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SOCIAL SCIENCE AND SOCIAL SCIENTISTS  
IN MALAYSIA: TOWARDS INDIGINISATION?

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In its broad and widely accepted sense, Social Science refers to the whole range of subjects, that relate to different branches of knowledge dealing with various aspects of man and society. It encompasses such disciplines as anthropology, economics, geography, history, law, politics, psychology and sociology. But in a narrower sense it may be used to refer to only anthropology and sociology. It is in this latter sense that I will be using the term for subsequent discussion. This is done merely for convenience. Time, space and my involvement as well as training dictate that I should limit myself to only anthropology and sociology.

A. General: Development and Trends

To understand the development and orientation of social science and the social scientists in Malaysia now, we have to look at the state of the art in the past and also at present. For a long time it has been acknowledged that the origins of social science can be traced to social philosophy developed by the early Greek philosophy. It is often taken for granted that Comte is the father of Western sociology because not only he discoursed on the Subject but also gave it its name. But more and more now it is being accepted that the honour of being the father of social science should be bestowed upon Ibn Khaldun, whose encyclopaedic Muqaddimah covers not only the subjects of philosophy and history but also what may be regarded as modern anthropology and sociology. But despite the immense Greek and Muslim contributions, there is no doubt that modern anthropology and sociology took shape in Europe.

The development of sociology right from the beginning is linked up closely to social changes that took place in Europe. The industrial and French revolutions together with the emergence of the middle classes all had great influence in shaping up the ideas in sociology. There were many interesting aspects of the development of this subject. One of the most important to be noted is that, particularly during its classical period in the 19th century sociology was dominated by two streams of thought, the Marxist and the non or anti-Marxist, which continued to contend strongly with one another. For a long time the latter trend was dominated by such towering figures as Max Weber and Durkheim.

Sociology spread from Europe to America, where it became more imperial and quantitative and less philosophical and speculative. Later, with the emergence of 'communist' & 'socialist' states in some parts of Europe and Asia after the Russian and Chinese revolutions, the Marxist trend received a boost. But on the other hand it also further strengthened the anti-Marxist



trend in Western sociology, particular in America. It is not surprising when C. Wright Mills observed that social science had become a serious arena when cold war was waged. But after the middle of the 20th century, things began to change. The growth of the anti-Vietnam war movements as well as the outbreak of campus revolts in Europe and America during the sixties and seventies led to the revival of interest in Marxism among especially youths and students. This revival also influenced social scientists to examine their orientations and perspectives. The two contending trends continued, but there were also attempts to converge them. Thus developed various shades in between radical sociology influenced by Marxism and conservative sociology that continued the anti-Marxist tradition. The radical stream became concerned with issues like national liberation freedom from exploitation, class conflict, social justice and development. On the other hand the conservative stream were more keen to retain social equilibrium and the status quo. Admittedly, this is only an oversimplified caricature.

The development of anthropology was slightly different. The process of especially industrial and commercial development in Europe in the 19th century had led to its economic expansion overseas and later colonialism. Contact between the Western colonial powers and their colonies led to the desire to know the culture of the colonised people, who were considered to be backward and primitive not only for itself but more importantly for the purpose of facilitating control and domination. Although the basis of anthropology was already laid in Europe, especially by people like Durkheim and Schmitt, its full blossom took place in Britain.

At the beginning, anthropological studies carried out by those like Frazier and Taylor were based largely on tales and records collected by travellers, missionaries, traders and religious missionaries on the 'primitive' peoples. These were classified in the manner to show some process of evolutionary change. But with Radcliffe - Brown and Malinowski, present day anthropology reached its full maturity, depending entirely on field research (through participant observation) on small and simple communities. They studied communities wholistically, trying to understand the structure of the whole and functions of the component parts to maintain the whole. The structural-function theory that they developed, and which still influences anthropology strongly even now, stresses on social equilibrium and favours the maintenance of status quo rather than conflict and development.

Anthropology has often been branded as the true 'child of imperialism'. But it should be noted that even in this discipline there has been



reexamination and rethinking of its theories and methods. During the Vietnam War, a number of American anthropologists were sent to study various aspects of Vietnamese life, culture and society. Their findings were used for military and political purposes to subdue or destroy the Vietnamese people. This created serious uproar and controversy which led to reexamination of roles and ethics of the social anthropologist and his discipline. Besides that it also stimulated efforts to break away from traditional anthropology and find avenues for developing new types of anthropological theories and methods. Among them were those who rediscovered and developed Marxism, some in very creative manner, in anthropology. There were concerned with anthropology serving human liberation rather than imperialism, promoting progressive change rather than preserving status quo, saving human life rather than causing death and destruction.

