The Study of Social Sciences in Developing Societies: Towards An Adequate Conceptualization Of Relevance

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Introduction

Since the 19th century, there has been a strong awareness or a lack of fit between the western social sciences and non-western realities. Many examples of the irrelevance of western concepts, theories and assumptions have been noted in the literature. The fact that the social sciences emerged in the West, were initially practised in the Third World by colonialists and other European scholars, and then finally implanted among the locals during and after formal independence, had raised the question of the relevance of these bodies of knowledge to Third World societies and their problems. Some non-western scholars in the 19th century and more during the postcolonial period recognized that the social sciences cannot be transplanted to a different historical and socioeconomic setting without doing injustice and violence to their respective realities. In short, there was recognition of the problem of irrelevance of western social science and of the need to generate relevant alternatives. For the most part, those who made these observations do not regard the entire western social science tradition as irrelevant and do not reject knowledge on the grounds of origin. The general idea was that the western social sciences are indigenous to their own settings and that the call for relevance is meant to contribute to the universalization of the social sciences.

However, what is meant at a conceptual level by irrelevance and relevance has rarely been the subject of discussion. This conceptualization is vital because it lies at the heart of the projects to make social science relevant. The result is that the prescriptive calls for relevance are necessarily vague. This is in no small measure due to the unsystematic way in which irrelevance is discussed. There is not much beyond the enumeration of examples and little by way of typology. It would be difficult to come by a lucid notion of relevance if there is uncertainty as to what irrelevance is. For example, are we referring to political or social irrelevance, or irrelevance at the level of culture, or at the level of theory?
As a result, the calls for more relevant social science, often reflected in moves to decolonize, indigenize, or nationalize the social sciences, are equally incoherent.

This article seeks to clear some ground in this area by discussing theories of the state of the social sciences, the problem of irrelevance and the various prescriptions for the creation of relevant social science.

I begin by outlining the problem of irrelevance as it has been discussed in a broad range of literature in the social sciences spanning the last century. This literature is implicitly concerned with the problem but has not attempted to conceptualize irrelevance. The second section follows with an itemization of the types of irrelevance. This typology of irrelevance is rationally reconstructed from various theoretical perspectives on the state of the social sciences in developing societies in which the theme of irrelevance is present but implicit and unarticulated.

The third section is devoted to a discussion of the nature of relevant social science, which is defined by a set of criteria of relevance implied by the typology of irrelevance from the second section. I list the prescriptions found in a variety of disciplines for the creation of more relevant social science for non-western societies. As in the case of irrelevance, the theme of relevance is implicit but not conceptualized in these prescriptions. There is a vague conception of relevance and, for the most part, of what would constitute more relevant theory, methods and practice. The typology of relevance that I introduce allows for a construction of relevant social science, examples of which are given at difference levels of social science such as meta-analysis, theory, empirical studies and applied social science.

The second and third sections undertake a rational reconstruction of the critique of western social science on the one hand, and the prescriptions for alternative social science on the other. This allows for the translation of the discourse of the critiques of western social science and the proponents of alternative discourses into a conceptual discourse relating to irrelevance and relevance. The aim of doing this is to construct the thought of such critics and proponents in such a way that would be consistent with what they themselves would have constructed had they been explicitly concerned with conceptualizing irrelevance and relevance. The result is a conceptual framework for the study of relevance and irrelevance, both of which remained implicit in the literature.

I conclude the article with a cautionary note on nativism and with an
aesthetic as well as practical justification for relevant social science.

The Discovery of Irrelevancy

The formative period of the various disciplines of the social sciences and the institutions in which they were taught in much of Asia and Africa was initiated and sustained by colonial scholars and administrators from the 18th century, as well as by other Europeans directly and indirectly in vicariously colonized areas.

Reflection upon the question of irrelevance at the philosophical, theoretical, empirical and applied levels is a consequence of the encounter between western theory and modelling on the one hand, and local/national/regional realities on the other. It should be noted, however, that the discourse critiquing this state of affairs was by no means unified and that it was almost always the case that the critical assessment of western social science did not result in reflections upon the concepts of relevance and irrelevance. Recognition of the problem of the applicability of the social sciences dates back to the 18th century during the colonial period and we can cite numerous works from the last century in which scholars and activists from the periphery of the capitalist world-system studied the language of the oppressor and often assessed its applicability, pertinence and attunement to their own political and cultural contexts. These two centuries of critiques contain statements that adumbrate a lack of fit between western theory and non-western realities, but do not attempt to introduce irrelevance and relevance as concepts in the sociology and philosophy of social science and explore their nature and typology. It is precisely for this reason that concern with relevance/irrelevance has to be read into these critiques. Let us consider a few examples of cases where irrelevance was at least implicitly seen as a problem.

