

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE OPEN ACCESS

# The Coloniality of Knowledge and the Autonomous Knowledge Tradition

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## ABSTRACT

An autonomous social science tradition is one in which knowledge creation takes place amidst consciousness of the psychological and structural obstacles that mental captivity and intellectual imperialism present to students, academics, and people in general. The limitations imposed by the structure of intellectual imperialism and the ubiquity of the captive mind allow for various hegemonic orientations to dominate knowledge creation in such a way that limits originality in terms of the choice of research problems, the application of theories and concepts, and the use of methods of data collection and modes of argumentation. This article defines autonomous knowledge, and discusses the hegemonic orientations that autonomous knowledge seeks to gain autonomy from.

## 1 | Introduction

My concern with autonomous knowledge is partly an outcome of the realization that at times American and European-based scholars seem to take the lead in the decolonization of knowledge, often founded on an essentialist understanding of the problem of knowledge creation in the Third World/Global South, that is, that the basic or fundamental problem is the coloniality of knowledge. In other words, it is assumed that the only or main hegemonic orientation that affects knowledge creation is Eurocentrism. If one were to do a survey of projects on knowledge creation, this is likely to reveal that most of such projects deal with Eurocentrism. The topic of Eurocentrism and responses to it, that is, the decolonization of knowledge, seems to have captured the global imagination of social scientists, unlike other hegemonic orientations.

I take a different view. I do accept the decolonial argument that the conquest of what was to become the Americas was the beginning of the constitution of a new world system and order in which history witnessed the entanglement of capitalism, colonialism, racism, slavery and misogyny in the process of the 500 years of its making, and in which there was a fundamental ideological role of colonial knowledge (Grosfoguel 2013). This is what we refer to as the problem of Eurocentrism in knowledge creation. But, this is not the only possible view of the long durée of history. We may give saliency to other moments other than Columbus' discovery in 1492. In this case, hegemonic orientations other than Eurocentrism would be viewed as problems for knowledge creation. An example would be the conversion of Iran to Shi'ism in the sixteenth century (Arjomand 1984, 1985, 1988) as a pivotal moment that is salient for the development of sectarianism as a hegemonic

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orientation in much of the Muslim world. In other words, not all problems of knowledge creation have to do with the hegemonic orientation of Eurocentrism. This is not to suggest that the conversion of Shi'ism had the same global effects as Columbus' 1492 voyage. But, the former was a significant moment for Iran and the Muslim world in general as far as the development of sectarianism was concerned. Here, I refer to sectarianism not just as a political and social reality but also as a hegemonic orientation that affects knowledge creation in the social sciences.

This paper introduces the idea of autonomous knowledge, a notion that emerged in the Malay world, as a result of the critique of various dominant hegemonic orientations in knowledge creation. The first section discusses the early concerns with the coloniality of knowledge after the colonial period, with specific attention to the thought of Syed Hussein Alatas who worked out of Malaysia and then Singapore from the 1950s. I then turn to a discussion on the structural and psychological contexts of knowledge creation in order to situate the problems of knowledge production in terms of structural inequalities and cognitive distortions. Here, the problem of hegemonic orientations is introduced. This is followed by an account of autonomous knowledge, its meaning and scope. The paper concludes with some remarks on the autonomous knowledge tradition.

## 2 | Coloniality After Colonialism

The idea of autonomous knowledge or, more specifically, an autonomous social science tradition, originated with the Malaysian sociologist, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007). Alatas was born in Bogor, West Java, in what was then the Netherlands East Indies and was an Indonesian national following Indonesia's independence till the late 1950s, after which he obtained Malaysian citizenship. Colonial rule in both British Malaya and the Netherlands East Indies, therefore, was the formative period of Alatas' thought.<sup>1</sup>

In a short piece published in *Eastern World* in 1956, Alatas discussed what he understood to be the fundamental problems of colonialism. This was during the time he was a post-graduate student at the University of Amsterdam.

The problems left behind after a period of colonialism fall into three categories. One is the purely physical and material problem, incorporating agriculture, communications and housing. The second is the problem of organisation, economic relations, political administration, education, social welfare, and industrialisation. The third problem is sociological, psychological and moral, and the greatest damage occasioned by colonialism is precisely in this field, since it hampers the solution to other difficulties.

