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Instigating a Call for the Teaching of Alternative Discourses and Knowledges in Asia

Noorman Abdullah

Abstract

The state of knowledge production and circulation – or what is framed as “relevant” knowledge within academic cultures of learning and teaching – is intimately tied to the global concept of what is “marketable”. Closely associated with this are opportunities for teaching and research funding, graduate scholarship awards, the employment of research and teaching staff and curriculum design. In Asia, the corporatisation of universities and their departments intensified in the 1990s and early 2000s. This stemmed from a complex interplay of historical and structural conditions and pressures, including the colonial legacy of cultural, intellectual and economic dependency. In this paper, the author argues that what is necessary in these contexts in Asia, in line with the call for what are now broadly termed “alternative discourses” from scholars such as Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha, is the teaching of a social science tradition created and expanded by scholars who are guided by the selection of problems and relevance from within. In broad contours, alternative discourses refer to the theorising and conceptualisation of social science in Asia and elsewhere that emerged from dissatisfaction with mainstream Euro-American-oriented models, research agendas and priorities. More specifically, the article interrogates the focus on teaching and pedagogy, which has, among other things, resulted in a displacement of attention from issues that should be of crucial consideration to Asian societies.

Keywords: Knowledge production, alternative discourses, pedagogy, captive mind, Asia

Numerous scholars have examined the ways in which people, objects, deities, viruses, symbols, senses, capital, discourses and knowledge traverse the diverse and multiple pathways that constitute everyday life in Asia (Arumugam 2020; Low et al. 2020; Maunaguru 2019; Mielke / Hornidge 2017; Sinha 2005). For example, Claudia Derichs (2017: 174) has noted the intensified tempo of global processes, with “digital communication and social media facilities becoming household tools in even the remotest areas, and technically facilitated access to information of all provenience accelerat[ing] the flows of ideas, opinions,

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summons, invitations to debate and the like”. All these academic works collectively attempt to elicit the connectivities, comparisons and collaborations in teaching and research, with the goal of critically revisiting and reworking conceptual and theoretical toolkits, methodologies, as well as curricular and pedagogical interventions.

“Asia” as a site of method and theory is conceived of as a node of multiple and complex movements of knowledge. This context of and perspective from Asia provides a productive analytical landscape to problematise the logics of mobility (Dutta / Shome 2018; Lin et al. 2017; Low 2019, 2023). Such logics emerge from inter- and intra-Asian encounters in various aspects of social, political and economic life. While scholarship on mobilities and immobilities across a range of domains in Asian societies have gained some traction (Collins 2011; Galam 2017; Steele / Lin 2014; Vasankumar 2014; Whittaker / Chee 2016), this paper seeks to deepen and broaden the extant scope of enquiry that deals with how knowledge and discourse traverse different and multiple paths in universities in Asia, drawing specifically on Singapore in this case. “Asia” is therefore treated not merely as a geographic region per se, but as a site of theory (Sinha 2003) and method (Chen 2010) that thereby builds upon earlier theoretical, empirical and methodological interventions. The aim, so to speak, is to “evade the constraints of Western academic ethnocentrism” (Clarsen / Mom 2014: 2; see also Alatas / Sinha 2017) and draw on perspectives from and on Asia as a broader enterprise, while at the same time appreciating the salience accorded to history, context and relevance.

What then are some of the effects on teaching and research when knowledge and theory produced from the context of the global North moves through universities across the globe? How is knowledge acquired and disseminated in institutions of higher learning and research? In every society, the “‘production of discourse’ is not free and unplanned but controlled, selected, organised and channeled, and in consequence only certain ideas achieve prominence and can develop push effects” (Derichs / Heberer 2006: 1). This includes “[h]ow fast they are allowed to move, how far they can move and whether they have a chance to enter the space of political decision-making” (ibid.: 2). More specifically, the state of knowledge production and circulation – or what is framed as “relevant” and “important” knowledge within academic cultures of learning and teaching in Asia – is intimately tied to the global concept of what is “marketable” and the extent to which this idea has shifted. Closely associated with this are opportunities for teaching and pedagogical innovation, research funding, graduate scholarship awards, the employment of research and teaching staff, and module and curricular design, which have an impact on what is taught in universities and how these are communicated to students.

Over the years, the corporate and neoliberal character of universities and their departments has become more apparent. This stems from a complex of

historical conditions, as well as internal and external structural pressures, which usually include the colonial legacy of cultural, intellectual and economic dependence. In light of this context, one of the most acute problems is the overwhelming and habitual academic and intellectual dependence on North American models and knowledge structures. These intertwine with the global politics of academia and its embedded complexities to perpetuate and reproduce a division of intellectual labour between those who research and those who are researched upon. Connected with this are not only theoretical, conceptual and empirical manifestations of this division of labour, but more crucially, the ways in which these ideas and knowledge move and are disseminated and reproduced in everyday academic practices and actions, which include teaching and learning.