Islamic Socialism

One of the most outstanding nationalist organizations of colonial Indonesia was the Sarekat Islam (Islamic Union), founded in 1912. By 1919 its membership had grown to 2.5 million. The Indische Social-Democratische Vereniging (ISDV), that is, the Indies Sociaal Democratic Organization, was established in 1914. This was later to become the PKI (Indonesian Communist Party) and played a crucial role in the radicalization of Sarekat Islam, especially since ISDV members had membership in Sarekat Islam branches as well. At the First National Sarekat Islam Congress held in 1916, a Sarekat Islam member, Hasan Ali Soerati, a capitalist of Arab origin, raised the
issue of combining Islam and socialism. Others who thought along similar lines pressed for the establishment of labour unions (Sarekat Islam Congres, 1916). By the time of the Fourth National Congress of Sarekat Islam the idea of an association of labour unions to combat capitalism and foreign domination was proposed (van Niel, 1960: 152). As Marxist elements within Sarekat Islam sought to minimize the role of Islam and stress class struggle against capitalism, another group led by Agus Salim espoused an Islamic socialism (van Niel, 1960: 1523). This was to eventually influence the thinking of the Sarekat Islam leader H.O.S. Tjokroaminoto in the 1920s, who sought to indigenize socialism in Indonesia by founding it upon Islamic principles. This required him to separate what was considered as inappropriate or irrelevant European views on religion and philosophy from socialism as an economic system (Tjokroaminoto, 1988: 30). Adolf Baars, editor of Het Vrije Woord, the organ of the ISDV, recognized that despite what he regarded as the anti-socialist position and bourgeois tendencies of Sarekat Islam, it signified progress in Indonesia because it brought people to self-assertion and independent thinking (Baars, 1916).

**Public Opinion Polls**

Ralph Pieris noted that while the development of sociology in the West was the outcome of a need for a new science that could discern the nature of rapid social change that eluded the older disciplines of philosophy, political economy and law, the type of social science that was introduced into the colonies precluded indigenous self-awareness because these sciences defined their object of study from the outside, thereby alienating their practitioners from their fellow human beings (Pieris, 1969: 4336). An example of the lack of concordance between the assumptions of western scholars and, say, Indian reality comes from the study of public opinion. Surveys of public opinion may undermine the goals of the research to the extent that respondents were uncertain of their own opinions until they consulted decision-makers. This was because public opinion was the result of consensus rather than individual decision (Pieris, 1969: 43940).

**Postmodernism in China**

This is a case of the misreading of the cultural context in which literature is produced. Modern Chinese literature studies have been described as part of the postmodernist debate in the West (Liu Kang, 1993: 14). Mu Ling, however, notes that this is a misrepresentation of Chinese literature and literary criticism of the 1980s because the
cultural and political contexts within which Chinese writers and critics were writing differed from that of the West. They were less involved in postmodernist debates in the West than with political struggle within China (Mu, 1995: 420). Mu Ling shows how Huang Zipings rereading of Wang Anyis novella Xiaobao Village appropriated postmodernist literary ideas for a different agenda, the interest in post-modernism being to undermine Maoist literary theory and practice but under the guise of an aesthetic quest which could get past government censors (Mu, 1995: 4345).

The Western Point of Reference

Another example of irrelevance concerns the discussions on Max Weber in the context of the development of capitalism outside Europe. Many sought to discover a Protestant-type function in religions such as Islam and Buddhism. They approached the matter from a Protestant point of view, seeking to discover what was said to be missing in other religions, the point of reference being Protestantism. An alternative formulation, one of several possible viewpoints, might ask why Islam was able to avoid the breakdown of prebendal feudalism and pastoral nomadism for as long as it did, or suggest reasons for Chinas regression into capitalism!

Imported Models

Consider now a concrete example of the inapplicability of imported models. The development staff of a rural development programme in Nueva Ecija, the Philippines, failed to understand the complexity of peasant behaviour by viewing peasants as self-maximizing, rational individuals that conform to the tenets of microeconomic theory. Peasant defaults on bank loans were viewed by the development staff as irrational (Weeks, 1986: 1819). The peasants, however, were quite happy to receive the first loan and utilize it for purposes other than for which it was intended, default on it and forfeit receiving sub-sequent low interest loans, as it enabled them to make payments for certain items that they would otherwise not have been able to purchase (Weeks, 1986: 19). Presumably, the development staff would have liked to have made the peasants more rational, not realizing that what is irrational from one point of view may constitute economic rationality from another because of different economic and cultural contexts.

Another example illustrating the problem of imported models comes from Iran. Reporters who have travelled to that country seem to be puzzled by what appears to be a paradox, that is, the coexistence of
a lively civil society with secular and consumerist yearnings on the one hand, and a theocratic regime on the other. However, as Ehsani notes, this sounds paradoxical only if one thinks within the confines of a western model of progress, according to which religious social movements are antithetical to modernity (Ehsani, 1995: 48). Against the feminist claim that the hijab is a tool of state oppression and without denying the repressive aspects of forced veiling, Ehsani notes that it enabled many lower middle-class urban women to enter the public sphere as social actors and constituted a powerful and culturally legitimate instrument to overcome the patriarchal control and restrictions of their male-dominated homes and families (Ehsani, 1995: 50).

