

PREFACE to *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* by Syed Hussein Alatas

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Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007) was one of those rare public intellectuals who managed to straddle politics and academia, inhabiting a space between the two. While he pioneered the importance of indigenous knowledges, this was never to the exclusion of Western knowledge. He was the founder of a political party and the author of scholarly critiques both the role of imperialism and of the imitative behavior of the postcolonial ruling class. His notion of the “captive mind” has captivated many a commentator on postcolonialism. For a short time, he was an opposition member in the Malaysian parliament but he was also the promoter and organizer of intellectuals not just in Malaysia but across Asia. Toward the end of his career he became Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya, Malaysia’s oldest university (1988-1991), but he was also a popular teacher who nurtured students of history and social sciences and a founder of sociology in Malaysia. As a scholar he could resurrect the writings of non-Western scholars such as the 14th century sociologist Ibn Khaldun as well as being an ardent advocate of scientific and technological progress. He could, in short, transcend antinomies, making it never easy to locate him in the pantheon of sociologists. He understood the dilemmas of modernization from within while taking a standpoint from without. Alatas was the consummate sociologist but also a public intellectual, never to be locked into any narrow discipline. Above all he believed in intellectuals as the guardian of progress. His sociology and his ideals are fully presented in *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* first written in 1972 but only published in 1977.

The Myth of the Lazy Native (1977) may be Alatas’ most famous book – an account of the ideology that helped to perpetuate imperialism, both before and after the demise of colonialism – but *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* is his most ambitious work. There he tackles the question of “development” in postcolonial societies with specific attention to Asian societies. As he writes in the acknowledgements: the book reflects on four years of abortive participation in politics as the chairman of the opposition party and a short time in the Malaysian Senate. He is wrestling with the implications of that experience, trying to come to terms with his own place as a scholar, as an intellectual and as a politician.

Let us recall that the 1970s were a period of disillusionment when the hopes of the new nations, which had recently achieved independence, had not entirely disappeared but were definitely waning. As it grappled with the pathologies of postcoloniality, Western social science, that had invested so much in the study of newly independent countries, turned in two directions. There were those who blamed the victim, arguing that postcolonial societies were still steeped in tradition and primordiality, holding back development. This vision was influenced by the theory of pattern variables, associated with Talcott Parsons (1951) then the dean of social theory, who claimed the value orientations of universalism, achievement, individualism, and affective neutrality were the underlying conditions of Western success. By implication, underdeveloped countries were mired in the other side of the binaries, that is, in ascription, particularism, collectivism and affectivity. Interestingly, Alatas also applies this dualism of tradition and

modernity to explain underdevelopment, drawing specifically on the work of Edward Shils (1961), Parsons' distinguished collaborator.

At the same time, Alatas recognizes the importance of the oppressor nations in orchestrating the postcolony's continuing dependency on the colonial metropolis as manifested in terms of trade and specialization in the extraction of raw materials. In criticizing theories of economic growth, Alatas recognized the importance of a distinction Samir Amin (1974) would make between "extraverted accumulation," dependent on the metropolis whose economic development was based on "autocentric" accumulation. Similar arguments were made by Immanuel Wallerstein's World System Theory (1974). Alatas was well acquainted with the fundamental idea that animated their theories, namely that pioneers of capitalism in the West did not develop within the imperial framework that postcolonial societies faced, an imperialism that sucked surplus out of the peripheries of the world system, what Andre Gunder Frank (1967) called the development of underdevelopment. These materialist theories punctured the optimism of orthodox development theory and, at the same time, criticized the cultural arguments of modernization theory. In their view it was as if the function of colonialism was to bring the periphery into the orbit of capitalism; once having achieved this unequal incorporation, colonialism had performed its historic role and could be cast off. Underdevelopment continued regardless of political independence.

Alatas was able to weld together these two perspectives on "backwardness" – the materialist and the cultural – by advancing dependency theory into the cultural sphere. He saw this in the imitative adoption of the trappings of modernity, conspicuous consumption of Western artifacts, inferior transplants of education and scientific institutions, inefficient bureaucracy, ineffective planning, lip service paid to liberal democracy and, what he would write about in comparative and historical depth, the plague of corruption – all amounting to the absence of that ineffable "spirit of modernity" that is essential to progress.

Colonialism explains the economic backwardness of Asian societies up to a point but it does not explain backwardness in social habits, particularly twenty or twenty-five years after independence. What explains it is the backwardness of the elites, who do not exert their influence to introduce positive habits. (p.95)

While recognizing all these attributes of underdevelopment, Alatas refuses to accept their determinism. Men and women *do* make history even if they do so under conditions they don't control. There are possibilities within limits as well as the limits of possibility. After going through the litany of pathologies of underdevelopment, he focuses on the failures of ruling elites – they after all are responsible for the direction of society.