(H. Alatas 1956, 9)

The idea that the non-material problems of colonialism, that is, the sociological, psychological and moral, are fundamental is of course a view that is widely held today among those who

identify Eurocentrism as a hegemonic orientation in knowledge production. The phenomenon of the wholesale importation and transmission of Western thought in an uncritical manner, without due recognition of the socio-historical setting of those ideas, was an unconscious continuation of colonialism in the cultural sense (H. Alatas 1956, 9).<sup>2</sup> This is what is meant by coloniality after colonialism, although Alatas had not used the term.

The term “coloniality” is associated with the Peruvian sociologist, Anibal Quijano (1928–2018). Coloniality refers to the state in which colonial-type relations continue after the end of political colonialism. It is

the relationship between the European – also called ‘Western’ – culture, and the others, continues to be one of colonial domination. It is not only a matter of the subordination of the other cultures to the European, in an external relation; we have also to do with a colonization of the other cultures, albeit in differing intensities and depths. This relationship consists, in the first place, of a colonization of the imagination of the dominated; that is, it acts in the interior of that imagination, in a sense, it is a part of it.

(Quijano 2007, 169)

Mignolo and Walsh, among others, have recognized that far more serious than political economic exploitation was and is the remaining coloniality of knowledge (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 124). Furthermore,

[T]he coloniality of knowledge implies the coloniality of being; they move in two simultaneous directions. The coloniality of being is instituted by racism and sexism. However, if ontology is instituted by an epistemology that devalues certain human beings in terms of race and sexuality, there must be some force that sanctions the devaluation, since the devaluation is not itself ontological. The sanctioning comes from human beings who place themselves above those human beings who are devalued and dehumanized.

(Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 148)

In his review of two works, Mignolo and Walsh's *On Decoloniality* and Achille Mbembe's *Out of the Dark Night* (2021), Arjun Appadurai states that the strength of both works is

their common recognition that the heaviest price extracted by colonizers on the colonized in the past 500 years was not in the currency of labor and resource extraction but in the realm of knowledge, where colonial subjects were classified as the other in Europe's empire of reason. Both books also represent a radical critique of European dominion over the rest of the world through the various ages of empire, and both agree that materialist analyses of this dominion —by Marxists, dependency theorists, and world-

systems theorists—have misunderstood both colonialism and the decolonization that followed.

(Appadurai 2021)

Despite the different genealogies of the above critiques, it has been for decades, and soon after the end of political colonialism, that scholars have recognized the lingering problem of colonialism in the form of coloniality.

Alatas noted that if the colonial ruling power displayed no respect for ethical principles, social welfare and justice, it cannot be expected that the “native” elite who took over rule from them would be immune from such colonial rule (H. Alatas 1956, 10). Alatas cites Tocqueville’s *L’Ancien Régime*, who noted that the methods used by succeeding governments often had precedents in those of the preceding governments, and that the old order had provided the new with many of its forms.

I venture to state – for I hold the proofs in my hand – that precedents for very many of the proceedings of the revolutionary government were found in the records of the measures employed against the lower classes during the last two centuries of the monarchy. The old regime furnished the Revolution with many of its forms; the latter merely added the atrocity of its genius.

(de Tocqueville 1856, 233)

In other words, the ills of the old regime, colonial or otherwise, are reproduced in the new regime by the succeeding elite, whether political or intellectual.

Alatas’ anti-colonial ideas emerged when he was still a schoolboy in Johore Bahru during the pre-war years. This was especially the case when he stayed at the home of his uncle, Dato’ Onn Ja’afar, whose library was enthusiastically made use of by the young Alatas. Certainly there was a profound influence on the anti-colonial ideas of Alatas when he was a student at the University of Amsterdam. The University of Amsterdam had developed a critical tradition in the social sciences.