**Orientalist Concepts**

Before the emergence of capitalism, the Ottoman social system was undergoing transformation that possibly involved a non-capitalist route. Yet, Ottoman history is constructed with concepts and themes based on Western European experiences (Aricanli and Thomas, 1994: 25). When these concepts are uncritically applied the West becomes the primary referent for the study of Ottoman history, with the standard concern being why processes of transformation in the direction of capitalism did not take place. The Orientalist perspective operates on the assumption that Ottoman, like other Islamic societies, was so different from European societies that concepts such as class, progress, revolution and the like did not apply, at least until the time that Ottoman society attempted to reform as a result of contact with the West. When these concepts are applied, the internal logic of development of Ottoman society does not occupy centre stage. Change is largely assumed to be possible after contact with western civilization and the point of reference is always the influence of modernization.

Social and political changes that did take place but which did not take Ottoman history along a capitalist path remain invisible because transformation is associated with the sphere of production (Aricanli and Thomas, 1994: 26). Aricanli and Thomas contend that through a critical application of concepts like class, property, social surplus and the state, Ottoman history can be reconstructed to reveal a dynamic but non-modern trajectory of development. An alternative framework with which to look at change is the Khaldunian theory of state formation. Ibn Khaldun’s theory, which addresses itself to the reconstruction of the pattern and rhythm of historical change, can be applied to Ottoman history, while the Ottoman political economy may be conceptualized in terms of modes of production (S. F. Alatas, 1990). These examples illustrate that many have noted various
problems surrounding the irrelevance of western knowledge in non-western contexts. These problems range from the inappropriateness of European views on religion to the distorting effect of survey research methods to the inapplicability of western models. So great have such concerns been that they have resulted in the formulation of a number of theoretical perspectives on the state of the social sciences in the postcolonial world that provide critical assessments of the western social sciences and of their impact on the various disciplines in the Third World. Such theoretical perspectives include theories of Orientalism (Said, 1979, 1993), theories of Eurocentrism (Amin, 1989), postcolonial criticism, rhetorical theories of social science (S. F. Alatas, 1998), the theory of mental captivity (S. H. Alatas, 1972, 1974), pedagogical theories of modernization (Illich, 1973; Al-e Ahmad, n.d.; Freire, 1970), modern colonial critiques (Fanon, 1968; Cesaire, 1972; Memmi, 1967) and academic dependency theory (Altbach, 1977; Garreau, 1985). While these theories are perceptive of the phenomenon of irrelevance and they address themselves to problems that clearly imply some form of irrelevance on the part of knowledge that originates in one sociohistorical context but is transferred to and applied in another, they are not concerned with the conceptualization of irrelevance.

**Conceptualizing Irrelevance**

Various problems identified by the aforementioned theories on the state of the social sciences in the Third World illustrate some aspect of the phenomenon of irrelevance, from which we can derive a preliminary typology of irrelevance.

**Lack of Originality**

According to the theory of mental captivity, the captive mind is characterized by a way of thinking that is dominated by western thought. The lack of originality does not lie in the appropriation of western thought per se but rather in the uncritical and imitative manner in which western knowledge is assimilated. An uncritical demonstration effect results in imitation at all levels of scholarly activities including problem-setting, analysis, generalization, conceptualization, description, explanation and interpretation (S. H. Alatas, 1972: 1112).

Consider as an example of such a lack of originality, the absence of a philosophy of social science that would have derived from the particular circumstances of the social sciences outside North America and Europe.
Non-Accordance between Assumptions and Reality The scholarly writings of the captive mind are also founded upon the unreality of basic assumptions in the social sciences (S. H. Alatas, 1972: 11). The theories of Orientalism and Eurocentrism that discuss the discursive construction of the Orient and of world history also suggest this aspect of irrelevance, that is, the non-accordance or disparity between assumptions and reality. For example, many of the observations of Marx and Weber of non-European societies were problematic as they were not merely factually wrong but based on unfounded assumptions with regard to the basic characteristics of Oriental societies.

**Inapplicability**

The problem of non-accordance between assumptions and reality then results in the more practical problem of the inapplicability of theories, concepts or models. The theories of Orientalism, Eurocentrism and postcolonial criticism have tirelessly demonstrated how inapplicable theories result in ideologically biased or empirically flawed constructions. A classic example is Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production. The inapplicability here is due to the discrepancy between theory and empirical reality to which the theory is being applied.

**Alienation**

The problems of lack of originality and the non-accordance between assumptions and reality suggest the alienation of social science from its context. This refers to the discrepancy between the concerns of social science and the needs of the community of which the social scientists are a part. Consider, for example, the kinds of issues raised in the sociology of education in contrast to the types of problems existing in the system of education in many developing societies. Very often, the thinking and research of social scientists in developing societies are more a reflection of what they had learnt from sociology of education texts rather than from the real and functioning systems of education in their own settings.