In this paper, I argue that it is necessary, following scholars such as Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha who call for what is now broadly termed “alternative discourses”, to establish an academic tradition that is created and expanded by teachers and scholars who are guided by the selection of problems and issues that are both relevant to and resonant with them. In broad contours, alternative discourses refer to efforts at social science theorising and conceptualisation in Asia and elsewhere that have emerged as a result of dissatisfaction with mainstream Euro-American-oriented models, research agendas and priorities (Alatas 2000). More specifically, I interrogate the issue of “intellectual imperialism” (or “academic colonialism”) in teaching and pedagogy, which has, among other things, resulted in a displacement of attention from issues that should be of crucial consideration to Asian societies.

I use two interweaving frameworks to discuss the state and potential of teaching of alternative discourses in Asia – the process of “silencing” (S.F. Alatas 2019) and the “captive mind” (S.H. Alatas 1974). Two connected concepts to be unpacked further are “academic dependency” and “alternative discourses”. The main focus of this paper is to look at the teaching of social theory and the limits of the approaches available. It is an ongoing struggle to research and teach effectively, inclusively and critically about the power and politics of difference via alternative discourses; I agree with bell hooks, who writes in her book *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*:

The classroom, with all its limitations, remains a location of possibility. In that field of possibility, we have the opportunity to labour for freedom, to demand of ourselves and our comrades, an openness of mind and heart that allows us to face reality even as we collectively imagine ways to move beyond boundaries, to transgress. This is education as the practice of freedom. (hooks 1994: 206)

Silencing and the captive mind

Colonialism lingers over the fate of many countries in the non-West; its effects continue to be felt in many institutions, including academic and knowledge structures in these countries. While several scholars assert that high theory is almost entirely “Western” and largely European in provenance (Alatas 1998; Clammer 2000) and moves from these sites to universities in the non-West, there are also intellectuals who have been actively involved in disengaging and decentring the issue of hegemonic social theories, epistemologies and methodologies for more than half a century (S.H. Alatas 1974, 1977; S.F. Alatas 2000, 2015; Chaudhuri 1990; Chen, 1998; Derichs 2017; Said 1979; Sinha 2000, 2003). These emerge under broad and connected efforts pertaining to “indigenous knowledge”, “theory from the global South and elsewhere”, “decolonisation”, “subaltern theory” and “alternative discourses”. S.F. Alatas (2000: 1) further contends that “some non-western scholars in the 19th century and more during the postcolonial period recognised that the social sciences cannot be transplanted to a different historical and socioeconomic setting without doing injustice and violence to their respective realities”.

Many of those who make these observations do not consider the entire corpus of “Western” social science as irrelevant and do not reject such knowledge on the sole grounds of origin. Chen and his contributors emphasise in *Trajectories* (1998) that Critical Cultural Studies is both an internationalist and decolonised enterprise that does not occlude “Western” practices in cultural studies. However, many other teachers and students continue to uncritically and imitatively subscribe to such ideas of Western origin in what S.H. Alatas (1974) terms the “captive mind”. This largely refers to the theoretical and institutional dependence of scholars on Western thought and the uncritical and imitative manner in which such knowledge is internalised and disseminated. Among the characteristics of the captive mind are the inability to be creative and raise original problems, the inability to devise original analytical methods and alienation from the main issues of indigenous society (Alatas 1974). At its core, the captive mind, S.F. Alatas (2019: 3) argues, is “trained almost entirely in the Western sciences, reads the works of Western authors, and is taught predominantly by Western teachers, whether in the West itself or through their works available in local centres of education. Mental captivity is also found in the suggestion of solutions and policies. Furthermore, it reveals itself at the levels of theoretical as well as empirical work”.

Concomitantly, the interest in the phenomenon of academic dependency is a longstanding scholarly tradition. Academic dependency broadly refers to the (1) dependence on ideas; (2) dependence on the media of ideas; (3) dependence on the technology of education; (4) dependence on aid for research and teaching;

(5) dependence on investment in education; and (6) dependence of scholars in developing societies on demand for their skills in the knowledge powers (Alatas 2003). Moreover, what is crucial about the structure of academy dependency is the knowledge division of labour which is predicated on a three-fold division: (1) the division between theoretical and empirical intellectual labour; (b) the division between other country and own-country studies; and (3) the division between comparative and single-case studies (Alatas 2003; Sinha-Kerkhoff/Alatas 2010). Theories of academic dependency are often thought of as a mirror of the economic dependency theory, in which the presence of academic dependence reflects economic dependence (Alatas 2006; Onwuzuruigbo 2018). Relevant research on academic dependency has mushroomed and continues to engender important analyses and understudied cases (Hanafi 2011; Keim 2010).

S.H. Alatas further notes that such dependency has, among other things, resulted in a lack of attention to issues that should be of critical concern and resonance to non-Western societies. Within this structure, epistemic communities, regardless of their locale, rely on the global North for publication outlets and academic legitimacy (Lee 2020; Collyer 2018). At the same time, S.F. Alatas (2001) invokes the concepts of imitation, relevance and emulation that need to be called into question and linked to the global power structures in academia. These procedures of normalisation become ingrained and internalised as everyday practices, and are concomitantly disseminated via learning, teaching and research structures in non-Western universities. While we do recognise that corpuses of diverse alternative social knowledge are produced, these are not given due recognition, prominence or equitable standing in academic cultures in many of these non-Western countries.

