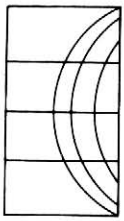

Vineeta Sinha

Decentring Social Sciences in Practice through Individual Acts and Choices

That the history and the continued practice of the social sciences are orientalist as well as Eurocentric is recognized within academia today as a fact, and a problematic. The idea that social sciences must problematize the colonial and neocolonial histories of their establishment in non-western locales is one that has been in currency for at least half a century. Often this has culminated in a call not only for recognizing instances of western hegemonic influences in the very foundation of the various social science disciplines in the non-West, but further for challenging and breaking away from them. Historically, the link between colonial encounters and social science practices (Asad, 1973; Berreman, 1968; Gough, 1968; Hailey, 1944; Galtung, 1967; Hooker, 1963), the rallying cry for 'academic independence' and overcoming 'the captive mind' (Alatas, S. H., 1974; Fanon, 1967) in the social sciences closely paralleled slogans of political liberation from colonial rule carried in Third World nationalist, self-rule and independence movements. In my assessment, the discourse about decolonizing the social sciences already carried the critique of concepts, categories and dichotomies of investigation used in mainstream social science – subsequently reiterated by postcolonial, feminist and postmodern perspectives.

In addition to investigating the history of the social sciences and its varied associations and liaisons with colonial, imperial projects and activities, the practical task of acting upon this knowledge articulated the need for 'disengaging', 'delinking', 'decolonializing' and 'decentring' mainstream social science – both in its conceptual and empirical manifestations. This earlier language of 'breaking free' and separating from a hegemonic past (and to some extent a present) were carried perfectly in the Hindi word *swarajist* (meaning self-rule) (Uberoi, 1968). One specific formulation of such extrication from western influences finds expression in the need for indigenizing the social sciences, and in the increasing use of the English word 'indigenization'

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in the literature through the 1970s and 1980s (Kim, 1978; Cheng and So, 1983; Abbi and Saberwal, 1969; Ahmad, 1972; Marriot, 1989; Sinha, S., 1968, 1976). Since this period, the core message in indigenization projects has been heeded and acted upon by Third World social scientists in a variety of ways, some more problematic than others. Scholars working out of Asian, Southeast Asian, African, Latin American and Eastern European contexts have interpreted this delinking exercise in terms of generating regional, autonomous, indigenous social science traditions according to the exigencies of their own contextual realities. More recently, the term 'indigenization' itself seems to have lost its earlier aura, has been subjected to some critique for its conceptual and methodological limitations, and its usage is not as commonplace. Nonetheless, its core ideas – about avoiding essentialisms, problematic reifications and stereotypical assumptions about the (non-western) 'other' and also not replicating these in the conceptual and methodological machineries in use in the social sciences – continue to be the bedrock of what are now more broadly termed 'alternative discourses' in the social sciences.

It is not without significance that after five decades of these aforementioned critiques of the social sciences, Third World social scientists continue to experience and articulate the problematics associated with a western hegemonic past. Hence, we revisit the same rhetoric about the need for reform and reorganization of this field. It would also be inaccurate to suggest that only non-western social scientists have participated in the debates about refashioning the social sciences or about formulating alternative social science discourses. However, the pool of such individuals is a small one, and from where Immanuel Wallerstein is one scholar who has actively and relentlessly called for a need to problematize the assumed legitimacy and universal validity of the theoretical, epistemological and structural bases of social science discourse and practice. In addition to an earlier work of 1991, *Unthinking Social Science: The Limits of Nineteenth-Century Paradigms*, Wallerstein's 1996 text *Open the Social Sciences: Report of the Gulbenkian Commission on the Restructuring of the Social Sciences* outlines the author's concern with rethinking and reformulating the social sciences in the present. Linguistically, Wallerstein's use of such terms as 'restructure', 'rethink', 'reorganize' and 'reform' the social sciences does not immediately connect with the rhetoric of decolonizing the social sciences. Yet, ideationally much of what is being said here would strike a chord with earlier critics of the social sciences. In my view, Wallerstein's call for 'opening up' and rebuilding the social sciences really comes at the tail-end of a long and sustained period of critique of western (North American and European) dominance in the conception and practice of the social sciences in the non-West. For historical, intellectual and political reasons, it is important to note and register the connectedness of this more recent call for 'opening up' with earlier efforts to shake up and remake the social sciences.

Open the Social Sciences is indeed an exciting document authored by a team of well-known and distinguished scholars from a range of diverse disciplines. It continues to generate interest, provoke discussions and shape social science agendas more than half a decade after it first appeared in print. The ideas it carries, although not entirely novel, do challenge one to locate newer and critical pivots for continued engagement. For the purposes of this article, I achieve this engagement through this dual focus: first, the document highlights thematics that are of interest to me – the 'opening up' of the social sciences and the idea of critique and its role in the former task; and second, the text allows me to return to my interest in the project of conceptualizing alternative discourses (an example of which for me is 'indigenizing' the social sciences) and contributing to the ongoing debates therein. In so doing, I join a small and diffused group of social scientists (located in diverse settings – both western and non-western) who do have an interest in critically appraising mainstream social science traditions and in attempting to conceptualize and formulate 'alternatives' of the same. I further draw on my experience and positionality of being located in a largely teaching university in a non-western context, and practising the craft of sociology – teaching, researching and publishing – therein.