Capital formation and technical progress in the history of European development were achievements of the dominant elites. In the developing societies it is the dominant elites that impede capital formation by their example by encouraging such habits as gambling and race-horsing, by conspicuous waste, by a craving for imported luxury articles, by keeping their money in foreign banks, by speculation, and so forth. Some economists whose views about capital formation are based entirely on published statistics, and who

are out of touch with reality, seldom observed the simple fact that in an undeveloped country of low capital formation there is a great deal of luxury expenditure by the ruling elites... The cost of parasitism, corruption, smuggling – all borne by the state – does not show up in the statistics (p.110).

Alatas juxtaposes the decadence of existing postcolonial elites to a vision of an alternative ruling elite:

A different group, inspired by a social ideal and moved by a social conscience, would set an example of frugality, hard work, rational planning, respect for science, instead of wasteful expenditure, gambling, indolence, sexual licence, irrational planning, disrespect for science, and amazing lack of patriotism. (p.111)

But from where could such an alternative elite emerge? Alatas is clear that it will not simply emerge of its own accord, there is no spontaneous road to a visionary elite that would place the interests of the nation above itself. Indeed, he observes the opposite tendency, the consolidation of the “reign of fools” besotted by “bebalisma” (from the Malay word meaning “stupid”) – “an attitude of mind which is lethargic, unthinking, impervious to logic, at times crudely unaesthetic, indifferent, credulous, unscientific, unreflective, piecemeal in orientation, without direction, passive, uninventive without any consciously avowed goal. Bebalisma is a parasite of the mind... Its parasitic hold operates through the unconscious” (pp.31-2). A system dominated by “fools” infected with “bebalisma” cannot pursue justice, cannot fight corruption, cannot plan effectively, unduly influenced by colonial stereotypes of the indigenous population. Hence the pathologies of underdevelopment.

Alatas was not content to criticize, he was also intent on thinking through possible solutions. If there was no sign of change coming from within the ruling elites, could there be opposing forces from without? Here Alatas denounces the “revolution of fools,” by calling for their replacement by the “revolution of intellectuals.” *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* is constructed around such a possibility. Intellectuals are leaders in the realm of thinking by using the faculty of reason rather than the common sense of “sensory perception.” Intellectuals are possessed of a spirit of critical inquiry; able to assess the wider picture of society and its challenges. They are distinguished from the intelligentsia – scientists and professionals who have acquired higher education but are not able to grasp the context in which ideas emerge and grow, not able to examine the fundamental issues at stake, captive of the ideas they have inherited from other contexts.

In developing societies, intellectuals are a small minority of the population. They are often a leading force in the struggle for independence, but once a new government is formed, they fall by the wayside. Expelled from positions of leadership, they become “superfluous” individuals. No longer able to exercise the influence they once had, they are critical of the ruling elites who, in turn, resent or despise them. This vision of the progressive intellectual is a self-portrait of Alatas himself. So how is the “revolution of intellectuals” to take place? Alatas insists that intellectuals must shed their sense of alienation by forming themselves into an influential group. He ends on a dispirited and even desperate note.

There is no public recognition or demands for intellectuals. The mass media are in the hands of the government of groups who are not intellectually inclined. The universities are not creating an intellectual atmosphere. The homes do not act as an intellectual-conditioning institution. The schools do not contribute in this direction either. The writers and the publishers do not encourage the growth of intellectual interest. Thus wherever we turn we face a blank wall. In such a situation a reform movement is required, a reform that inspires intellectual interest and seeks to awaken intellectual consciousness of various problems. The suppressed and oppressed intellectuals of Asia must assert their own right to exist and function as a community in their respective societies. They should accomplish the revolution of the intellectual as opposed to the revolution of the fool. (pp.115-6)

But how is the revolution of the intellectual going to take place? To help us understand both the necessity and the possibility, Alatas calls for a “sociology of elites suitable to their surroundings” (p.109). We need to understand how they are formed in order to understand how they may be reformed. Where might we look for such a theory of elites? There are candidates in Western sociology from C Wright Mills, *The Power Elite* (1956) to Pierre Bourdieu’s *The State Nobility* ([1989] 1996) but what about the global south? In South Africa a school of sociology developed around the dissection of the changing character of the ruling class, the product of a struggle among its economic fractions – agricultural, manufacturing, and mining – that would lead to the undermining of apartheid. Alatas might respond that the maladies of the postcolonial order would, however, still apply to South Africa, and intellectuals have been shunted aside.