Linked with academic dependency is S.F. Alatas's broader discussion on the politics and effects of silencing in the process of global knowledge production and movement. These effects are connected to and demonstrative of the marginalisation of particular knowledges and discourses in the context of academic dependency. He further draws on the relationship between Orientalism and silencing, arguing that "there is a tendency in Orientalist scholarship to be silent about certain themes or topics, although they are empirically relevant" (Alatas 2019: 4). He cites examples of Orientalist scholarship, such as those which are predisposed to consider the more feudalistic-oriented classical Malay literary texts, while obfuscating the egalitarian patterns in the same works. At the same time, he notes the lack of citation of Malay literary scholars who have raised such problems in the field of Malay Studies.

S.F. Alatas conceives of two forms of silencing: omission and dismissal. These include citation and referencing practices that contribute to the marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion of certain discourses. Silencing and the very act of not citing or referencing certain works or authors, he contends, further disregards the "already marginalised discourses and contribute to the unevenness of global

knowledge production” (2019: 11). Here, he notes the “unwillingness or failure to cite or acknowledge the work of others, no matter how pertinent or relevant those works are” (ibid.), which suggests a lack of conscientious engagement with relevant bodies of work. The second form of silencing encompasses the dismissal and marginalisation of particular works and discourses. Alatas (2019: 19) notes that such repudiation is quite different from critique, in that “[c]ritique can be seen as a serious and creative engagement with an opposing discourse, whereas dismissal refers to an unconscious and unserious engagement with such discourses”. Such silencing extends not only to the field of research, but to both teaching and pedagogy. As Kelvin Low and I have noted elsewhere (2005), pertinent questions arise, such as what types of research and studies are regarded as important and thus worthy of study and funding, as well as in terms of what appears on the curriculum, which is discussed in the next section.

Teaching and learning in context: The case of sociology in Singapore

The success of academic departments in Asia, especially Singapore, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Taiwan and South Korea, reflects the economic growth of these nation-states. Based on global university rankings such as the QS World University Ranking and Times Higher Education World Universities Ranking, such universities have quickly climbed the ladder. According to both of their 2022 rankings, these universities are within the top 100 Sociology programmes. I reference such global rankings as social facts as well as to critically and sociologically reflect on the privilege accorded to such rankings.

More specifically, Sociology as a discipline and practice has developed and spread in many societies and universities in Asia, including Singapore to address and understand broader social, political and economic issues, problems and concerns facing such societies. For the most part, the historical and institutional advancement of such departments in Asian universities reveals a knowledge production structure that relies on the United States and, to some extent, Western Europe for publication outlets, recruitment and academic legitimacy (Collyer 2018). Though initially reported in the 1960s and 1970s, this pattern of relying on the US and Western Europe continues to recur today. Graduate students and faculty members from many universities in Southeast Asia, East Asia and other non-North-American institutions are acquainted with the relationship between the model for internationalisation and the emulation of standards from North America. In fact, the shift from the United Kingdom and Europe to North America has intensified even further in the new millennium, and even universities in Europe have begun to follow suit. One plausible reason why

universities and academic cultures subscribe to such global metrics is that these sites require benchmarks to measure their “impact” and “cutting edge” work above others to enable them to market their capabilities and performances – both nationally and globally. The reliance of what scholars have termed centres for academic training and learning is one of the more significant indicators of academic dependency status. Case studies in other regions have shown that the United States and the United Kingdom continue to be the largest source of junior researchers (Keim 2011).

The findings presented in this paper are preliminary and nascent, and require more research to be done, especially comparatively within and between Asian universities. Broadly, Singapore provides an interesting case in Asia to demonstrate a strong dependence on academic scholars trained especially in reputable universities as well as publishing in prestigious outlets situated mainly in North America, leading to the emergence of a hyper-production regime that gives privilege to such sources. The disciplinary training in these respective institutions, mostly in the global North, also often shapes and influences the manner in which such faculty members design and teach modules, design curricula and conduct research. The learning of formative and pivotal ideas, works and theoretical frameworks moves with them from their graduate training to their eventual academic, research and teaching institutions. In spite of the fact that scholars have continued to express concern for the “fast-food” type of academic works published (Abbott 2018), the concept of “publish or perish” is well known to all academics and the pressure is experienced in everyday life. In this regard, Singapore has often been treated in academic research as part of the Asian economic miracle for its robust growth.

The Department of Sociology was one of the earliest departments in the University of Singapore (later the National University of Singapore (NUS)), established after Singapore’s unanticipated independence in 1965. Today, the department has consistently been placed in the top twenty in global university rankings and continues to hone its core research programmes, which are organised into four broad clusters: Anthropology; Comparative Historical Sociology; Family, Demography and Inequality; and Urban, Mobility and Cultural Studies. The discipline and teaching of Sociology was initially only offered in the National University of Singapore (NUS), but with the expansion of three other universities, it was gradually made available in the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), the Singapore Management University (SMU) and the Singapore University of Social Sciences (SUSS). In 2022, the department at NUS changed its name to the Department of Sociology and Anthropology to signal the range of faculty members and modules working there. Presently, out of 38 full-time faculty members in NUS Sociology and Anthropology, 28 have postgraduate degrees from North America (73%) with the remaining having received degrees in Australia (ANU), Germany (Bielefeld, Bremen) and the United Kingdom (Cambridge,

Oxford, LSE, SOAS, Sussex). Only three faculty members have degrees from NUS. This academic faculty profile is similar in other sociology departments and units in Singapore.