**Redundance**

Another problem raised by the theory of mental captivity is redundancy (S. H. Alatas, 1972: 12). This refers to the propensity for scholars in developing societies to uncritically assimilate verbal inventions and tautological expressions which do not represent new
ideas. These problems have been well documented (Andreski, 1972: Ch. 6) and have been also attributed to cultural studies (Ferguson and Golding, 1997: xiii).

**Mystification**

Irrelevance is implied by a certain degree of mystification. Social science can be said to be irrelevant when it mystifies through the use of jargon and comes across as being sophisticated. Such social science is irrelevant in the sense that the use of such jargon and obfuscat ing convolutions, to borrow an expression from Andreski (1972: 82), does not add to knowledge. An example would be the work of Althusser on relative autonomy which, according to Kolakowski, is merely a repetition of Engels’s principle of the relative autonomy of the superstructure with respect to the economic base, in extremely pretentious language (Kolakowski, 1971: 120).

**Mediocrity**

Irrelevance also implies mediocrity. Here we refer to mediocre or shallow social science that attains high levels of currency and prestige in the social science peripheries of the world, despite their being beset by various problems of irrelevance.

Each of these types of irrelevance, that is, lack of originality, non-accordance between assumptions and reality, inapplicability, alienation, redundance, mystification and mediocrity can be seen to plague the social sciences at different levels. These are the levels of meta-analysis, theory, empirical studies and applied social science.

**Meta-Analysis**

Meta-analysis concerns the reflexive study of a discipline, body of work or theory. The concern is less with theoretical or substantive content and more with philosophical underpinnings, social and historical contexts, or cultural assumptions. The misreading of the cultural context of modern literature studies in China discussed earlier is an example of irrelevance (non-accord- ance) at the meta-analysis level.

**Theory**

The assumption that there is a functional analogue to the Protestant ethic in East Asia, that is, the Confucian ethic, and the resulting
theorization, is an example of irrelevance (non-accordance) at the level of theory.

**Empirical Studies**

Research conducted within the framework of modernization or Marxist theory, with their Orientalist assumptions, is an example of irrelevance (inapplicability) at the level of empirical studies.

**Applied Social Science**

The inability of the development staff in Nueva Ecija to understand the behaviour of peasants is due to the irrelevance (non-accordance) of their assumptions of peasant rationality. This is irrelevance at the level of applied social science. The socially irrelevant, servile (alien) commitments of many social scientists to western social science agendas, that may have little applied value in their own settings, are an example of irrelevance (alienation) at the level of applied social science.

The absence of conceptualization of irrelevance in terms of its typology and the lack of attention to the manifestations of irrelevance at the different levels of social science activities perpetuate the various problems that form the context of irrelevant social science (for example, Eurocentrism, academic dependency and mental captivity), which in turn make it possible for irrelevance to persist. For example, mental captivity would continue in the absence of efforts to raise consciousness of the problem of irrelevance. Academic dependency, in terms of the reliance on mainly North American and British scholars and institutions for research agendas, theories and models, and the technology of research and social science education, therefore, persists. It might be pointed out that some aspects of irrelevance, such as non-accordance, inapplicability and mystification, are not specific to non-western social science but plague research in the West itself. While this is true, it is vital to note a number of points:

1. The social sciences are indigenous to the West in the sense that they arose amid concerns with problems relating to the emergence of modernity, that is the theoretical and empirical research agendas were internally generated, while this was generally not the case in Asia and Africa.

2. It has to be stressed that to the extent that the social sciences, as they emerged in Western Europe and the USA, are universal, they
are not to be rejected. What is being rejected are those aspects deemed irrelevant. Rejection is not based on origin but on the criteria of relevance.

3. Problems such as non-accordance, inapplicability, mystification and the like have been widely discussed and debated in the West and have become integral aspects of the philosophy of social science, while they have not in the non-West.

4. While certain aspects of irrelevance may not be specific to the non-West, they do appear in non-western social science in a different context, that of postcoloniality and academic dependency. Their phenomenology is therefore distinct even though the categories of irrelevance may be common.

Consider a Weber-inspired Confucian ethic thesis that explains the phenomenal rise of the East and Southeast Asian economies since the 1980s. According to this thesis, Confucianism instils respect for authority, frugality and hard work, which explains political stability and high growth rates. This thesis can be critiqued for being irrelevant in terms of non-accordance between assumptions and reality. For example, the tenability of the assumption that the Chinese of Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are Confucianists or are under the influence of Confucianism to the same degree that Protestantism influenced Webers bourgeois businessmen can be questioned. If this untenability be accepted, but if it is further claimed that Webers assumptions of the influence of Protestantism on merchants of the 16th and 17th centuries in Western Europe too are untenable, then we would be justified in saying that irrelevance characterizes both theories. But the significance of this irrelevance for the West and the non-West differs. This aspect of irrelevance, that is, non-accordance, may not be specific to the non-western world but its connotations and implications for the non-West are different, this difference being due in large part to conditions peculiar to any particular society that we may be referring to. In the case of the Confucian ethic thesis, the expose of irrelevance is bound up with revealing (1) the context of academic dependency and mental captivity and (2) the ideological and doctrinal basis of authoritarianism in East Asia, in the sense that irrelevance had the function of empowering authoritarian governments and inter-national funding agencies. Therefore, while social scientists everywhere may subscribe to irrelevant theories, the context and significance of irrelevance differ.