The Weber-oriented scholar, Bertram Johannes Otto Schrieke (1890–1945) was a social anthropologist and professor at the University of Amsterdam. He had developed a somewhat critical approach to the study of Indonesian social and economic history (Schrieke 1955, 1957). He was succeeded at the University of Amsterdam by the sociologist, W. F. Wertheim (1907–1998) (Breman 2017). This critical Dutch historical sociological tradition that began with Schrieke was influenced by Weber and Marx as well as the Dutch Marxist historian, Jan Romein (1893–1962), a professor of history at the University of Amsterdam, and Wertheim’s mentor. The tradition was continued by Wertheim’s students, Otto van den Muijzenberg, Jan Breman and Alatas, all of whom had studied at the University of Amsterdam in the 1950s and 1960s. Alatas completed his PhD at the University of Amsterdam in 1963, and subsequently took up a position as head of the Cultural

Division at the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. What is important to note is that the Dutch historical sociological tradition was decidedly anti-colonial and presented itself as an alternative to mainstream Eurocentric/Orientalist orientations of the time.<sup>3</sup>

Four years later, in 1967 and following the separation of Singapore from Malaysia, a Department of Malay Studies was established at the University of Singapore, later to become the National University of Singapore in 1980, with Syed Hussein Alatas as head of department. The formal departure of Alatas from the Malaysian academic scene meant that the institutionalization of an anti-Eurocentric orientation in the social sciences, at least after the tradition of autonomous knowledge was slower to develop there. Rather, such an orientation first developed in Singapore and subsequently influenced scholars based in Malaysia and Indonesia. The Filipino writer, John Nery, refers to this as the Alatas tradition, “the lineage of elite Malaysian scholars begun by that towering pioneer, the late Syed Hussein Alatas...” (Nery 2012). According to Nery:

We can use the appropriation of Rizal as object of study or source of inspiration to trace this living tradition of inquiry, beginning with Hussein Alatas’ own influential deconstruction of ‘the myth of the lazy native’, to Chandra Muzaffar’s founding of a Malaysian social reform group on Rizal’s death anniversary, to Shaharuddin Maaruf’s brave but unjustly neglected discussion of ‘the concept of a hero in Malay society’, which posited Rizal as one of three ideal heroes; down to Farish A. Noor’s web-based ruminations on Rizal and especially Syed Farid Alatas’ important, ground breaking work on alternative discourses, with Rizal as both precursor and paragon. The Alatas tradition is a living lineage...

(Nery 2011, 202)

The aim of autonomous knowledge is to emancipate people from the forceful imposition of colonial/Eurocentric knowledge and institutions. The task of doing so is difficult, not in the least due to the structural and cognitive context within which knowledge creation in the social sciences and humanities take place.

### 3 | Structural and Cognitive Problems

The structural context referred to above is that of intellectual imperialism. The problem had been identified decades ago, but continues to be a constraint on knowledge creation, much like political economic imperialism continues to hamper the autonomous development of nations. Furthermore, it should be stated that intellectual imperialism is related to two other problems in the realm of knowledge creation, that is, academic dependency and the captive mind.

One of the earliest discussions on intellectual imperialism can be found in an essay by Johan Galtung, who referred to

scientific colonialism as “that process whereby the center of gravity for the acquisition of knowledge about the nation is located outside the nation itself” (Galtung 1967). This was followed by the publication of a special issue of the well-known Indian journal, *Seminar*, on the theme of academic colonialism. The issue took up the topic of the intellectual dominance that North American academics exerted over knowledge creation in the rest of the world (Saberwal 1968). Then, in 1969 in a lecture entitled “Academic Imperialism,” Alatas introduced the term intellectual imperialism and defined it as “domination of one people by another in their world of thinking” (S. H. Alatas 1969, 2000, 24). It was a phenomenon that was analogous to political and economic imperialism (S. H. Alatas 1969, 2000). The political economic structure of imperialism had “generated a parallel structure in the way of thinking of the subjugated people” (S. H. Alatas 1969). In the post-colonial period, the hegemonic orientation of Eurocentrism was facilitated by the West’s control of and influence over the flow of social scientific knowledge rather than its ownership and control of academic institutions in the Third World/Global South. Neither was this imposed by the West through force, unlike during the colonial period. Rather, the hegemony that intellectual imperialism is was and continues to be “accepted willingly with confident enthusiasm, by scholars and planners of the former colonial territories and even in the few countries that remained independent during that period” (S. H. Alatas 2006, 7–8). The theme of intellectual imperialism was revisited by *Seminar* 53 years later with a special issue entitled *Intellectual Imperialism* (S. F. Alatas 2021).

If in the colonial period intellectual imperialism was maintained via direct colonial power, today it is perpetuated via the condition of academic dependency. Intellectual imperialism and academic dependency are not to be confused with each other. It is possible that intellectual imperialism exists without subjects being in a state of academic dependency. In other words, there is sufficient resistance from the subject such that she is able to retain some degree of intellectual autonomy.