The modules offered in the department are open to all undergraduates and graduates across the entire campus. There are currently over 70 undergraduate modules being taught in the present academic year. Undergraduates who intend to concentrate in Sociology as one of their majors are required to complete and pass three modules: Making Sense of Society (Level 1000 module), Social Research Methods (Level 2000 module) and Social Thought and Social Theory (Level 3000 module). There are approximately 85–130 Sociology majors per cohort, though student enrolment in modules offered in the department can range from 20 to 900 undergraduates.

While there are graduate modules offered in the Department, this paper examines certain aspects of the undergraduate curriculum, with a specific emphasis on classical sociological theory instructed as a Level 3000 module and its relationship to academic dependency, silencing and the captive mind. As one of three mandatory components for Sociology majors, the social theory module has an enrolment of approximately 70 to 100 students every semester, and is offered as a cross-faculty module for other interested undergraduate students. It is pitched as an upper-level Level 3000 undergraduate module, although it is open to any interested undergraduate without any pre-requisites. It is usually taught by one or two members of the main faculty, who give the lectures, and is supported by about two teaching assistants, largely made up of graduate students. The course consists of weekly 95-minute lectures taught over 13 weeks in the semester. Enrolled undergraduates are divided into smaller tutorial groups of about 20 and meet for a total of five fortnightly discussion group sessions in the course of the semester. During each of these 95-minute sessions, the topics covered in two lectures are generally revisited and discussed through specific discussion questions and exercises. The Continual Assessment (CA) assignments vary depending on the faculty members assigned to teach the module. These often include a final examination component at the end of the semester (with the exception of the semesters during the COVID pandemic, when modules were recalibrated as 100% CA), short critical responses, forum posts, essays that test students on application, and tutorial participation.

The interest and rationale in focusing on the module on classical social theory in this paper is two-fold. First, an earlier article written by Alatas and Sinha (2001) in *Teaching Sociology* more than two decades ago serves as the precursor of this current paper. Given the time that has passed, this paper provides an update on the challenges and continuities identified by the two authors in their earlier work. Second, the topic of social theory is also taught and required in most, if not, all Sociology departments globally, including universities in Asian contexts. Through the range of course syllabi and outlines in NUS Sociology,

the selection of theorists, key texts and assignments enables a critical interrogation of how knowledge moves and circulates, and the extent to which such knowledge is accorded privilege and authority. Given the academic training of different faculty members in NUS Singapore from different academic institutions, mostly in North America, this background potentially shapes the manner in which these modules have been structured, designed and taught. A brief comparative analysis on classical sociological theory modules is provided with other Singapore universities such as NTU and SMU.

Two fundamental issues and patterns emerge in the examination of such syllabi. First, non-Western founders or precursors of social thought and social theory are generally not part of the module outlines. Typically, a module on classical social thought and theory in NUS will cover theorists such as Emile Durkheim (1858–1917), Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Max Weber (1864–1920) in its curriculum. Some samples of the course outlines read as follows:

Lecturer 1 (NUS): This course introduces students to the tools that were invented by the “classical” or “founding” social theorists – Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. We will look at their arguments about how modern machines and money systems destroyed traditional forms of community and traditional ways of life; and created new challenges to humanity’s quest for well-being. We will consider their ideas about how society could and should endeavour to solve these challenges, to see how their social theories help us to think critically and analytically about the problems and promises of modernity.¹

Lecturer 2 (NUS): The module is a critical examination of central problems in classical social theory, with emphasis on the multifaceted analysis of the larger social processes in the making of modern society. The module will concentrate on the original contributions of major theorists such as Marx, Weber, and Durkheim and explore how their works continue to influence current Sociology and Anthropology. It is mounted for all students throughout NUS with an interest in classical social theories.

The module has been designed for those who are majoring or minoring in sociology. It will also interest those who are interested in the evolution of social theory. We will examine foundational thinking about how society works. The main thinkers we will study are Karl Marx, Max Weber, and Emile Durkheim. The thinking will be located in the particular historical context of modernity in the 19th and 20th century, which will help the students to identify the limitations of the thinkers as well as be critical about their ideas. We will focus on how these theories are relevant in further theory building and understanding contemporary society because these thinkers and theories have withstood the test of time. By the end of the course, the students will learn to understand the contemporary relevance of these theories, their limitations, as well as interconnections. Along with encouraging the sociological imagination of students, these theories will also help them find better answers to the problems of contemporary society; at least they will know that scholars have been probing these problems since the 19th century. We will then look at the historical context of the emergence of sociology as a discipline to respond to the social problems presented by modernity. We will look at Karl Marx’ ideas on alienation, surplus value, commodity fetishism and so forth as the essential components of modern capitalist society and his programmatic call for social change