While I do support the political and intellectual stance of the various indigenization positions, I have noted elsewhere (Sinha, V., 1997) what I see as serious problems with its existing conceptual frameworks. The term 'indigenization' itself has been utilized in a number of different domains by a range of interested parties: from laypersons, to development planners, academics, government and funding agencies, etc. The meanings and interpretations bestowed on the term in such diverse contexts lend a high degree of confusion, ambiguity, mystification and obscurity to it. Even more problematic is that the term is often used in social science discussions rather loosely and in a mode that deems it to be self-explanatory. I have argued that in order for the term and its empirical realization to have any impact and efficacy, it cannot continue to be used merely as a descriptive and residual category but instead must be conceptualized as a theoretical and methodological tool. In the same piece, I have argued for conceptual attention to, and clarification of the notion of indigenization, by highlighting four areas for action. In the present context, these four dimensions constitute an integral part of the 'opening up' project for me. In listing them here in a slightly different formulation from the original, I revisit them in an effort to now fill out the practical and empirical dimension of 'how to open up' the social sciences in practice.

1 To problematize and question the epistemological, ontological and methodological status of all social science categories, including 'indigenous', 'native', 'West' and 'non-West'.

A first necessary step in clarifying the conceptual dimension would be to ask what is meant by categories such as 'indigenous', 'native', 'West' and 'non-West'. What are the meanings that are assigned to them? They are clearly not self-evident, although treated as such by social scientists themselves. The problems surface in actual attempts to 'indigenize' particular social science disciplines. For example, attempts to formulate 'Indian anthropology' 'indigenous' to India have had to deal with the ontological and political status of two categories 'Indian' and 'indigenous', agreement and negotiation about which have turned out to be more problematic than envisaged.

2 To embed social science analysis in the sociocultural and political particularities of a region or locale, without rejecting all western contribution.

A desire to build an autonomous social science tradition for a non-western locale would be embroiled in controversy if it did not adequately theorize a shared common history with western social science traditions. Drawing again from the example of anthropology in India, Indian anthropologists cannot erase historical connections in claiming a distinct conceptual, methodological and political space for their discipline in the present. The 18th- and 19th-century orientalist images of 'India' that defined and infused early anthropological researches about India constitute their intellectual inheritance and this connection needs to be theorized rather than forgotten. It is however legitimate to sketch and prioritize what may be specific local and internal interests in formulating the boundaries of a discipline indigenous to the region. In the case of many Third World scholars, the 'applied research and pure research' divide comes down on the side of the former.

3 To articulate and theorize the global politics of academia and its complex role in perpetuating the traditional division of intellectual labour.

To continue with the example of Indian anthropology, its practitioners have largely defined their task as more 'applied' but in so doing have been further marginalized from the intellectual agendas of anthropology in the West. The explicit particularizing of Indian anthropology leads to a disengagement of Indian scholars from issues considered relevant in Euro-American anthropology. This allows one to revisit the theme of a 'core–periphery' dichotomy in the world of social science. With this comes the association of the West as the locus of social science theorizing and of the non-West with collecting and providing empirical material. In a true 'opening up' exercise this divide would not only have to be acknowledged, but challenged and corrected.

4 To recognize multiple and alternative centres, spaces and identities (both in the West and the non-West) as repositories of social science thinking and theorizing.

Following from the last point, social science theorizing must be seen

as a universal rather than an exclusive practice. This entails a recognition that there are diverse locations from which good social science theorizing can emanate and hence question the exclusive and monopolistic location of theorizing in the West and in western traditions. In this sense the restructuring of the social sciences requires social scientists to explore the cultural and intellectual histories of their own societies to see what evidence there is of social thinkers and theorists. This gaze has both spatial and temporal dimensions, in focusing attention on a timeframe that must go back before the 16th or 17th centuries.

Attention to these four elements can be considered the intellectual backbone of the social sciences and I see these as the outcome of a successful 'opening up' project. Additionally, having had the benefit of more exposure and grounding as a social scientist, I am emboldened to add more ground rules to my earlier schema and the next portion of the article discusses these elements in greater detail.

5 To address the marginalization of alternative discourses in mainstream social science.

6 To see linkages between the institutional structures that frame social sciences spheres and the reproduction of problematic norms, practices and knowledges.