Academic dependency is a condition in which the knowledge production of certain scholarly communities are conditioned by the development and growth of knowledge of other scholarly communities to which the former is subjected. The relations of interdependence between two or more scientific communities, and between these and global transactions in knowledge, assumes the form of dependency when some scientific communities (those located in the knowledge powers) can expand according to certain criteria of development and progress, while other scientific communities (such as those in the developing societies) can only do this as a reflection of that expansion, which generally has negative effects on their development according to the same criteria (S. F. Alatas 2021, 12–13). The dimensions of academic dependency can be listed as follows: (i) dependence on ideas; (ii) dependence on the media of ideas; (iii) dependence on the technology of education; (iv) dependence on aid for research as well as teaching; (v) dependence on investment in education; (vi) dependence on recognition; and (vii) dependence of Third World social scientists on demand in the knowledge powers for their skills (brain drain) (S. F. Alatas 2021, 13).

Of particular concern is the first trait, the dependence on ideas. This refers to the cognitive dimension of intellectual imperialism. Alatas’ colleague at NUS, Tham Seong Chee, who headed the Department of Malay Studies from 1989 to 1997, referred to colonial thinking as being informed by “a false consciousness about values, person and goals. It is a mode of seeing one’s society—its workings and the direction of its movement—by super-imposing on it another reality, that is to say, the reality of a foreign society” (Tham 1971, 39–40). Here Tham is referring to a cognitive problem that exists within the context of intellectual imperialism. However, it was Alatas who discussed the cognitive dimension of the problem systematically in the form of the concept of the captive mind in the 1970s.

Nevertheless, Alatas was not the first to use the term captive mind. The term was used by the Polish writer, Czesław Miłosz, in his 1953 non-fiction work entitled *The Captive Mind*, originally written in Polish (1955). Miłosz was referring to minds literally held captive under authoritarian and totalitarian regimes. There was merely the pretention to subscribe to the dominant ideology due to fear or the hope for personal gain (Mariani 2020, 29). In other words, such minds were still autonomous subjects. Masturah Alatas, in her biography of Alatas, notes that Miłosz’s captive minds were great minds, despite captivity, whereas Alatas’ captive minds were not great minds because they were unable to think originally and creatively (M. Alatas 2024, 109).

It is also interesting to note that the Filipino scholar, Renato Constantino, had also used the term captive mind years before Alatas did (Constantino 1957/1971). For Constantino, the captive mind was a mind dominated culturally and intellectually by America and the Americans. He laments that Filipino minds and spirits became “willing captives of America” (Constantino 1957/1971, 66). Constantino illustrates the coloniser mentality with regard to the captive mind with a quote from a statement made by the Prime Minister of Japan, Ito Hirobumi, made on July 26, 1899 to an American Republican senator, Albert J. Beveridge, in Tokyo, concerning the Philippines:

First, you must keep the islands ... because ... your national honor is involved; because it is to your interest, not at once but greatly almost incontestably so in the future ... From what you say, I think self-government is out of the question, and even their participation in your government should be regulated and limited with great caution...

As to your present situation, I think your course is clear, most clear. Don’t treat with them until you definitely defeat them. First you must do that. You cannot treat and fight. Of course, make the English language the language of courts and schools and everything else. Do away with the court interpreters as soon as may be. After a while, when the people have sent their children to America to be educated, all things will be much better.

(Cited in Constantino 1957/1971, 67)



Here we see in the words of the Japanese Prime Minister, a blueprint for the creation of captive minds, first and foremost, through their cultural and intellectual assimilation of the Filipinos. This was the philosophy of the new colonialism, that is, conquest by acquiescence rather than conquest by force. Once the people identified themselves with the conquerer their mental captivity was complete (Constantino 1957/1971, 68). The imposition of the English language and an American-oriented education system, led to Filipinos becoming almost a part of America, living by American standards and values (Constantino 1957/1971, 71).

A manifestation of the captive mind for Constantino was what he called “thinking in installments.” Filipinos had acquired the habit of thinking in installments as they needed to pause and await American approval or consent. Only then could thinking and planning proceed. The thought of the captive mind was unoriginal and subsidiary (Constantino 1957/1971, 72–73). Constantino also lamented that Filipinos studied about their own country from textbooks that used American viewpoints, often founded on Western stereotypes or formulas (Constantino 1957/1971, 77–78).