#### B. Malaysia: Development and Trends

Both anthropology and sociology are relatively new disciplines in Malaysia. For some time foreign anthropologists and sociologists have been doing research in Malaysia. Among the first was Raymond Firth, who did a study of a fishing community in Kelantan before World War II. After the war, a number of them associated with the Social Research Unit which later was situated in the University of Malaya (Singapore), studied and published on particularly the Chinese (e.g. Freedman, Kaye and Newell) and also Malays (e.g. Burridge). Initially the concentration was more on the Chinese community; this could have been influenced by the political situation then, when a large number of Chinese were actively involved with communist movements and activities. But later there were more younger anthropologists who carried out research among the Malays, mainly those in the rural areas (e.g. Swift).

At the beginning most of researches were British or those associated with British universities and other institutions. But in the sixties and seventies, there were many who came from America (e.g. Downs, Banks) and Japan (Tsibouchi, Maeda), the latter being the last among the foreigners to enter the field. Then there were also a sprinkling of local local scholars, mainly Malays, who were beginning to show interest in the fields. (e.g. S. Husin, Taib, Kahar, Mokhzani). This seemed to mark the beginning of the process of indiginization at least in participation.

The introduction of anthropology and sociology to the local population was done through the Malay studies Department, which was established in the University of Malaya (Singapore) in 1952. That department was formed to teach and study mainly Malay language, literature and culture. For the culture component some introductory anthropology courses were conducted. The person first responsible to conduct these courses was a Dutch scholar, Jesselin de



Jong. It is interesting to note that the emphasis was mainly on cultural anthropology. At the same time there were a couple of sociologists who were also then working in the University, but they were associated with the Department of Social Studies, which was involved almost entirely in the training of professional Social Welfare workers.

As far back as 1961 there was a recommendation to establish departments for anthropology, sociology, psychology and politics. Several attempts followed, but it was only in 1971 that the department of anthropology and sociology was formed in the University of Malaya. In fact, a year or two before, these subjects had already been introduced in universities that were established much later, namely, Universiti Kebangsaan and Universiti Sains. In these three universities, departments have been established to provide anthropology and sociology courses leading to the degree level. In Universiti Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan, where the Malay Studies departments continue to exist, the subjects are also taught under the culture streams in those departments. But whereas in Malay Studies they are confined to studies on Malay society and culture, with appropriate theoretical framework given, in the anthropology and sociology departments proper more theory is taught and the area covered is not confined only to the Malays, other societies and cultures are looked at in order to provide adequate comparative perspective. There are also the other universities, Universiti Teknologi and Universiti Pertanian, which although focussing mainly on the technological and agricultural fields, also provide some ancillary courses in sociology (more than anthropology) for their courses relating to education, extension and so forth. Their roles are secondary and they do not exist in separate departments. In such non-university institution as INTAN, which specialises in training of administrators, social science is also taught, although at very introductory level and not as major subjects.

A good number of the lecturers teaching anthropology and sociology in the universities, particularly in Universiti Malaya and Universiti Kebangsaan at the early stages, were associated with Malay Studies, and so were introduced to anthropology and sociology in a very confined sense. Only a very small number among them obtained their second degree through Malay Studies, but many more from the already existing anthropology and sociology departments. Later, a large number after obtaining their first degree, pursued their second and third degrees in full fledged anthropology and sociology departments overseas, mainly in Britain, America and Australia. Those who already obtained their Masters locally also inevitably went overseas for their doctorates. Those who continued to do their doctorates locally can be counted with fingers of one hand. The early influence of Malay studies shaped the



development of anthropology and sociology in Malaysia especially in two ways. A large number of the undergraduates who followed the anthropology and sociology courses were (and still are) Malays. As such the majority who later pursued their higher degrees and finally become university teachers were also predominantly Malays. They in turn attracted a good number of new students. Although the existing anthropology and sociology departments have managed to attract more non-Malay students, the majority of them are still drawn from among the Malays. That is why even until now the majority of anthropology and sociology lecturers are Malays. Such ethnic composition in the disciplines also influence the type of research being carried out in anthropology and sociology in this country.

To some extent the tradition of focussing on 'primitive' societies is still continued by some anthropologists in their study of 'orang asli'. But by comparison, the largest proportion of local anthropologists and sociologists concentrate on the Malays, and by virtue of the Malays being predominantly in the rural areas, their studies are mainly on various aspects of the Malay rural society. But at the same time there are also some of those trained in sociology, who are beginning to look into the urban people and their problems. Here too there is a tendency to look at the Malays. No doubt there are some studies on the Chinese and Indians, but the number is still small, and some of them are related to the field of ethnic relations.