7 To translate critique into practice through specific acts, choices and decisions.

To Address the Marginalization of Alternative Discourses in Mainstream Social Science

The Eurocentric critique of the social sciences is far from new, and has involved social scientists from India, parts of Africa, Latin America and Southeast Asia, for a few decades already.[1] The debates vis-a-vis interdisciplinary work in the social sciences have involved scholars in the West and the non-West for some time now (see, for example, Roose, 1967; Campbell, 1967; UNESCO, 1982: 7; Chee, 1974; Suvanajata and Namatra, 1974). As is evident from the existing literature, critical appraisals of social science disciplines are largely articulated in those contexts where social scientists see themselves and their craft as marginal to mainstream and dominant Euro-American and patriarchal discourses. What about social scientists at the 'centre'? Do they consider restructuring of the social sciences to be decisive for the future of the social sciences? It is interesting, for example, to speculate if the discourse on 'Eurocentrism' and the call for reshaping and restructuring the social sciences would receive more attention if prominent scholars located in the 'centre' participated in this discourse.

It is thus curious that 'Eurocentrism' has *only* recently started to get some

scholarly attention in the world of social science. If the discourse on restructuring the social sciences does take off now, it would be a piercing commentary on the politics through which ideas get recognized and validated as legitimate. A historical perspective and a recognition of multiple and dissenting voices are essential to the task of restructuring the social sciences. But how are counter-androcentric and counter-Eurocentric discourses positioned vis-a-vis mainstream social science? The 'restructuring' agenda in the social sciences, I would argue, is often untouched by these critical argumentations (although sometimes fashionably mentioned and thus officially included) and not embedded in the critique of its fundamental premises identified and articulated by these voices. This strategy of 'mention and inclusion' produces the effect that merely lip service is paid to critical voices, but their actual appraisals are neither attended to nor theorized vis-a-vis the 'opening up' project, and hence continue to remain outside and also irrelevant. Yet, the mode of their inclusion is problematic. I suggest that the empirical discussion and *presence* of critical voices in this argument actually lead to *closure* – both intellectual and structural – and thwart attempts at further deliberation. The issues are deemed to have been raised, highlighted, addressed and resolved. This manner of addressing criticisms does not create further spaces for assessing counter-arguments or responding to them, a situation that seems counter-productive to the agenda of restructuring the social sciences.

This raises for me a more serious question about the role of 'critique' in any discourse. Clearly, critique is an essential element of all discourses, reflecting a refusal to take anything for granted, and can potentially be regenerative. A reflection on the status of Eurocentric and androcentric critiques in mainstream social science is both illustrative and enlightening. After several decades of these critiques, Eurocentric and patriarchal hegemony continues to be the norm in the world of social science. Admittedly, by now at least the need for alternative formulations of social science is deemed 'permissible' and 'legitimate' in a climate of celebrated multiplicity and political correctness. However, both feminist scholarship and 'alternative discourses' continue to be marginal and peripheral; they do occupy a space and a voice within the social science domain, but have not really been able to challenge or decentre the problematic premises and categories therein. For example, after some half-a-century of *noting* Eurocentrism in the epistemological and methodological foundations of the social sciences, the subject today has been *normalized* enough to be taken for granted. Thus, one confronts not a denial of Eurocentrism (for the evidence for this is abundant), but arguments that either trivialize the issue, rationalize it away or incorporate (and thus resolve) it superficially, all of which are problematic responses for obvious reasons.

I think a vital aspect of the 'opening up' project would entail work towards the legitimation of alternative discourses, which are marginalized both in the Eurocentres of social science and from the larger community of

social scientists in the non-western world. It would be oppressive to suggest that everyone should be concerned with the question of conceptualizing and formulating alternative discourses or that these perspectives should now be considered mainstream. Rather I am making an argument for a legitimate space for critique of received traditions for those who are passionate about it. In my experience a common reaction to alternative discourses is to either ignore, ridicule or dismiss them often without proper understanding. What is lacking here is a serious engagement with the domain, which is also detrimental to the production of knowledge within the field of alternative discourses given the absence of an atmosphere of healthy intellectual debates and considered deliberations.

To See Linkages between the Institutional Structures that Frame Social Sciences Spheres and the Reproduction of Problematic Norms, Practices and Knowledges

In my assessment, to date much work in the name of producing regional and indigenous social science has concentrated on either the examination and critique of 'western' concepts, theories and models and their applicability (or not) to non-western realities, or attempts to generate indigenous/native and autonomous concepts to theories of the same. The task of deconstruction of received conceptual frames and their 'lack of fit' to other realities has engaged scholars in this field. By now, numerous examples of good and valuable works that have contributed to rich theorizing in this domain can be cited as evidence (Norholdt and Visser, 1995; Oommen, 1995; Pertierra, 1995). For example, particular concepts in the social sciences such as 'religion' have been subjected to intense scrutiny and their etymological, cultural and intellectual histories investigated to demonstrate its particularities rather than its assumed universalism (Alatas, S. H., 1977; Asad, 1993; Tambiah, 1984). Such literature has rightly highlighted the problematics of universalizing western concepts, and the search for alternate and autonomous concepts (Spickard, 1998) is indeed imperative. However, in my estimation, this constitutes just one dimension of the 'opening up' project. Another vital facet that needs scrutiny in such a task is the administrative and organizational frameworks within which the social science disciplines are institutionalized and reproduced.