5. Following from the preceding point, irrelevance at all these levels leads to social science which, as pointed out by various works on Orientalism, intellectual imperialism and academic dependency,
empowers western social scientists, academic institutions, funding agencies, students, rather than Third World social scientists or those on whose behalf they speak, that is, the natives, subaltern groups and so forth. The result is that it is primarily European and American experience that guides the social science enterprise elsewhere. Expert knowledge is deemed to originate from western centres of learning. There is, therefore, an almost unidirectional flow of ideas and research funds from Europe and the USA to the Third World.

6. It is also vital to note that while irrelevance may be a problem of the social sciences in the West as well, for the most part western scholars have not been preoccupied with advancing the conceptualization of irrelevance and relevance in the context of Third World concerns or the global spread of the social sciences.

It follows that what must be regarded as relevance is the reversal of all that has been presented in the preceding as constituting irrelevance. Relevant social science would then refer to originality, accordance (between assumptions and reality), applicability, affinity (between the social science enterprise and its surroundings, that is, non-alienated social science), succinctness (non-redundance), demystification and rigour, which can be seen to exist at all the levels of social science. To be sure, these aspects of relevance are not to be understood in any absolute sense. While it is true that all, including First World social science, would aspire to be more relevant, how a particular discipline or community of scholars define rigour, demystification, accordance and so on may be dependent upon extra-scientific criteria. The location of Third World or postcolonial scholars helps to define these extra-scientific criteria. For example, whatever the aspect of relevance under consideration is, what is deemed relevant is social science which empowers postcolonial social scientists and those on whose behalf or with whom they speak (for example, the natives, subaltern groups). At least, this is how many who have been critical of irrelevance in the relationship between the West and the non-West in the social sciences would envision relevant social science.

**Relevant Social Science and its Levels**

The identification of the problem of irrelevance and the proliferation of perspectives with which to understand and gauge the state of the social sciences in the Third World is the proper context in which to read the calls for relevance.

These have taken the form of pleas for endogenous intellectual creativity (S. H. Alatas, 1981), an autonomous social science
tradition (Smail, 1961), decolonization of knowledge (ben Jelloun, 1985; Zghlal and Karoui, 1973; Boehmer, 1995; Zawiah, 1994), the globalization of social science (Bell, 1994; Hudson, 1977; Taylor, 1993), the sacralization of knowledge, the indigenization of social sciences (Fahim, 1970; Fahim and Helmer, 1980; Bennagen, 1980; Atal, 1981; Sinha, 1998), deschooling (Illich, 1973), postcolonial theory, the nationalization of social science (Agbowuro, 1976; Chan, 1993, 1994) and delinking from the structures of academic dependency.

Just as the theories on the state of the social sciences in the Third World recognize the problem of irrelevance but do not conceptualize irrelevance, so do these prescriptions just listed recognize the need for relevance without advancing the concept of relevance.

Because recognition of the need for relevance arose from the reading of irrelevance in social scientific works in the theoretical, empirical and applied areas, it is suggested that an adequate conceptualization of relevance can be derived from a prior conceptualization of irrelevance. The result of grappling with questions such as irrelevance, imitation and academic dependency allows us to begin to reconstruct a relevant social science, with relevance here understood in terms of its various types at different levels of social science, that is, meta-analysis, theory, empirical studies and applied social science.

Meta-Analysis

As stated earlier, meta-analysis concerns the reflexive study of a discipline, body of work or theory in which the concern is with philosophical assumptions, or social and historical contexts that underlie these works. At the level of meta-analysis, the creation of relevant social science first of all refers to the unmasking of all the types of irrelevance. Second, it refers to the production of meta-analytical work that restores relevance, that is, originality, accordance (between assumptions and reality), applicability, affinity (between the social science enterprise and its surroundings, that is, non-alienated social science), succinctness (non-redundance), demystification and rigour.

The theories of social science referred to earlier are examples of relevant social science at the level of meta-analysis in the sense that they seek to expose irrelevance, as would be the meta-analysis of works on relevance themselves (Chan, 1993, 1994). Other examples of relevant social science at the meta analytical level can be categorized as follows: 1. Revisionary history; 2. Political economy of
social science; 3. Sociology of intellectuals.

Revisionary history is what Edward Said refers to as works that reject dominant discourses and go beyond the reified polarities of East versus West, and in an intelligent and concrete way attempt to understand the heterogeneous and often odd developments that used to elude the so-called world historians as well as the colonial Orientalists (Said, 1993).