The handful of Chinese and Indian anthropologists and sociologists especially those associated with Chinese and Indian Studies departments, like their Malay counterparts, also concentrate their research on their own community. Although there are a few among the Malay and non-Malay anthropologists and sociologists studying particular socio-economic categories like the workers and peasants, for instance, and including in their study different ethnic group within these categories, yet the general trend still seems to be for local sociologists and anthropologists to work on communities which are of the same ethnic groups as the research workers themselves. There is a great need to break this quite unhealthy ethnic compartmentalization of research in social science.

### C. Course Content at University

An examination of the social science syllabus in the various local universities show that they do not differ very much from that found in foreign universities, especially those in Britain, America and Australia. The main difference is that in Malaysia, both anthropology and sociology are combined within the same department whereas elsewhere they often exist in separate departments. There is a tendency in these places to confine sociology mainly to the study



and teaching of urban-industrialised societies and to confine anthropology to the simple or 'primitive' societies. Nowadays this compartmentalization seems to be breaking down; anthropology has been used to study even some urban communities, like in London, while sociology has been used to study the rural societies in various developing countries especially. Perhaps in developing countries like Malaysia, it is better to teach both anthropology and sociology together under the same departments so that the students will be quite equipped to use either discipline or both to study the nature and problems of their own society. It does give them some "inter-disciplinary" perspective, which is quite useful to enable them to view and understand things in an integrated or wholistic manner. Specialization can take place at a higher level.

The contents of the syllabus also do not differ very much. There seems to be four main components of the syllabus. Firstly, our introduction to the knowledge itself and various theories concerned with it. Various theories of anthropology and sociology relating to family, religion, politics, economics, social change/development are covered. These theories are still very much Western oriented in the "academic" and conservative tradition. But with increasing number of post-graduates returning from overseas, some radical theories and trends have also been introduced, especially by the younger lecturers.

There is a danger that some of these courses have been personally-instituted and not being part of a carefully planned process of introducing various theories and perspectives to students. This is clearly demonstrated in the case of "Islamic Sociology". With the resurgence of Islam and 'dakwah' movement in the universities there have been great demand for that subject to be introduced. Sometimes it is introduced in very ad-hoc manner, not only because it is a result of pressure especially from students, but also more often than not a qualified staff to handle and develop such a course is not easily available. And so, there is a tendency for theology displacing sociology or Western sociology still being used but with only some references to Islamic concepts, ideas and institutions. Either way it is not satisfactory.

Secondly, the societies or regions and issues covered. There is a tendency for emphasising on societies and issues on which literature exists or the staff concerned has been trained. In sociology there seems to be focus on Western industrial and urban processes and problems, while in anthropology there is still focus on simple 'primitive' communities, especially in Africa and Oceania, which have been extensively studied by Western anthropologists. It is useful to provide all these in order to understand the various concepts and theories that have been developed and to gain a clear comparative



perspective. But there does not seem to be sufficient focus on the study and understanding of the societies within the Southeast Asian region itself. What is surprising is that sometimes local material on the communities in Malaysia are not referred to. Too great an emphasis and focus on our own local communities may not be good, but complete neglect of them will be unwise. Perhaps the imparting of knowledge in social science should begin with close local and regional examples, and then due comparison be made with examples from other developing or even developed societies.

Thirdly the methodology. Most of the methodological techniques and styles that are used in social science have been devised and developed within especially the Western frame of reference, although, and this is particularly true in anthropology, the areas where the methods have been used have included non-European ones. The survey or interview methods have been widely used in sociology, while the participant observation method extensively used in anthropology. These methods are still useful, but there is need to modify them to suit the cultural and social peculiarities of our own societies, so that they can be utilised more effectively to get the most accurate information.

#### D. Role of Social Scientists

It is clear from the preceding discussions that both anthropology and sociology are very much the product of Western knowledge, they grew and expanded during the time when much of the West was developing as capitalist and later imperial or colonial powers in the world. Anthropology and sociology in Malaysia have been total imports from the West; most of the early researchers and teachers in the subjects were also from there. Many local anthropologists and sociologists have been educated and trained in institutions in the West. Even if they were totally trained locally, the content of knowledge that they have acquired is almost no different from what they would have received overseas. Of course, as mentioned earlier, there are many streams or trends of anthropology and sociology. In Malaysia we have all of them. But whatever their orientations they are mostly Western-centric. Such western-centricity may be seen from the concepts and theories adopted, methodology used and ideas regarding the role and function of social science.