A historical perspective further allows us to see that the attention to the organizational bases of the social sciences is itself not recent. It has concerned social scientists for some time. For example, a UNESCO-led symposium on social science research development in Asia, organized in Jakarta in 1974, is historically significant (see UNESCO, 1974). This symposium brought together social scientists from India, Malaysia, Pakistan, Iran, Thailand, Bangladesh and Indonesia. These participants provided empirical material

relating to the institutional structures of the social sciences in their respective countries, and also articulated the need to attend to this domain for the further development of the various social sciences disciplines. But this counsel has largely gone unheeded by subsequent generations of social scientists, or at least not prioritized sufficiently.

Decades later, the authors of *Open the Social Sciences* pick up on this theme. It has been pointed out by numerous other scholars too that the organizational structures are themselves completely embedded in limited intellectual logic and a problematic politics – which must also be articulated in a successful rebuilding of the social sciences. But a prioritizing of the organizational apparatus of social science practice over intellectual reconfigurations is as untenable as is viewing them as separate. For example, feminist scholarship (Christiansen-Ruffman, 1998) has suggested institutional reform by exposing and attending to the patriarchal and androcentric assumptions in the very infrastructure of the various social science disciplines. In another example, writing out of a Latin American context, Edgardo Lander (1997) points out that the very institutionalization of the social sciences here is rooted in a 'hegemonic discourse' that privileges the white, masculine, urban and cosmopolitan perspective at the expense of the 'Other', who is barbarian, primitive, black, Indian and who is viewed as having nothing to offer to conceptualizing the social sciences in the region.

Both feminist and postcolonial critiques of the social sciences have overwhelmingly highlighted the politics of knowledge production and its legitimation. Clearly, any restructuring of the social sciences cannot take place in a sociocultural and political vacuum and must acknowledge and problematize colonial links and patriarchal assumptions in the perpetuation of particular institutional structures (organization of faculties and universities, teaching of the various social science disciplines, selective resource allocation across disciplines, foreign funding of research, etc.) in the world of social science.

I fully endorse the need to expose the ideological and political dimensions of knowledge production in the social sciences and the rootedness of its institutional bases in orientalist, Eurocentric and colonial worldviews. Yet, I propose that a *balanced* account of the state of social sciences in the present also must pay attention to what has happened to these 'inherited' organizational and administrative structures in the former colonies, since political independence. There has to date been little analytical discussion and information about the actual *internal* circumstances in which the social sciences are now practised. This latter entails attending to the institutionalized structures and frameworks of public and private universities and research centres and institutes, where social scientists are practising their craft – either in their capacity as instructors or researchers. I contend that it is equally important to examine and survey the operational logic of these locales in order to better appreciate how the social sciences in practice are constrained and thus to see

what spaces for autonomy may be possible if they were organized differently. Based on my experience of teaching and undertaking research in the region, I identify some domains that impact my day-to-day life as a sociologist, and try to articulate the embedded norms that are evident in specific practices relating to administration of research and teaching.

Appointment of External Examiners, Directors of Research Centres, External Reviewers for Evaluating Staff for Promotion and Tenure, Membership of International Advisory Boards (for Journals and Departments) and Visiting Committees

Many Third World universities continue the practice of engaging experts (meaning social scientists and administrators from outside the country and the region, usually North America or Europe) to these named positions. The role of these individuals is varied but it includes evaluating both staff members and their research and teaching, grading students' work, advising as to the shape the departments should take, etc. Some questions many of us ask include these: Why should this continue to be deemed necessary? Are there no experts internal to the region? To my mind this practice of always needing to secure external experts is first and foremost an unthinking custom, and second, and more problematically, signifies the absence of a culture of self-validation, self-affirmation and a lack of confidence and independent judgement. We know that there are indeed strong and critical social science traditions in India, China, parts of Southeast Asia, Africa, Latin America, etc. But rarely are any experts from these places identified to sit on international panels, whose membership is normally constituted by social scientists from North America, Europe and increasingly from Australia. The argument I am making here is not about being xenophobic or about delinking from the 'West' or being chauvinistic. Rather I am pointing to the existing practice and logic by which experts are recognized and often this has little to do with the merit and intellectual standing of the person in question.

What Research is Considered Important and Crucial?