Here, Constantino refers to the captive mind in much the same way that Alatas did in his two essays of 1972 and 1974. But, the notion was far more systematically developed by Alatas. For Alatas, the captive mind refers to a way of thinking that is dominated by Western thought in an imitative and uncritical manner. The question as to whether imitation involves an exact copy of the original, and whether it involves some degree of adaptation is relevant, but will not be dealt with here. Suffice to say, for Alatas, imitation entails the least degree of critical and original thinking.

Through the concept of the captive mind, Alatas sought to understand the pattern and effects of the intellectual domination of the Asian scholar by the West (S. H. Alatas 1972, 10). Alatas explained this with recourse to Duesenberry’s conceptualization of the demonstration effect. Duesenberry explained that the demonstration effect referred to the increase in expenditure at the expense of saving for what consumers believed to be high-quality goods. The purpose of such consumption was to maintain self-esteem independent of the objective utility of the goods acquired. The strength and frequency of the drive to acquire such goods depend on the regularity of contact with them. Every contact was a demonstration of the superiority of such goods, and at the same time a threat to the continuation of the current consumption pattern (S. H. Alatas 1972, 10).

Alatas suggested that there was a demonstration effect in the social scientific thinking of Asian academics. The main impulse in the consumption of the social science knowledge from the West was the belief in its utility and superiority. The consumption of this knowledge shows parallel traits to those of the demonstration effect. They are (i) frequency of contact; (ii) weakening or breakdown of previous knowledge habits; (iii) prestige attached to the new knowledge; and (iv) non-utility of the new knowledge (S. H. Alatas 1972, 10–11).

The uncritical imitation by the academics whose consumption patterns of knowledge are of the demonstration effect type

“pervades almost the whole of scientific intellectual activity. All its major constituents such as problem-setting, analysis, abstraction, generalization, conceptualization, description, explanation and interpretation, have been affected by this process” (S. H. Alatas 1972, 12).

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 (S. H. Alatas 1974, 691). The captive mind is trained almost entirely in the Western sciences, reads the works of Western authors, and is taught predominantly by Western teachers, either directly or through their works. The captive mind uncritically imitates Western social science. This is manifested in the areas of problem selection and choice of research methods, as well as the suggestion of solutions and policies. It is also manifested at metatheoretical and epistemological levels as well as at the levels of theory and substantive work.

Theoretically speaking, intellectual imperialism may or may not co-exist with academic dependency and the captive mind. Academics in the Third World/Global South, while subjected to intellectual imperialism, may or may not become captive minds that are academically dependent, especially in terms of the dependency on ideas (S. F. Alatas 2021, 15). If they do, however, then there is a heteronomy rather than autonomy in the process of knowledge creation, in that there is the domination of hegemonic orientations that preclude the ability to think autonomously (Guillermo 2023, 3).

This leads us to the consideration of the hegemonic orientations that are the empirical manifestations of this heteronomy. These hegemonic orientations include Eurocentrism as well as several others. Hegemony is the preponderance of influence that one group has over another. In Marx’s historical materialism, hegemony refers to the “ideal representation of the interests of the ruling class as universal interests” (Marshall 1994, 212). When the particular interests of the ruling class are imagined by the masses to be their interests as well, the ruling class may be able to dispense with rule by force. The ruling class, rather than rule through domination, that is, having to rely on the “coercive organs of the state,” is better off ruling via its “intellectual and moral leadership,” expressed through orientations circulated via the dominant educational, religious and associational institutions. This is what is referred to as hegemony (Femia 1975).

Hegemonic orientations in knowledge creation in the social sciences, then, refer to those orientations circulated via the dominant educational, religious and associational institutions which exert intellectual and moral leadership over knowledge producers, and are able to do so because their worldviews, assumptions, theories and methods are taken to be valid (S. F. Alatas 2022, 2). In the case of many social science communities in the Third World, heteronomous thinking is widespread owing to the presence of multiple hegemonic orientations. Grosfoguel refers to the “multiple entangled constellations of colonial power matrix of what I called, at the risk of sounding ridiculous, ‘Capitalist/Patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric Modern/Colonial World System’.” He rightly sees capitalism as an important constellation of power, but recognizes

that it is not the only one (Grosfoguel 2011). While Grosfoguel's point is valid, it cannot be said that the problem of hegemonic orientations and heteronomous thinking are to be located solely in the colonial matrix of power. Some of the hegemonic orientations predate colonialism and capitalism.

