autonomous Malays, confining them – those, that is, who have not become self-conscious in methodology and aware of the class affiliations that affect thought – to the categories of ‘colonial capitalist thought’. Thus he continues,

“The false consciousness distorts the reality. The Malay ruling party inherited the rule from the British without a struggle for independence such as that which took place in Indonesia, India and the Philippines. As such there was also no ideological struggle. There was no intellectual break with British ideological thinking at the deeper level of thought.” (1977:152).

Again we turn to Edward Said: “Alatas supplies us with an alternative argument about the meaning of the lazy native, or rather, he supplies us with an argument for why the Europeans succeeded in holding on to the myth for as long as they did. Indeed, he also demonstrates how the myth lives on...The myth of the lazy native is synonymous with domination, and domination is at bottom power. (Said, 1993:307).

“Alatas’s work has had two aims: to establish a foundation for a post-colonial methodology of South Asian history and society, and to further the demystifying and deconstructive work suggested in *The Myth of the Lazy Native*.” (Said, 1993:308).

I had a brief meeting with Prof Alatas when he was the vice chancellor of UM. He told me that he was writing a pamphlet showing that Islam is not against music. There was a controversy in UM at that time over the performance of a group that the religious right opposed. While at UM, Prof Alatas appointed dean based on their competence measured in universal criterion of achievement rather than ascription. This did not go well with the powers that be.

But Alatas's forte is not compliance, his intellectual boldness emerges from an integrity of character, a force of conviction and an honesty of intellectual integrity. He once commented about Singapore about corruption; An entire generation of Singaporean has grown up without ever paying a cent in bribe. A bouquet. And brick bat? He once said, Singapore has all the conveniences of a hotel but you cannot call it home. The very similar statement has been echoed by senior cabinet officials in Singapore and in some sense forms the basis of S21 discussion of reinventing Singapore as a home.

Alatas's social science has a deep commitment with the moral visions. In this sense there is a close parallel between sociological projects of Robert Bellah and his colleagues who also envision a moral grounding of sociology, a program best exemplified in the works of Bourdieu especially in his later works such as the *Weight of the Earth* and so on. It is impossible for the social scientists to run away from the moral concerns of the day. And with Montaigne we will plea for reason rather than opinion that must be the yardstick of social scientific analysis. Alatas will agree, I hope.

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