1 See Chua (2022). <https://luminus.nus.edu.sg/module-search/9c96472c-5d92-4599-9ae4-5d5f6f05d4ae/module-description> (accessed 02 May 2022).

through a revolution. Then we examine the theories of Max Weber, who established a middle path between all approaches to understanding society. We will examine Max Weber's studies on social hierarchies, economy, religion, state and politics. We will study Emile Durkheim and his rather 'conformist' responses to the same social issues as discussed by Marx. Through his analysis of social facts, division of labour, and religion, we will see how Durkheim firmly established the boundaries and subject matter of the discipline of sociology.²

Course chairs, who typically design and teach the module on social theory in NUS, have received graduate training in the global North, with the exception of one who obtained a PhD in Asia. Over the course of 13 weeks, three to four weeks are usually devoted to covering each social theorist and a selection of primary readings. This reading list, depending on the lecturer assigned to teach the module, includes excerpts from Marx's *Selected Writings*, *The German Ideology* (with Engels) and *Capital*; Durkheim's *The Division of Labour in Society*, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*; and Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism and Economy and Society*.

In NTU and SMU, the module outlines are similarly constructed with the same selection of theorists, with some exceptions. For instance, SMU's course Introduction to Sociological Theory includes, in addition to Marx, Weber and Durkheim, contemporary schools of functionalism, symbolic interactionism, rational choice theory, neo-Marxism and postmodernism. A cursory examination of other course syllabi accessible online, from social theory modules or history of social thought courses taught in other universities globally, may cover theorists such as Montesquieu, Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer, Georg Simmel, Ferdinand Tonnies, Karl Mannheim, Vilfredo Pareto and others. For example, in Hong Kong University (HKU), the module on Classical Social Theory focuses on theorists identified as "the great masters in sociology" viz. Marx, Weber and Durkheim. An excerpt of the course description is as follows:

What is meant by social order? How is order maintained? How does social change affect this order? What is the nature of the relationship between individuals and society? Sociologists have had a longstanding interest in these questions, dating back to the 1700s up to the present. The purpose of this course is to examine these questions by introducing students to the classics in sociological theory. In particular, we will focus on the contributions of the "great masters" in sociology – Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Each had a distinctive framework for explaining the rapid changes in society from Marx's historical materialism to Durkheim's structural functionalism and Weber's interpretive historical sociology. Their work has been instrumental to the development of modern social theory.³

2 See Liang (2019). <https://luminus.nus.edu.sg/module-search/46dae954-150b-4860-93f4-614f41f74eb3/module-description> (accessed 02 May 2022).

3 See Joosse (n.d.). <https://sociology.hku.hk/courses/soci2001-history-social-theory> (accessed 02 May 2022).

From these course outlines, it can be seen that non-Western thinkers are generally not included, with the exception of some course syllabi offered in NUS by three other course lecturers, which include Marx, Weber and Durkheim, but also a critical appraisal of the sociological canon by introducing a selection of one or two social thinkers from the global South or women thinkers. These thinkers may change but can include Jose Rizal (1861–1896), Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406) and Harriet Martineau (1802–1876).

Moreover, classical and contemporary sociological theories are not adequately contextualised in a manner that establishes a resonant reference point for undergraduates in all contexts. While the Enlightenment, the transition from feudal to capitalist societies, and the democratisation process in Europe form a relevant context in some locales, this historical and contemporary experience is not necessarily the case universally (Alatas / Sinha 2001: 318). In light of the fact that there were obviously thinkers in Asia, Africa and Latin America engaged in such an exercise, the silencing and neglect of non-European thinkers in course curricula is particularly apparent. This is also evident in modules that deal with contemporary social theory in the NUS Sociology department. As examples at the time of writing, two other modules offered for senior undergraduates in their final undergraduate year – Interpretive Sociological Theory and Contemporary Sociological Theory – cover and teach theorists situated in the global North. These include Sigmund Freud, Georg Simmel, Talcott Parsons, Bruno Latour, Michel Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu, Immanuel Wallerstein, John Meyer and Saskia Sassen.

In sum, these cases demonstrate the different ways in which academic and intellectual dependency, and the politics of including or silencing knowledge production, have permeated teaching and curriculum design. A comparison with the observations of the teaching of social theory in Singapore nearly two decades ago (Alatas / Sinha 2001) reveals that these patterns and observations remain largely sustained in extant teaching and pedagogical practices.

Critically responsive initiatives: Some teaching strategies

While many scholars no longer refute the critique levelled against Euro-American-centric social theories and methodologies, these arguments have often been normalised, taken for granted and rendered as dated, parochial, ideological and unoriginal, and thus trivial. This is highly problematic, because the issue still remains and said arguments are seldom translated and actualised into teaching practices and choices. In this respect, the call for decolonised knowledge, autonomous social science traditions and alternative and more liberating indigenous discourses and knowledges has not become mainstream even in many Asian

social science epistemic communities (S.F. Alatas, 2019). As iterated, the goal of such a call is to entrench social science theorising in specific socio-cultural and political particularities, without necessarily rejecting inputs and contributions from the global North. What are some examples of how the idea of alternative discourses has materialised to overcome academic dependency? How can we rethink the relevance and resonance of our conceptual apparatus and construct autonomous and relevant concepts and knowledge? There are several initiatives of bold, courageous institutions or individuals who are able to think and practice alternative discourses in the midst of the entrenched corporate intellectual and academic culture (see for example, Sinha 2003). I suggest two non-exhaustive initiatives below.