Although there are exceptions to the rule, Third World social scientists have generally defined their research interests and expertise by focusing on the study of their own societies. This is as true for sociologists as it is for anthropologists. Consequently, many of them have become experts in fields labelled 'area studies' and 'regional studies'. There is a tendency for university administrators and even for academics in Third World universities to receive such work as being of 'local' rather than 'global' importance. This is indeed a problematic dichotomy as we know well. In such a context the definition of a piece of work as 'regional' becomes a basis for seeing its parochialism and limitation, in not transcending the immediate context. But one needs to ask: what defines the regionalism of a particular research project? Often one

hears that if someone is working on Malaysia or Singapore that is not good enough as it is not of global relevance. Is work on Paris or New Jersey necessarily more global by definition? There is of course the reverse problem in these very universities where only work on their own societies is deemed to be relevant, to the exclusion of all else. As a means of countering both problems, and this is stating the obvious: surely the mark of a good piece of work is not about empirical sites where research is carried out or even about its substantive contributions alone, but about its capacity to abstract theoretical insight and practical knowledges from particular locations, contributions that may have relevance anywhere. The deprioritizing of the 'local' is a real problem that is pervasive and one that social scientists in the non-West have to deal with in being asked to demonstrate the value and applicability of their works beyond the local.

Where to Publish and Why?

Research and publishing have increasingly, and ironically, become fragmented activities for most social scientists today. It is no longer sufficient to undertake social science research and incorporate that in one's teaching. The proof of research lies in producing public documents such as articles, conference papers, books, book chapters and monographs. More importantly, the measure of publications lies in the stature and standing of publishing domains, themselves judged according to 'objective' criteria. The idea that academics either 'publish or perish' links publications to the rice bowl. It is legitimate to make the argument that writing and disseminating one's research findings and insights is 'normal' for academics, as are research and teaching. However, increasingly social scientists everywhere are expected to publish in a list of select and set journals (originating largely from North America and Europe) that are defined as international refereed journals, and with university presses (again mostly North American). This experience is by no means unique to social scientists working in Southeast Asian universities. I have colleagues in Australian and Indian public teaching universities that also experience the hegemony set up by this list of 'good' and 'prestigious' publishing spaces. This is not because there is a dearth of publishing platforms in say Southeast Asia or South Asia. The list of publishers and journals (that are ironically sought after by social scientists from the North) in non-western settings is a long and respectable one. But the politics of location haunts non-western social scientists in a new and altered mould. Publishing in local/regional journals is not good enough they are told. Publishing, everywhere, has become tied to tenure and promotion, to keeping a job and making a living. Social scientists are subjected to the tyranny of journal ranking exercises, which evaluate journals and hence publications on the basis of circulation figures, impact factors and their mention in collections of abstracts and indices, normally generated in North America and European countries.

This poses a real problem for scholars working and writing about Southeast Asia or specific countries in this region. In an ideal world, writing and publishing are about seeking relevant and interested audiences. Thus one would publish in domains/arenas where one is likely to encounter interest, perhaps generate some discussion and even receive some feedback because one is saying something that is of consequence to other social scientists. So one might publish in *Review of Indonesian and Malay Affairs (RIMA)*, *Sojourn*, *Man in India*, *Alternatives*, *Akademika*, *Kajian Malaysia*, *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, *Philippine Sociological Review*, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* – to name just a few journals that originated in and are based in the region. Yet, sociologists and anthropologists working on Singapore, Indonesia or Malaysia know that the top-ranked journals in their fields are identified as those originating out of Boston, San Francisco, London, Leiden or Denmark. We all know these journals by name: *American Anthropologist*, *American Journal of Sociology*, *American Ethnologist*, *International Sociology*, *British Journal of Sociology*, *Sociology of Religion*, etc. The list is a select one. What are the chances of someone who is working say on the development of Malay and Indonesian literature in Southeast Asia generating sufficient interest amongst the editors of say *American Anthropologist* to consider publishing it? Yet, if the person were to publish in *RIMA*, not only would the accomplishment be seen as less worthwhile, he or she would also be 'penalized' for not having a publication in an 'international refereed journal'. One clearly gets more credit, prestige and points for publishing in the latter. What is clearly problematic here is the definition of 'international' vs 'regional' journals, the former commonly viewed as 'western' publications, and judging the quality of the work within on the basis of such categorization. It would be unfair and inaccurate to suggest that what are called regional journals are not valued at all, and indeed there are social scientists that do publish their research in them. However, the point I wish to make is that, as far as the 'authorities' are concerned (particularly university administrators and those who evaluate staff research and publications), this 'international–regional' dichotomy and the merits of the two types of publications are obvious and natural to them. It is sometimes possible for individuals to argue for the quality of a piece of writing if it is not published in a top-ranked, premier journal. But the point to note is that the possibility of allowing for recognition of quality work is *not built into the structure* but is left instead to individual effort and initiative. To some extent there is both a self-fulfilling prophecy and a vicious cycle at work here. Very often, journals coming out of non-western settings are not valued by social scientists working in these domains themselves for reasons just outlined, hence further compounding the problem of lack of self-validation and self-confidence.