The political economy of social science involves the study of the relationship between power and knowledge. There are at least two aspects of this. One is the study of the link between academic discourses and colonial and neocolonial practice (McKay, 1943; Driver, 1992; Pels, 1994; McWilliams, 1995). An example would be the role of the discipline of geography in enabling territorial acquisition and resource exploitation (Driver, 1992: 27). Another is western feminist textual production of the Third World Woman as a homogeneous, powerless group of victims (Mohanty, 1984). The other dimension of the political economy of social science is its academic politics, that is, the set of institutionalised practices and relations of power that influence the production of knowledge from within academe: academic filiations, the mechanisms of institutionalization, the organization of power within and across departments, the market value of publish-or-perish prestige (Trouillot, 1991: 18).

The sociology of the intelligentsia and of intellectuals is a vital field to be cultivated in the context of relevant social science. Mannheim noted that the proletariat was the first social group which became conscious of its social identity while the intelligentsia is the last group that attempts to comprehend the sociological significance of its existence (Mannheim, 1993: 72, 74). The emergence of such consciousness among intellectuals is greatly impaired by the pre-existence of an elaborated proletarian framework of class analysis which does not acknowledge the possibility of intellectuals being anything other than a class (Mannheim, 1993: 745). The sociology of intellectuals is required to appreciate and account for the position of intellectuals in society. The task of such a sociology, in the context of Third World societies, would be to understand the social identity of the intelligentsia and their potential role in civil society. This is all the more important in those countries where intellectuals are, in a manner of speaking, fugitives, lacking liberty and self-perceived as irrelevant.

**Theory**
At the level of theory, relevant work also entails the unmasking of all the types of irrelevance as well as the production of theoretical work that restores relevance in terms of originality, accordance (between assumptions and reality), applicability, affinity (between the social science enterprise and its surroundings, that is, non-alienated social science), succinctness (non-redundance), demystification and rigour.

This would require a critical study of received theories and concepts as well as the generation of concepts and theories from indigenous historical experiences and cultural practices. Indigenous theories and concepts are not merely local terms that substitute for western ones. For example, the Filipino concept of kapwa cannot be understood in terms of others. Others is used in opposition to the self whereas kapwa is a recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others (Enriquez, 1994: 3).

There are few cases of theory that are self-conscious of relevance, even if relevance is not conceptualized, and they have to be seriously investigated. Examples are Fe Hsiao-tungs concept of the gradated network, which he developed to explain the prevalence of selfishness among peasants in pre-revolutionary China (Lee, 1992: 84) and the neo-Khaldunian theory of state formation.

In the case of the latter, there have been a few works which have gone beyond the mere comparison of some ideas and concepts in Ibn Khaldun with those of modern western scholars towards the theoretical integration of his theory into a framework that employs some of the tools of modern social science (Laroui, 1980; Cheddadi, 1980; Gellner, 1981; Michaud, 1981; Lacoste, 1984; Carre, 1988; S. F. Alatas, 1993). An example is the attempt to explain the rise and fall of the Safavid dynasty in premodern Iran by employing Ibn Khalduns theory of the dynamic of tribal state formation. While Ibn Khaldun does have a notion of historical change, absent is the conceptualization of the economic system. It is possible to apply the Marxist notion of mode of production and to then understand changes in Safavid history in terms of coexisting modes of production. Marxist and Weberian concepts are combined with various Khaldunian concepts such as asabiyyah (group feeling) and mulk and khilafah authority to yield a historical political economy of Safavid Iran (S. F. Alatas, 1993).

In this regard, it would be important to itemize the sources of theories and concepts from within the domain of local historical experiences and cultural practices. This will not be done here but mention can be made of a distinction that suggests two sources. This is a distinction made by Kim Kyong-Dong in the context of
Korean social science between the classical tradition (Confucianism, philosophy and so on) and the world of popular discourse.

Examples of utilizing the former as a resource for theorizing would be drawing upon the yin-yang dialectic and developing a critical Confucian ethic mode of analysis (Kim, 1994a, 1994b, 1996). An example of the latter is the study of common sayings and terminologies in popular discourse that not only reflect the cultural heritage but also reflect cultural perceptions of particular social phenomena (Kim, 1995: 173).

**Empirical Studies and Data Collection**

At the empirical level, the creation of relevant social science would refer to the identification of irrelevance as well as the production of empirical work that restores relevance in terms of originality, accordance (between assumptions and reality), applicability, affinity (between the social science enterprise and its surroundings, that is, non-alienated social science), succinctness (non-redundance), demystification and rigour. Above all, this would require a focus on problems more relevant to local settings that have hitherto been neglected. Relevant social science at this level may either consist of the application of imported theories and concepts to the local situation according to criteria of relevance or the collection of data that would not have been motivated by an allegiance to western models due their differing concerns and priorities.