Diversification and expansion of the teaching repertoire through alternative discourses

The onus of responsibility for diversifying and expanding the curriculum and content falls especially on teachers of the topic, who must avoid omitting and silencing alternative theorists. Several key articles and texts that have emerged from Asia are instructive here as examples to redress the captive mind. As an important teaching intervention, Syed Farid Alatas and Vineeta Sinha have written a timely book emerging from their joint teaching of social theory at NUS. The book, *Sociological Theory beyond the Canon* (2017), is an endeavour to critically rethink and historically contextualise the sociological canon and address the bases of its Eurocentric and androcentric biases. In their assessment of the “founding fathers” of Sociology and what is described as “classical”, Alatas and Sinha introduce omitted or neglected non-Western and female thinkers, whom they include in their own teaching of classical social theory. These thinkers from North Africa and West, South and Southeast Asia, as well as Europe, include:

Abdel-Rahman Abu-Zeid Waliuddin Ibn Khaldun (Ibn Khaldun) (1332–1406), a 14th century scholar and philosopher from Tunisia, who wrote “Muqaddimah” (understanding civilisation) and introduced concepts such as *asabiyya* (social solidarity, group consciousness and social cohesion), thereby developing a historical and political sociology. A prominent perspective he advances is his cyclical theory, which explains the rise and fall of sovereign powers. These powers include dynasties, states, empires and civilisations. The theory assumes that these institutions are akin to living organisms, undergoing a process of birth, growth, maturation and death. Using the concepts of *umran* (science of civilisation, society or culture) and *asabiyya*, the cyclical theory connects the strength of *asabiyya* and the cohesion it brings to the rise and fall of such powers.

José Protasio Rizal Mercado y Alonso Realonda (José Rizal) (1861–1896) was a Filipino nationalist, activist and polymath during the end of Spanish colonial

period. He wrote on how the supposed “indolence of the Filipino” was partly attributed to colonial rule, thereby demonstrating that the underdevelopment of Filipino society was not because of any inherent shortcomings or backwardness of the native population. This ostensible “indolence” was rather the outcome of the exploitative conditions of colonial society. The attention to entrenched structural arrangements in colonial society affords important sociological leanings to Rizal’s thoughts. S.H. Alatas took up and debated such ideas and perspectives in his pivotal work *Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977). S.F. Alatas argued that Rizal’s ideas about the nature of Filipino colonial society and critique of colonial history “laid the foundations for an original Southeast Asian sociology of colonial society” (2011: XY)

Pandita Ramabai Sarawasti (1858–1922) was an Indian social reformer who was a champion for the emancipation and education of women, advocating for freedom of thought and action. Diagnosing Indian society at the time, she was critical of the dominance of caste, Hindu orthodoxy and dogma, patriarchy and colonialism as the social structural conditions for women’s oppression and of their impact of women’s everyday lives, and conceptualised alternative social structures for a more progressive future. Her core ideas and perspectives centred on ways in which women would be able to develop and harness their ability to live independently from men. These social analyses were imperative in their call for social reform.

In this regard, Alatas and Sinha have made their interventions a political project to disrupt dominant and mainstream accounts of knowledge production and flows of sociological theory. Strong and favourable endorsements of *Sociological Theory beyond the Canon* recognise the importance of such interventions for teaching and research, suggesting that the book “has done sociology a great service in this guide to early social thinkers ... [given that it] will broaden horizons for all teachers and students of social thought” (Raewyn Connell) and that it “offers an alternative account of sociological theory” (Sari Hanafi). Hanafi, who was the president of the International Sociological Association (ISA) from 2018 to 2023), further notes that the book “is not about the southern theory but the way social theories coming from the north and the south enter into cross-border interactions. Ibn Khaldun, José Rizal, Benoy Kumar Sarkar, as well as women thinkers: Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, and Pandita Ramabai will converse with Durkheim, Marx and Weber”.⁴

In addition, there are other candidates from Asia not incorporated in the book, such as Raden Ajeng Kartini (1879–1904). As a young Javanese *priyayi* (governing upper class) woman living during the colonial period of the Dutch East Indies, Kartini formulated a framework and agenda of social reform inclusiveness in education that incorporated gender as an important analytical category. Given

4 See <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/978-1-137-41134-1> (accessed 02 May 2022).

the call toward inclusiveness in today's educational institutions, Kartini's thoughts and ideas advocating education for all, including women, as well as women's rights, independence and self-autonomy, were a progressive milestone, particularly in view of the fact that she was living in the context of the prevailing conditions of the late nineteenth century, when obstacles were often erected against women's development. Scholars such as Raewyn Connell (2009), and Surya Desismansyah Eka Putra and colleagues (2022) have recognised the salience of Kartini's ideas, which often incorporated a theory of gender and emerging feminist consciousness. These included the centrality of the family and education, as well as the ways in which gender dynamics can be changed. Connell (2009: 32) notes that Kartini "problematis[ed] the relationship between global centre and periphery that is now a crucial issue in feminist thought". Her ideas, writings and letters on gender and sexuality have been included as part of a more extensive and focused volume on Kartini and her appropriation (Bijl / Chin 2020).