Who Has the Authority to Speak and about What?

The global academic division of labour identified in the West/non-West–theory/data divide certainly typifies the politics of academia and intellectual specialization in the social sciences. But it is curious that newer permutations of this divide have also proliferated and manifest themselves in real life situations: that is the global/regional(local) segregation. Many social scientists can no doubt vouch for the trend I am about to relate. When I have attended social science conferences, seminars and symposia in universities or research centres in Manila, Kuala Lumpur, Pekanbaru, New Delhi and Singapore I have noted that the keynote and distinguished speakers selected for these events are invariably from the 'West'. Of course local experts are also on the programme, but often there is the assumption that their expertise lies in speaking about particular places (their own societies) and perhaps about regional issues. Whereas the outside experts are assumed to be better able to provide a more comprehensive account of global, historical, comparative, theoretical and universal perspectives. This is often reflected even in the amount of time that is allocated to these individuals to speak on their specific topics. The choice and invitation of individuals and the subject matter assigned to them clearly reveal implicit and problematic assumptions about their intellectual capacities, simply on the basis of their location and identity, which is a disturbing trend.

Admittedly, all the points that I have noted here are neither confined to social science spheres nor unique to particular non-western societies. Indeed, many of the problematics I have identified have more to do with the ways in which universities (both in the West and the non-West) conceptualize and organize themselves under changing socioeconomic, cultural and political conditions. But quite apart from this commonality, in my view there is a more serious problem in non-western settings in the dominance of an 'outside orientation' (read western), lack of self-affirmation and the continuing valorization of things 'western' however this category is understood.

I have already argued that critique of received social science knowledge and practices and their legitimation are essential ingredients in the 'opening up' project. Despite the end of political colonial and imperial rule, social scientists the world over have rightly alerted us to the ways in which subtle but powerful mechanisms operate to keep the hierarchical, unequal, core–periphery relationship alive, even in the world of academia (Lander, 1997). However, I wish to now turn to a problematic that in my view emerges from an overwhelming emphasis on the idea of western hegemony in non-western social science. Rarely have proponents of indigenization positions or formulators of alternative discourses highlighted the need to look at procedures and policies through which universities and research centres in the non-West function. Without generalizing, it would be fair to state that many such domains can (within some obvious constraints) and do by now operate

on a day-to-day basis, in a more or less autonomous and independent fashion. After some decades of self-government and political autonomy then, theoretically at least, many non-western tertiary and research institutions do have the leeway to do things differently. I argue for a need to focus on the political economy of knowledge production and its actual infrastructural framework in the present, and internal to the context of non-western societies. This is necessary to allow us to explore the extent to which continuing norms and practices in social science spheres are indeed a result of western, hegemonic influences, or to establish if other factors are at work.

A historical dimension reveals that the infrastructures for the perpetuation of the social sciences were implanted from western societies to non-western locales, and carried with them particular agendas – intellectual, organizational and political. But to what extent do these continue and who is involved in perpetuating them today? Social scientists working in these settings often find themselves fighting a battle on two fronts: in shaking off the remnants of a colonial past and in dealing with university administrators and bureaucrats present in their own midst. Granted that the present structures were indeed once inherited, but what has been done with this received tradition? If they are unthinkingly accepted as normal and natural and thus perpetuated, where is the hegemony of a colonial, imperial past? Resistance to change and reform does not necessarily operate in a hegemonic fashion emanating from some abstract centre of social science power located in the North and acted upon by powerful academics from the centre. Far from it. In my experience, the resistance to changing received modes of doing things is very often internal and accounts for the perpetuation of the status quo in the world of social science. The controls over received traditions and the resistances to decentring them are by now, after some few decades of institutionalization, well entrenched in universities everywhere. It is pointless, therefore, to continue to speak in terms of 'western' hegemony in the social sciences, if the terms are ill defined, abstract and too diffused to be of any concrete value. The obstacles to building new and different social science institutions and practices are very often present in our own backyards. It is more fruitful to recognize the presence of gatekeepers (senior academics and administrators alike) in the West and in the non-West, who do monitor and police attempts to question what is conventionally recognized and accepted as a legitimate and final received tradition.

I want to reiterate that I am not denying the presence of academic colonialism and hegemonic relations between social science centres in the West and non-West – through a variety of mechanisms.

The piece by Lander (1997) is remarkable for pointing out the nuanced ways in which the social sciences continue to exercise different kinds of domination, and for highlighting how deep-seated its reach is. He is also pessimistic about the possibility of change given the structure of contemporary,

global power relations, including in the world of social science. In his view, 'the main obstacles are political' (Lander, 1997: 72). I certainly agree, but I also hold that a continuous attention to the global politics of academia actually detracts from the internal conservatism, bureaucratic mentality and politics, and can become a pretext for the pervasive lack of initiative, effort and willingness to think and act differently – on the part of various parties (including social scientists themselves) in non-western social science domains. Ironically, many social scientists do not problematize but unthinkingly accept their discipline's history and indeed take for granted the norms and practices that govern them. A vital aspect of the 'opening up' project for me would thus lie in greater self-reflexivity and self-criticism on the part of practising social scientists themselves and thus moving towards alternative modes of acting.