**Applied Social Science**

At the level of applied social science, relevant social science entails, first of all, the unmasking of irrelevant decision-making, planning and policies. Second, it refers to working with voluntary organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and government in implementation with a view to restoring relevance: that is, originality, accordance (between assumptions and reality), applicability, affinity (between the social science enterprise and its surroundings, that is, non-alienated social science), succinctness (non-redundance), demystification and rigour.

Let us consider the case of relevant social science at the level of applied social science in terms of demystification of political and public discourse. Let me give an example of what needs to be demystified. This concerns the question of the so-called East Asian miracle, as it has been discussed in some countries of the region. There are two points among many that are worth noting. First, Asia
itself is a myth, an Orientalist construct, appropriated by Asians for a variety of reasons, including the idea that Asian is a kind of sales gimmick, used for political and commercial public relations (Buruma, 1995: 67). Apart from the fact that many local cultural practices are disappearing in Asia, what is often presented as Asian values either suspiciously promotes an authoritarian style of government or is universal in practice so as to make them indistinguishable from, say, American values. The task of demystification is not simply to expose the gimmick and place oneself in the liberal camp necessarily, but to present a third position, that is an alternative discourse on democracy or development that is authentic and liberating. Another area that needs demystifying concerns the question of South-east Asian development and pertains to the misuse of the works of Max Weber. In reply to the post hoc claim that development has taken place due to Islam/Confucianism, a case can be made to the effect that (1) capitalist forms of development took place in spite of Islam/Confucianism, (2) Islamic and Confucianist movements may actually reject current styles of development and (3) the state and media seem to dominate a discussion which has the potential to make sound claims about the possibility of indigenous forms of genuine democracy, not necessarily official communitarian democracy, but which, as yet, has had no opportunity to do so.

Proponents of demystification do not claim monopoly over the truth. It is precisely for this reason that demystification is necessary. For the human sciences to be relevant, no one voice should dominate public discourse. This, then, leads to the question of the access that the social science community has to policy-makers and the influence they have in decision-making and policy implementation. While it is generally agreed that development is meaningful only when it involves the full participation of citizens in public affairs, whether this refers to NGOs, professional associations, the mass media, trade unions and others, the extent to which social scientists impact upon interest and pressure groups as well as government is limited. However, if NGOs are to be effective, they must combine sophisticated research with insightful policy analysis and vocal advocacy of change. For this, there has to be a close working relationship among NGOs, academics and professionals, and government agencies if applied social science is to be relevant.

This is more of a problem in some countries than others. For example, in Malaysia, since the formation of the National Advisory Council for the Integration of Women in Development (NACIWD) in 1976 and the establishment of the Women’s Secretariat (HAWA) in 1983, several NGOs have been set up. These NGOs are all concerned with improving the status of women in Malaysia but
express this concern in different ways. Some are involved in the exchange and dissemination of information and research materials on various problems such as health, reproductive rights and domestic violence. Others are more active in raising public awareness of issues concerning women. Yet others are more practice-oriented and provide counselling, training and shelter for women. The problem is that the growing space for NGOs is not complemented by increasing participation of academics in NGO-related research and activism.

Therefore, the success of applied social science depends not only on the ability to absorb indigenous and traditional knowledge into modern planning and policy implementation, and not only on the political constraints under which social scientists work, but also on the crippling inertia that sometimes affects us.

Even in the relative absence of such extra-academic problems, relevant social science at the level of applied science must tackle the problem of translating theory into practice. An example is the use of traditional resource management systems based on communal property concepts (Clarke, 1990). In this case, a dilemma arose from the application of traditional systems because of the clash between communal property concepts and a capitalist logic of development.

**Conclusion**

At best, the problem is that the social sciences in the Third World are divorced from the realities that they claim to study, or that they generate erroneous theories. At worst, they are detrimental to their own communities as a result of their direct or indirect complicity in the coercion, discipline and control of subaltern groups. I have in mind, for example, works which seek to identify a functional analogue of the Protestant ethic in Islam or Confucianism for a psycho-cultural theory of capitalist development. Such social science, whether in the service of boundary maintenance and conflict, ethnocide and genocide (Basu and Biswas, 1980: 3), or soft authoritarian practices, operates to the benefit of the ruling classes, their clients and their transnational allies, and to the detriment of others. The more systematic, cogent and precise we are with respect to the notions of irrelevance and relevance, the more likely the relevance-seeking project is to crystallize into an intellectual movement, no doubt pluralistic in outlook, but systematic and thorough in aims and approaches. Nevertheless, there are other problems in this effort that must also be addressed. The extent to which the search for relevance in the social sciences, in its attempt to correct Eurocentric discourse, becomes a form of nativism or
orientalism in reverse, is a matter that must be taken seriously. Going native among both western and indigenous scholars constitutes the elevation of the natives point of view to the status of the criterion by which descriptions and analyses are to be judged to the extent that the social sciences from the West are held to be irrelevant (Amin, 1989; Abaza and Stauth, 1990; Moghadam, 1989). It cannot be emphasized enough that projects such as indigenization, postcolonialism, decolonization and others stand for the universalization of the social sciences. This they do in varying degrees of universality. At the simplest level, relevant social science would insist on a cautious application of western theory to the local situation. At a higher level of universality, both indigenous and western theory are applied to the local context. At yet another level of universality, local, western and other indigenous theories and concepts (that is, indigenous to other non-western societies) are applied to the local setting. I have in mind as an example, the application of the neo Khaldunian theory of state formation to the Mongol conquest of China. The highest level of universality refers to the application of indigenous theory from within and without ones own society to areas outside ones own area. Whatever the level of universality, for most critics of the western social sciences, there is in principle a commitment to the universal source of theories, concepts and ideas in general, although the extent to which ideas from without the locality are brought in and domesticated varies from one level and locale to another, and is dependent upon adherence to the criteria of relevance.