Yet another initiative meant to establish key texts is a co-edited book by NUS faculty members Eric Thompson and Vineeta Sinha titled *Southeast Asian Anthropologies* (2019). Both Thompson and Sinha appraise the wide range of debates in attempts to de-centre the Euro-American-, andro-, hetero- and other centrisms embedded in the discipline of Anthropology. However, they also contend that the development and progress of the discipline requires action beyond mere critique. The different chapters in the book therefore closely examine the practices of anthropologists working from and within Southeast Asia.

Collectively, these non-exhaustive texts are examples of tools and teaching resources that can be employed in different universities to diversify teaching and that fill a significant lacuna in introducing alternative discourses. To be sure, these perspectives and their drawbacks have also been debated and critically appraised by a range of scholars, including those advocating for alternative discourses from the global South (see, for example, S.H. Alatas 1977). Such interventions nevertheless reveal the potential for knowledge production in the form of alternative discourses to move across and circulate amongst other academic institutions in Asia and beyond.

These attempts can also extend to the types of assessments and assignments designed for students to partake in so as to encourage and stimulate critical engagement and thinking exercises. This includes comparing and appraising dominant sociological texts with writings and other media, such as film, from the global South; critical response papers on alternative discourses; online forum participation; the creation of blogposts in response to current issues, problems and challenges faced in their respective societies; and through visual and sensory representations such as the use of comics, pictorials and so forth. Such approaches enable diverse students to demonstrate and harness their skills in different ways in the creation of knowledge and curriculum.

Institution-building to recognise different knowledge centres of theorising and to appreciate the salience accorded to context in teaching and research

Knowledge will always be in flux and on the move, as will the centres of knowledge production and dissemination. S.F. Alatas conceived of alternative discourses not to indicate that indigenous or local concepts are to replace those in the global North, but rather to take seriously non-Western sources of ideas and concepts in the social sciences. In this respect, he also emphasised the need to avoid nativism, or orientalism in reverse, or academic nationalism. It therefore should be clear that alternative discourses and knowledge pertain to relevant and resonant discourses that are conscious and appreciative of the context and the challenges stemming from the power of academic and institutional structures (S.F. Alatas 2000).

In light of this, it is important to consider the institutions and conditions where teachers work in order to allow the fruition of alternative discourses. For instance, in NUS as well as in other research institutions at NUS, such as the Asia Research Institute (ARI), East Asia Institute (EAI) and Middle East Institute (MEI), some scholars and teaching instructors have come with the aim of revisiting the teaching orientations and perspectives of the global North that may have informed their work and teaching, often by drawing on their specific empirical work in and on Asia. In such spaces, teachers and researchers can potentially expand upon such orientations and perspectives by cultivating focused dialogues and conversations revolving around teaching and knowledge production and circulation in Asia and beyond. As a point of departure, these could broadly be thematised and adapted from one of the ARI workshops organised through approaches that include “researching in Asia; theorising from Asia; and applying to Asia” (ARI 2017):

Researching in Asia: The focus here is on how we research Asia; the methods and approaches we employ, the means by which we collect and present evidence, and the constraints under which that occurs. Is researching in/on Asia essentially the same as teaching and researching in/on other places? How and why might this be different and with what consequences?

Theorising from Asia: This theme focuses on our conceptual framings and theoretical approaches. This may be about the challenges of applying established modes of thought to the Asian context (what ‘works’, what does not, and why), or about the development of framings from Asia that provide alternative or complementary structurings of knowledge (so theorising from Asia)

Applying to Asia: Here the concern is to consider the application of knowledge, both empirically and in terms of policy. How does academic research gain policy and practical traction in Asia? How might established modes of research sit

uncomfortably in an Asian context? With growing interest in the social impact of academic research, where does the Asian experience sit?

Via these three nodes, the importance and application of context in teaching theory and theorising can easily be imparted to students and instructors so that collective responsibility can be taken in establishing and nurturing a liberating pedagogical and institutional environment. As Brookfield (1990: 23) notes: “Because [dominant values, “common sense,” wisdom, generally accepted standards and prevailing social and political arrangements] are cultural creations, teachers point out that they can be dismantled and reframed by human agency”. Clearly, critique is essential but by itself insufficient to produce significant structural changes in the academy. Both institutions and instructors therefore need to ensure that the critique is not merely superficially co-opted without de-centring problematic assumptions. At the same time, it is important to consider the resources, pedagogical exercises and teaching interventions necessary to enable and help instructors to restructure the dynamics of the classroom setting and to create a participatory classroom in which students, through their readings and interpretations of both alternative and dominant discourses and knowledges, actively create meaningful knowledge production in context.