As these have been discussed at length elsewhere (S. F. Alatas 2022), I will only mention them here. The following can be said to be the principle hegemonic orientations that affect knowledge creation in the Malay world: (i) Eurocentrism or Euro-Americocentrism (S. F. Alatas 2006, 2016); (ii) academic nihilism (S. H. Alatas 2002, 153–154); (iii) knowledge elitism (S. H. Alatas 1979a, 70–71); (iv) traditionalism (S. H. Alatas 1995; Bennabi 1988, 12; Rahman 2004; Saat 2017); (v) sectarianism; (vi) culturalism (Rahman 2007, 470); (vii) androcentrism (Sinha 2001); (viii) ethnonationalism (Ibrahim 2010); (ix) nativism/Orientalism-in-reverse (al-'Azm 1984); and (x) utopian thought (Maaruf 2000/2001). Although Alatas did not discuss all the hegemonic orientations referred to above, it was his concern with such orientations other than Eurocentrism that led his students and others to identify and critically assess these other hegemonic orientations.

#### 4 | The Call for Autonomous Knowledge

The presence of multiple hegemonic orientations and heteronomous thinking suggests that an emancipatory project for knowledge creation needs to go beyond the decolonization of knowledge. Indeed, in the Malay world the call had always been for an autonomous social science tradition as a counter to heteronomous thinking, a project initiated by Alatas and continued by his students.

Recognizing that colonialism and the ubiquitous conditions of intellectual imperialism and the colonality of knowledge decades after political independence was not the only problem of knowledge creation, Alatas since the early 1970s wrote of the need for an autonomous social science tradition in Asia (S. H. Alatas 1972, 11). He lamented that the idea of an Asian social science approach was being preached rather than having become dominant among Asian social scientists (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 265). An autonomous social science refers to “the linking of social science research and thinking to specifically Asian problems” (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 265). This in turn requires the identification of “criteria of significance distinctive of the region” (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 268). Furthermore, this was more than a matter of merely paying attention to local issues with the appropriate methods (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 265; S. H. Alatas 2002, 150). An autonomous social science tradition has the following features: (i) the identification and treatment of definite problems; (ii) the application of specific methodologies; (iii) the recognition of definite phenomena; (iv) the creation of new concepts; and (v) the relation with other branches of knowledge (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 265; S. H. Alatas 2002, 151).

Guillermo's rephrasing of the definition of autonomous social science is helpful:

It independently raises problems and is not intellectually ‘dominated’ by other traditions; 2) It creates its own concepts and creatively applies existing social science methodologies; 3) It is open to influences from other traditions and does not consider the cultural or national origins of ideas as a basis for rejecting them. (Guillermo 2023, 2–3)

Thus, autonomous social science is opposed to the social sciences that are nurtured under the conditions of intellectual imperialism, academic dependency and the captive mind. Habits of knowledge creation that had been established across the globe during the last centuries have for the most part been heteronomous. According to Guillermo:

What does it mean to ‘independently’ raise problems? It basically means that these problems do not come from, or are not imposed from, ‘outside’. Thus, if ‘independent’ is taken to be roughly synonymous with ‘autonomous’, the opposite terms arise as ‘dependent’ and ‘heteronomous’. Being ‘dependent’ means that a particular system of knowledge production, paralysed or hindered in some way, cannot generate problems by itself which must therefore be sourced from the outside. ‘Heteronomous’ means that the system (e.g. of intellectual production) is not self-determining, or self-moving, primarily according to its own principles of development but is instead determined externally. Such a system thus seems to have no life or direction of its own. However, it is important to think of this state-of-affairs as a range wherein there are more or less ‘dependent’ and ‘heteronomous’ social sciences on the one hand, while, on the other, there are more or less ‘independent’ and ‘autonomous’ social sciences on the other.

(Guillermo 2023, 3)

Also relevant is Roulleau-Berger's definition of autonomy, with reference to Chinese sociology, as the “refusal of hegemonic postures, seeking anchors in the moments of the Chinese civilization of yesterday and today, and also in filiations, displacements, hybridizations with European and American ideas” (Roulleau-Berger 2018, 29).