Such a project for greater relevance and universality in the social sciences can be further justified on grounds other than the already stated advantages of relevance.

Consider the appeal to aesthetics. The contemporary social sciences consist of many cultural voids. The practice of relevant social science at all levels means filling these voids by looking at the various non-western philosophies, cultures and historical experiences as sources of inspiration, insights, concepts and theories for the social sciences. The western social sciences are truly indigenous in the sense that they arose as a result of responses to European social and political revolutions and are rooted, at least partially, in European medieval absorption of Greek philosophy whether directly or via the Muslims. The implicit assumption here is that there is a pluralistic and rhetorical dimension to knowledge and that, therefore, the source of knowledge should not be restricted to one civilization.

All knowledge is constructed from a point of view and is, therefore, metaphoric (Brown, 1977: 77). A root metaphor is a fundamental
image of reality from which models can be derived. The five great root metaphors in sociology are those of the organism, machine, language, drama and game (Brown, 1977: 78). Insofar as metaphors are rooted in definite historical philosophic traditions, it would be rather appealing to widen our civilizational horizons, to engage in the search for new metaphors and entertain the possibilities of resultant models and theories. Apart from an aesthetic criterion of progress in the human sciences, it would be more astute, theoretically speaking, to be open to other civilizational sources of ideas as indicated by the example of Ibn Khaldun.

At a more down-to-earth level, there is a need to problematize irrelevance because of the practical implications of social research. An interesting comment on the matter was made on the Progressive Sociologists Network in connection with a comparison between Andre Gunder Frank and Fernando Henrique Cardoso (Karim, 1995). Karim was responding to a view that Frank is intellectually isolated for failing to connect social critique to action while Cardoso has been successful in filling the highest political position in his country. For Karim, while both are to be respected as scholars, Cardosos record for resisting neoliberal privatization, ensuring workers rights and stopping ecological destruction actually makes Bill Clinton look pretty good. Karims contrary view is that a lonely Frank is infinitely preferable to a Cardoso surrounded by the wrong crowd.

Social science has an important role to play in public discourse to the extent that social scientific discussions precede, parallel and follow policy decisions (Wingens and Weymann, 1988). Social science knowledge often sets the standards, directly or indirectly, according to which policy decisions and implementation are evaluated and justified. Often, this is unrelated to whether social science tells policy-makers something they do not already know. The ideas of Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Freud do find their way into public discourse, often in a distorted fashion (Wingens and Weymann, 1988: 94). The social sciences may, therefore, either enchant or disenchant, mystify or demystify. For Marx and Engels, the task of scientific socialism was to impart to the proletariat a full knowledge of the conditions and the meanings of the momentous act it is called upon to accomplish (Marx and Engels, 1968), that is, to raise consciousness. If for proletariat we read subaltern groups, that is all peoples subordinated by class, caste, age, ethnicity, gender and office (Sen, 1987: 203), the practical task of the social sciences becomes enormous.

The quest for relevant social science is a potentially liberating project. It is historically located contra-colonial and neocolonial
discourse. Its critical and emancipatory tone is a very strong reason to maintain an allegiance to the project.

Notes

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1 As this article is concerned with the state of the social sciences outside the cultura milieu of the West, particularly in those areas usually designated by the terms developing or emerging areas, or Third World, West or western is used here purely in a descriptive sense. It is not used in any Occidentalist mode but as a convenient category to refer to a largely Anglo-Saxon and, to some extent, a continental (French and German) dominated social science tradition.

2 This list of types of irrelevance is not meant to be exhaustive but represents what can be reconstructed from existing critiques of western social science.

3 These various prescriptions have been enumerated in a previous publication (S. F. Alatas, 1995a: 128-133).

4 For a critical discussion on this see S. F. Alatas (1995b).


6 For an account see Garreau (1986).


8 In a sense, this case may be cited as an exemplar for alternative discourses in the social sciences that wish to be more relevant in the ways that are being suggested in this article, but which do not wish to discard western social science in toto.


10 Orientalism in reverse is a notion originated by Al-Azm (1984: 368).