More crucially, institutions should support both conventional and “alternative” or non-mainstream teaching and research areas to further develop the actual learning process of scholarship and academic discussion across a diverse range of topics. This is connected to the cultivation and development of resonant theories and pedagogies in teaching and research. As a relational and phenomenological concept, resonance is adapted and derived from a range of conceptual toolkits from physics, anthropology and sociology. This invokes a subject-object relationship as a vibrating system in which both sides mutually stimulate each other, thereby constructing a meaningful, dynamic and transformative rapport between actors. Unni Wikan (2013) in her work *Resonance: Beyond Words*, speaks of resonance as the evocative capacity to feel affected by something and its transformative effects. In this respect, conditions to develop resonant and relevant theories and pedagogies for application in teaching and research need to be encouraged and cultivated. As Low and I have suggested elsewhere (2005), the production of meaningful and resonant knowledge may include encouraging and developing an environment of alternative and/or interdisciplinary discourses among graduate students, research staff and academics through the organisation of local, regional and international symposiums, graduate seminars/forums, and other forms of collective action to develop a sense of individual and/or collective agency, such as the Shaping Asia initiative and collaborative effort.

In line with this effort, S.F. Alatas has cited S.H. Alatas who suggested that the International Sociological Association organise a session at the World Congress of Sociology on the issue of an autonomous sociological tradition in order to

“alert sociologists throughout the world to pool their attention on this extremely vital need for the development of sociology” (2021) and, therefore, to counter the influence of the captive mind.

Related to this is the role and centrality of teaching and research committees that decide on funding as well as curriculum design and planning for both faculty members and graduate students and for those in charge of employment and tenure/promotion. They should evaluate works chiefly on the basis on merit, rather than on where the degree is earned, where the work is published or what research it conducts. While universities and departments must work from the availability of resources and institutional and departmental requirements, such selection processes should involve multiple voices within the department and universities. No topic should be considered too “dated”, “non-sociological” or “unworthy” to be taught, as long as it is relevant and resonant to the contexts in such universities and regardless of whether the topic is newly emergent, since the processes of social change take place constantly.

Lastly, Alatas (2019: 29–30) calls for scholars and teachers to engage in what he terms “conscientious engagement” as well as in more inclusive citation and referencing practices:

“[Scholars] should conscientise their colleagues and peers about the problems of exclusion and erasure. Students should raise the problem in classes and in their papers and assignments. One ingredient for the creation of a social science tradition in our societies is undoubtedly the values attached to conscientious engagement, values such as honesty, humility and a love of good ideas. This should be inculcated in our education system”.

Concluding remarks

The classroom is potentially an emancipatory and liberating space. Critical efforts at establishing and teaching alternative discourses have been propelled forward for more than half a century, as have calls for decolonising and decentring knowledge systems. These interventions have emerged from a range of quarters, including non-Western social scientists, scholars in the global North and feminist scholarship, to address the effects of academic dependency, the captive mind and silencing. Such engagement continues to problematize dominant discourses and knowledge systems entrenched in the present as well as the circulation and movement of social theory in different sites that teach these issues. We need to continue to probe these questions further both in teaching and research: What is the nature of this knowledge that we teach? Who is it for? Who is to define this? What might this include (or exclude)? What would it privilege? What knowledge is silenced? How far can knowledge move (or not move)? Scholars and teachers working in these domains have highlighted the essentialist and often reductionist renderings of other peoples, places and cultures.

In this paper, a recurring theme is the need to rethink and reappraise the approaches and orientations to the teaching of social theory that have their origins in the historical experiences as well as the geographical and cultural conditions of Europe and North America. While this paper has focused on teaching initiatives in sociology, such questions can readily be extended to other disciplines. Rowena Arshad (2021) for example, asks: “Why are Isaac Newton and Gottfried Leibnitz often attributed with discovering calculus at the end of the 17th century when the Kerala School scholars were exploring these 250 years earlier? ... [and] [i]nstead of using master or slave to represent computing agents, can we use instead the terms co-ordinator or workers?”.

To avoid the captive mind, teachers in Asian universities and beyond therefore need to be encouraged to develop and instigate their own intellectualism from the voices within their own settings, which have oftentimes been silenced and marginalised for other dominant models, as well as to pluralise and expand on the curriculum and sources they use for teaching. Given that this paper is only at a preliminary nascent stage, more research is needed to address the issues that are at stake, namely to engage through a comparative lens with other Asian universities and sociology departments; as well as to obtain access to quantitative and qualitative teaching feedback from students and interviews with faculty members involved in teaching and curriculum design and planning.

Again, the paper’s argument is not to say that ideas from the global North are not valuable or significant to be taught, but to recognise – rather than silence, omit or disavow – the voices within non-Western local institutions and voices from other interested groups (Alatas 1995; Oommen 1995). In other words, there is a need to recognise and acknowledge the equitability of multiple and alternative centres, spaces and discourses, both in the global North and South, as repositories of thinking, theorising and teaching (Sinha 2003). For our teaching to be pertinent and important, no single voice should dominate academic discourse and teaching. It is time to undergo a process of unlearning and dismantling where our knowledge comes from and of determining how we can teach students this process collectively. It is also time to re-imagine a commitment that inspires students to believe in the ideals of the discipline and to translate these into everyday action, as well as to re-evaluate taken-for-granted knowledge production, circulation and its silences.

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