To Translate Critique into Practice through Individual Acts, Choices and Decisions

It would be a pity if the awareness that social science disciplines are lodged in structures that are not only real but can, and do constrain behaviour and are resistant to change, were to lead to intellectual paralysis. As has been argued by countless others, critique would be a first important response. I agree with Wallerstein that 'What is most important, we repeat, is that the underlying issues be debated – clearly, openly, intelligently, and urgently' (Wallerstein et al., 1996: 105). The adoption of a constructive critical stance would be a starting point for scrutinizing the foundational premises of the social science disciplines and to propose an agenda for their explicit restructuring relevant for the future. But every generation of social scientists claims to be infused with this spirit. It has been with us in the world of social science for decades. A related and crucial question then emerges: What has been the effect of these persistent critiques of the epistemological, methodological and ideological bases of the social sciences? The presence of protesting and dissenting voices today suggests that much work remains to be done in the present. But also, merely revealing and exposing biases and limitations only go part of the way towards accomplishing the task. Critique of ideas, concepts, methodologies, assumptions and ideologies and organizational structures is indeed vital but additionally, one needs also to consider formulating and building institutional and disciplinary structures that are rooted in an awareness of the hegemony of foundational premises, in an effort to avoid perpetuating them.

I do not wish to speak here of dismantling western hegemony in the world of social science in grand, totalitarian terms. I simply wish to make the point that in the task of 'opening up' the social sciences, the agency must be

located in the hands of ordinary, practising social scientists – operating in this instance in non-western settings. It would be problematic if there were to be theoretical consensus that change is necessary but if one were to wait either for western social scientists or the 'authorities' (senior academics, research and university administrators, bureaucrats and policy-makers) to take the lead. I propose that it is indeed possible, despite the structural and intellectual limitations and controls (both emanating from within and from outside), for social scientists to engage in alternative practices in specific, small ways as they go about their day-to-day business as practitioners of their disciplines. Here, I shift the emphasis from reconceptualizing and rethinking the social sciences to rebuilding and restructuring the actual conditions and spaces where they are put into practice.

Open the Social Sciences lists four recommendations as part of the 'opening up' agenda. Of the four proposals, the first two (bringing together scholars for year-long research and establishing integrated research programmes across traditional disciplinary lines) already exist in some form or another, and the next two suggestions (compulsory joint appointment of professors and joint work for graduate students across disciplinary lines) seem to me rather administrative in orientation. In my assessment, the counsel offered here is rather grandiose and elite-centred and would involve perhaps only a fraction of individuals from any social science community, rather than touch all or the bulk of its members. This did make me wonder about the relevance of the proposed recommendations to the everyday business of being a social scientist in a western or non-western academic setting, for a vast majority of practitioners in the field. How would, for example, someone like myself be touched by these administrative, managerial changes, if they were to be more widely instituted?

If one recognizes the contextual particularities and multiplicities in the world of social science, an awareness made possible by the vast literature in the field of regional social science, what would the 'opening up' project mean? Can it possibly be conceptualized as having a universal set of meanings? What would it mean to a junior or middle-level faculty member in a teaching university in Dhaka, or New Delhi or Jakarta, or to already established professors, academics, or to administrators in elite universities in the centre? To begin with, and to state the obvious, such a project must necessarily signify different things to diverse communities of social scientists, located and practising in a multitude of settings, depending on the specifics of the situation. The evidence for this position is I think by now overwhelming[2] and does not need to be recounted here. Clearly, there would be as many versions of this 'opening up' project as there would be parties.

Is there indeed a need to 'open up' the social sciences? Some think that the social sciences are at present already 'so open that few dominant perspectives or theories or analytical vocabularies ... are dominant for more

than ten or twenty years' (Berger, 1997: 75). I disagree with this sentiment and define instead 'opening up' in this fashion and hence argue in its favour: recognizing and avoiding centrisms/centredness in the practice of the social sciences, both in teaching and research; paying attention to the internal structures in the non-western world where social science is practised; legitimating the role of critique, and of dissenting voices; and facilitating their translation into action and their dissemination in the teaching of the social sciences, particularly at undergraduate levels. In more concrete terms, I offer three specific areas where I have experienced the possibilities for individual action and choice, in an effort to 'open up' the social sciences in the ways that I have articulated it.