Alatas also defines the kinds of knowledge required for the development of an autonomous social science tradition. These are: (i) foundational knowledge; (ii) consolidative knowledge; (iii) reactive knowledge; and (iv) developmental knowledge. Foundational knowledge refers to knowledge of the foundations of societies, their culture, religion and other defining aspects of social life. Consolidative knowledge refers to knowledge that consolidates and strengthens those foundations. Reactive knowledge, on the other hand, refers to knowledge that is required to react to ideas that tend to undermine the basis of social life. Finally, developmental knowledge is the knowledge required to achieve peace, justice, welfare and insight into the life of humans. These types of knowledge are suggestive of the

goals of an autonomous social science tradition (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 268, 2002, 153–154).

There would obviously be distinctive variations within the autonomous knowledge tradition owing to the differing knowledge traditions as well as differing cultural and historical contexts and social structures to be found throughout the Third World. Alatas noted that we were not yet in a position to have a clear view of those distinctive variations as autonomous social sciences had not yet emerged (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 265). Related to the idea of traditions is Guillermo's discussion on the difficulty of differentiating "between the outside and the inside in the abstract," and suggests that we accept for the time being the idea of "national" social science traditions, appreciating at the same time internal heterogeneity within national traditions, and which are to be assessed in terms of their degree of autonomy or heteronomy. Guillermo further notes that any social science tradition exists within a particular context (Guillermo 2023, 3). To this we can add the notion that tradition may be defined in terms of not only the national but also the regional, ethnic, religious, and gender.

An autonomous tradition in the social sciences could only emerge if there was consciousness and desire to be free of domination by a hegemonic external intellectual tradition such as that of a previous colonial power (S. H. Alatas 2006, 10).

Autonomous knowledge, therefore, is concerned with the critique of Eurocentric as well as other hegemonic orientations. This can be seen in Alatas' own work, where there is both the reconstruction of knowledge that proceeds from anti-colonial thought, as well as the call for the critique of other hegemonic orientations. This is not to deny that in some cases, the various hegemonic orientations have their entanglements with colonialism and Eurocentrism. Nonetheless, they often historically predate colonialism, have their own distinct genealogies and logics of development. The failure to recognize this is to engage in a colonial-centric discourse.

Regarding the former, Alatas' works are examples of what Edward Said, referring to Alatas' *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977), called revisionary work (Said 1994, 41–42), or "revisionist" scholarship, that is, works that "set themselves the revisionist, critical task of dealing frontally with the metropolitan culture, using the techniques, discourses, and weapons of scholarship and criticism once reserved exclusively for the European" (Said 1994, 243). Two examples of Syed Hussein Alatas' works that come under this category are *Thomas Stamford Raffles* (1971) and *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977). In both works, Alatas exposes and critiques the ideological function of colonial constructions of the colonizer and of native societies, and the continuity of this ideology among the native elite themselves.

With regard to the latter, Alatas had identified knowledge elitism, traditionalism and academic nihilism as problematic hegemonic orientations that required critique (S. F. Alatas 2022, 9–10). While he did not expend a great deal of time dealing with these hegemonic orientations and their impact on knowledge creation, such critique was taken up by his students. Scholars based in Singapore and Malaysia such as Chandra Muzaffar,

Shaharuddin Maaruf, Sharifah Maznah Syed Omar, Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, Azhar Ibrahim Alwee, Norshahril Saat, Teo Lee Ken, Mohamed Imran Mohamed Taib, Pradana Boy Zulian, Okky Puspa Madasari, and Syed Farid Alatas have been critical of hegemonic orientations such as traditionalism, culturalism, sectarianism, androcentrism, nativism, utopian thought and ethnonationalism (S. F. Alatas 2022).

Whether it is Eurocentrism or the other hegemonic orientations, our task is critique and reconstruction. This requires recognition of the combative element in the social sciences (S. H. Alatas 1979b, 269, 2002, 155).

## 5 | A School of Autonomous Knowledge

By way of conclusion, it is relevant to reflect on the tradition of knowledge creation that was established at the Department of Malay Studies in 1967 at the then University of Singapore, by Syed Hussein Alatas. This can be said to be not only a decolonial one, but also one of autonomous knowledge. It was influenced by Alatas, and informs the writings of the first and second generation of scholars following him. This raises the question of whether it is possible to speak of a School of Autonomous Knowledge in the social sciences and humanities that has emerged from the Malay world.