Comparative studies are useful here and Alatas does make strides in that direction. He draws on 19th century Russia to indicate the despondency of intellectuals, parallel to that of Malaysian intellectuals, but while he does endorse the accomplishments of postrevolutionary Soviet society, he does not attempt to explain the role of intellectuals in that transformation. Again, it might be argued that as intellectuals were purged by the party state, the Soviet elite lost a grip on the society’s direction. Alatas refers to Meiji Restoration in Japan – how it was engineered by intellectuals - and suggests that might have been possible because Japan was not subject to colonization. Closer to home, he suggests that the neighboring Singapore had taken its own more positive route beyond colonialism and speculates this could be attributed to a special role for intellectuals. In this way Alatas directs our attention to interesting comparisons that suggests the prospects for intellectuals might not be so bleak.

Alatas has little to say about the postcolonial state as such, weaving it into the ruling elite. Subsequent sociology of the dominant classes focused on the relation between the dominant classes and the state, thereby raising questions about the postcolonial state and the legacy of colonialism. This has been a subject of intensive debate, especially in Africa during the 1970s. Does the state express the will of the dominant classes? Does it have its own “relative” autonomy? Is it prisoner of its colonial past? What room does the postcolonial state have to maneuver within the constraints of imperial forces? For development to take place does the new state have to insulate itself from the world capitalist system? How can the postcolonial state be

both embedded in the dominant classes but also autonomous from them. Will economic development ensue (Evans 1995)?

And what about intellectuals themselves? Can they really be a force by themselves, without allies? And if not who will be their allies? Will they be enlightened fractions of the dominant class? Or will they seek to work with middle classes or popular classes? As Syed Farid Alatas (2020) has shown his father's account of the malaise within the ruling elites brings to mind the equally disparaging account of Franz Fanon (1963). But where Syed Hussien Alatas roots the malaise in the elite's deep psychological disposition, its "habitus," Fanon portrays it as a class – the National Bourgeoisie – pursuing its class interests at home, but in the context of world capitalism. Moreover, Fanon shows how it is supported by middle class professionals, experts, traders, and above all the working class that had emerged under colonialism. The dissenting and alienated intellectuals in whom Alatas places so much hope, in Fanon's account, find themselves expelled to rural areas where they join the dispossessed peasantry who have nothing to lose. Together they form a revolutionary movement – the volcanic energy of the peasantry is given direction by committed intellectuals, keen on fighting for a society based on democratic participation and socialist planning. These are Antonio Gramsci's (1971) "organic intellectuals," as opposed to the "traditional intellectuals" who seek to justify the rule of a national bourgeoisie, an appendage of imperial capital, with all its decadent propensities. Fanon writing a decade earlier than Alatas, sees the postcolonial future as a struggle between these two projects that of the National Bourgeoisie on the one side and of the National Liberation struggle on the other. For Fanon, intellectuals, far from being irrelevant, provide the justification and inspiration for each project. History suggests, and here Alatas' pessimism is perhaps warranted, that the National Bourgeoisie have gained the upper hand, but there is variation among "developing societies" that Fanon does not recognize.

Alatas does not regard intellectuals as representing a different class. Instead, he anticipates the view of Pierre Bourdieu (1989) in which intellectuals are representatives of a universal interest, "organic intellectuals of humanity." They defend the autonomy of cultural production. Here there is a convergence with Alatas' call for an autonomous social science, resisting the encroachments of the West, denouncing the "captive mind," and inveighing against bebalisma. Bourdieu goes further when he writes of the "corporatism of the universal," referring to the necessary organization of an "internationale of intellectuals," much as Alatas devoted himself to building the community of intellectuals across the Islamic world, in pursuit of a progressive Islam.

However, **what** Bourdieu and Alatas fail to examine is whether there are more fundamental interests that intellectuals share. Their claim to represent the interest of humanity obscures the idea that intellectuals are also on their own side. In Alvin Gouldner's (1979) terms intellectuals are a flawed universal class. While neither Alatas nor Bourdieu speak of intellectuals on the road to class power, as in Konrad and Szelenyi's (1979) theory, that may in fact be their hidden agenda – perhaps even hidden from themselves. Both Alatas and Bourdieu have an inordinate sense of the superiority of intellectuals which can only infuriate those they label as misguided "fools," those who deal with the daily challenges of ruling in a developing

society. In the final analysis *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* is a pious call to intellectuals to deliver postcolonial societies from irresponsible incumbents of power.

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