Teaching and Research-Related Initiatives

These are two areas where I feel individuals can exercise a great deal of autonomy. Although course content and syllabi do vary with individuals who teach them, certain bodies of social science knowledge have been reproduced and institutionalized as 'normal' and 'right' in universities everywhere. While some real constraints do exist as to the choice of subject matter and teaching orientations, I have found that for the most part, I can exercise a great deal of independence in crafting a particular syllabus (say in the teaching of classical social theory or sociology of religion) that can recount the received wisdom, but also create a space for approaching such material critically. A very obvious and direct mode of action would entail incorporating the aforementioned critiques into undergraduate and postgraduate teaching projects, by formulating and proposing new and different subject matter, by deconstructing received history and wisdom of the social sciences. Allow me to cite an example from my own experience of what an instance of 'opening' the social sciences might look like in more concrete terms. Together with a colleague at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore, I have been involved in the teaching of a third-year undergraduate module, 'Social Thought and Social Theory'. When we first started to teach this module together some years ago, we surveyed the usual list of founding fathers, the great men of ideas, found in most such syllabi the world over. Eventually though, we have been teaching the module with a view to highlighting to our students the various sorts of biases in the sociological theory canon, and contemplating ways of addressing these limitations. This has led us to identify two dominant problematic strands, both in the recognition of the canon and in its perpetuation through teaching – Eurocentrism and androcentrism. Hence, although we continue to teach say Marx, Weber and Durkheim in this module, we also alert our students to the Eurocentric and androcentric dimensions of their ideas (Alatas and Sinha, 2001). Additionally, we have also tried to broaden the canvas of social thought to include a variety of individuals from diverse locations and timeframes such as Ibn Khaldun,

José Rizal, Ram Mohan Ray, Harriet Martineau, Pandita Ramabai, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, as instances of social thinkers. This strategy allows us to ask what 'social thought and social theory' signify and to question the exclusively 'western' location of social theorists and thinkers.

In the area of research also, there is scope for flexing one's creative muscles, particularly in one's capacity as an independent researcher. Team-based and collaborative research may provide fewer options for acting as freely unless one is working with like-minded individuals. For example, it is possible to undertake research in sociology or anthropology of religion that problematizes the category and highlights its Judeo-Christian-Islamic rootedness. This is particularly relevant if one is located in a sociocultural context where one is trying to theorize such religious traditions as Buddhism, Hinduism and Chinese religion through the lens of the category 'religion'.

Publishing in Relevant Arenas

Another alternative practice would be for social scientists working and researching in non-western locales to begin to publish in what are labelled 'regional'/'local' journals. This is not about being closed to other publishing outlets on chauvinistic or nativistic grounds or about lowering intellectual standards. Rather this is about recognizing the contextual importance and relevance of specific publishing domains on grounds of appropriate subject matter, readership and audiences. So if a piece of writing would get more discussion and dissemination in a 'regional' journal, that is where one could insist on publishing it, even if the journal is not ranked highly in the bigger scheme of things. Of course, this entails making a specific choice on the basis of one's intellectual commitments and would carry the requisite, most probably negative consequences.

Educating Administrators and Bureaucrats as 'Public Service'

As one aspect of the public service that social scientists are increasingly asked to perform, when the opportunity presents itself, one could seek out administrators and bureaucrats based in universities and research institutes and highlight how specific policies and decisions, however unintentionally, perpetuate Eurocentric assumptions and unequal global power relations in the world of academia. One example would be say the choice of distinguished speakers at conferences. Local experts who are invited just to provide empirical information about their societies could politely decline the invitations but then also explain the reasons for their decision. I personally know of only a few cases where this has started to happen. Of course, the immediate effect of such a decision is that one does not speak at all. But if one cares to listen, such silence speaks volumes and communicates the point well. These I think would go a long way eventually towards arresting the perpetuation of habitual and unintentional but ideologically loaded practices.

Concluding Thoughts

My argument here has been that a balanced 'opening up' exercise implies a simultaneous attention to the philosophical, intellectual apparatus and organizational frameworks in social science domains. The actual mechanisms and practices for reform can only be identified through attention to the structures of knowledge production in the non-West. Thus apart from the conceptual and political critique of the social sciences, I value the everyday, ordinary, mundane acts that practitioners of this field can engage in in their day-to-day task of being a sociologist or anthropologist, as absolutely crucial to the 'opening up' project. I am quite aware that these individual acts and choices will not revolutionize the world of social science or erase global power differences or change styles of university administration and governance. Yet, they are consequential even if they only culminate in identifying those spaces where individual social scientists can act differently, those challenges (no matter how seemingly small) that can be confronted and the extent to which given boundaries can be pushed and produce meaningful shifts.

Notes

1 See for example Sherif and Sherif (1967).

2 The most up to-date account of these writings are carried in the 11 volumes on the state of the social sciences in different parts of the world, commissioned by the International Sociological Association in 1999. These volumes demonstrate how diverse and unique the conceptualization, the practice and the challenges of the social sciences are in these different settings (Sinha, V., 2000).

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