While Alatas was a sociologist, his call to think along the lines of autonomous knowledge was made when he headed the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore (1967–1988). The department has always been at the forefront of creating works that ran counter to the various hegemonic discourses discussed above. In this regard, Noor Aisha's assessment is instructive:

Unlike the dominant anti-social science approach that had characterised representations of the Malays during the colonial period and thereafter, Malay Studies began to witness the emergence of a critical and systematic body of knowledge that creatively selected and assimilated perspectives, concepts and methodologies from both Western social science and indigenous and Asian intellectual traditions, to raise and diagnose problems of relevance to the Malays. Theses and monographs produced by students and academic staff during this period raised original problems that reflected not the interests of those in power but concerns and challenges of the Malays and Asian societies more generally as they adapt to political, economic, socio-cultural changes and the process of development. Even research and the teaching of language and literature departed from the emphasis on formalism but was conceived and approached as a mirror of social history. Studies were approached and understood using the contributions of relevant social science perspectives and concepts such as sociology of knowledge, social structure, ideology and its function,

social change, modernisation, elites, and so on. At the same time, new concepts were created from indigenous sources and traditions to explicate phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

It is likely that Alatas had imagined the possibility of a tradition emerging from his own work, as he had frequently spoke of the need for the development of an Asian social science tradition or for the generation of autonomous social sciences. Although the idea of a school was not suggested by Alatas himself, it cannot be doubted that his project to establish an autonomous social science tradition had influenced scholars for two generations, and something of a school or tradition can be said to have emerged. This has been discussed at length elsewhere (S. F. Alatas 2022, 10–14) and will not be repeated here at length. In discussing the idea of a school of thought emerging from Alatas' discourse on autonomous knowledge, it is important to draw lessons from discussions in the United States about the Atlanta School founded by W. E. B. Du Bois (Gabbidon 1999; Wright 2002a, 2002b; Morris 2017) and the Chicago School (Bulmer 1985).

The reference to the Atlanta and Chicago schools of sociology is important for at least two reasons. One is that a study of these sociological schools gives us an insight into what is meant by a school in the sense of a scholarly tradition. This was discussed by Bulmer in his “The Chicago School of Sociology: What Made It A School,” in which he enumerates a number of traits that underlie a school (Bulmer 1985). Secondly, the discussion among some African American scholars about the erasure from academic memory of the Atlanta School, including the fact that it preceded the “first” American school of sociology, the Chicago School, reminds us of the silencing of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore. What I mean by this is the phenomenon of leaving Malay Studies out in accounts of the rise of post-colonial theory and decolonization of knowledge discourses that had developed out of Singapore and, more broadly, the region (S. F. Alatas 2018/2019).

Indeed, there are parallels between Du Bois and Alatas. Du Bois had dedicated himself to challenging the scientific racism of his day, and to establish that African Americans were not an inferior race and that racial categories were socially constructed (Morris 2017, 66). Similarly, Alatas had demonstrated that the discourse on the “lazy native” was not only empirically flawed but was a colonial construction that had specific functions in promoting the interests of colonial capitalism (S. H. Alatas 1977). Apart from that, Morris noted that the development of a tradition of knowledge creation that stemmed from the thought of Du Bois was more or less erased from the collective memory of sociology for as long as a century (Morris 2017, 72). It can be said that the autonomous social science tradition that originated from the works of Alatas was also erased from the collective memory of Singapore academia of which Alatas was a part for 21 years (S. F. Alatas 2018/2019).

During the time that Alatas headed the department, a unique and distinctive approach in sociology and other social sciences emerged and influenced many of the students he trained, some of whom had later become lecturers in the department.<sup>5</sup> Malay

Studies at Singapore, as a systematic field of inquiry in the social sciences, was developed with a distinctive and original approach by Alatas and his students, and was the origin of the autonomous social science tradition.

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### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For Alatas' biography see M. Alatas (2024).

<sup>2</sup> This theme was also taken up by Samir Amin in his *Eurocentrism* (Amin 1989).

<sup>3</sup> For more on this tradition see King (2008, 32–35).

<sup>4</sup> Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, personal communication, July 28, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman, personal communication, July 28, 2018.

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