It is true that not every thing that is Western should be rejected. What Malaysian social science should do is to thoroughly examine the various concepts and theories from Western sociology, and sieve out the significant and relevant to local conditions from those that are not. The danger is when those concepts and theories which have been developed within the Western historical, ideological and social contexts are just accepted and applied



in toto without any question. Besides just modifying what is already there, there is also need to introduce and develop indigenous concepts and theories which reflect local realities and which are able to explain and understand conditions better and easier.

The underlying ideological bias of Western sociology and anthropology in particular, have to be reexamined and if possible even replace. It is in this connection that it is relevant to talk about local sociology and anthropology that should reflect its own ideological perspective. It is here that those who want Islamic sociology, for instance, have a basis for their demand. But lest it be misunderstood, the introduction of the Islamic perspective is only an aspect of the reorientation or indiginization of social science in this country.

All these will require more intensive critical studies of existing concept and theories and greater in-depth research to be done on various aspects of the local societies and cultures and their problems.

Talking about research, it is important to know to what ends its products are used. Despite its history of being manipulated for colonial, upper class or business interests, both sociology and anthropology can still be used for positive and progressive purposes. This depends largely on the Social Scientists themselves. Anthropologists and sociologists are more and more in demand now for the purpose of understanding human groups. Some foreign interests, which are not considered colonial in the traditional sense, but which nevertheless still want to further their own political and economic ends may find it useful to know the nature of groups that they want to influence or even dominate. In the past, they employed their own social scientists to do the necessary research, but more and more now they try to get the services of local social scientists. Financial and other rewards are offered.

At the same time local ruling elites in many developing countries, including Malaysia, are beginning to realise the importance of the so-called human factor in development. So they are more well disposed now to using the expertise of social scientists to evaluate development projects or to carry out feasibility studies before carrying out such projects. It is a rather sad development among social scientists, especially those in universities, that they are willing to sell their expertise (and sometimes even their soul) to foreign or local groups and agencies as consultants to report, sometimes on projects which ultimately will not promote national interest, what more to benefit the disadvantaged groups within the country. The point that is being made here is that social scientists, especially those who are supposed to dedicate themselves to the promotion of knowledge and truth in



institutions of higher learning should not allow themselves to be persuaded by considerations of financial gains as the criterion for determining the type of research that they should pursue.

Research should as far as possible be focussed on issues that can help to develop new concepts and theories or solve problems that are seriously faced by society; they should contribute towards development, progress and the liberation of man in general, especially those who form the majority i.e. the disadvantaged groups. They should be carried out seriously and deeply so that the findings will not be superficial, as those usually found in hurriedly done consultancy reports. It should be emphasised here that it is not being argued that social scientists should not cooperate with foreign bodies or local governments or accept payment for their work. The plea is for them to be more careful in their choice, so that they will not be enticed, especially through the use of money, into doing research that do not serve the interest of knowledge and do not contribute towards genuine development and progressive change for the people.

### Conclusion

Social science in Malaysia is still very much influenced by the tradition of the West. There is great need for its indiginization. This can be done or least at three levels, staff, teaching and research.

Almost all the staff in the various universities are local scholars, although owing to historical reasons the majority of them are Malays. In government, among social scientists who help in policy formulations, there are still a number of foreign 'experts'. Among the university staff the various trends or streams of sociology, from the conservative or radical, are well reflected; there are also some among them who have strong Islamic orientation. As for those in government, they reflect more the conservative Western tradition. Merely having many local social scientists is not sufficient; we need to have those who can give it national identity and progressive orientation too.

Teaching of social science is done mainly in the universities. An examination of the syllabus shows that the conservative Western tradition still dominates. It is necessary and good for education that students be introduced to different trends of thought; thus there should be sufficient academic freedom guaranteed to enable staff to introduce the various trends in social science without facing any psychological fear of repression. At the same time philosophical ideas and knowledge that are more rooted to the region should also be introduced. In this connection it is also desirable to develop, for example, such thing as the Islamic perspective in social science. At the same time



adequate emphasis should be given to the study and understanding of pressing problems faced by society, such as poverty, ethnic relations and development, just to mention a few. Most universities provide these courses. But what is surprising is that none provide a course on consumer problems (or consumer sociology). UTM teaches consumer education, but its scope is very limited, while UM is still planning to introduce the subject. This field still needs to be developed.

As regards research, priority should be given to local problems and issues, and also those in foreign (especially developing) countries which can help to understand more deeply the local ones. Such research should be aimed particularly at developing more meaningful indigenous-based concepts and theories and also contributing towards human liberation generally and development, particularly for the majority who are relatively poor and disadvantaged. Shallow types of research done hurriedly for consultancy purposes should occupy very low priority among academics. In other words, the use of social science should be for useful and progressive purposes. Only then the indiginization of social science will have a more significant meaning.

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