

# MISTAKEN MODERNITY AND ITS CRITICS: HUSSEIN ALATAS AND JALALAL-E AHMAD

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There already exists an idea of an American or European social science tradition. Though both draw upon a common universal fountain of social science knowledge, yet we do speak of an American or European social science tradition.

Syed Hussein Alatas, 2002 <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Syed Hussein Alatas, "The Development of an Autonomous Social Science Tradition in Asia: Problems and Prospects," *Asian Journal of Social Science* 30, no. 1 (2002): 151.

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## THE PERILS OF MISREMEMBERING

The late Tony Judt's book *Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* alerts us to a systemic tendency to mis-remember the intellectual history of the twentieth century as one of political extremes, filled with tragic mistakes and mistaken choices, a period of delusion from which the world has now thankfully awakened.<sup>2</sup> In the spirit of Judt's wider project, this essay offers a more nuanced understanding of twentieth-century political thought, focused on experiences outside of the West. Our aim is to revisit a critical intellectual debate which broached the predicaments of postcolonial societies. Specifically, we investigate an innovative intellectual tradition which took to task the uncritical Western imitation pervasive among governing elites in postcolonial countries. This new intellectual intervention sought to radically redefine how we understand agency in non-Western societies emerging from colonial domination. The new tradition gave special consideration to local cultural questions while engaging in a passionate dialogue with European intellectuals. The influence was a complex and bilateral relation, rather than a case of the West either preceding these Asian thinkers or giving birth to their recycled ideas. The intellectual process was simultaneous, dialectical, and interdependent, for Western and Asian thinkers alike were mesmerized by the perplexing significance of multiple independence wars and social struggles taking place in Algeria, Vietnam, Cuba, and Palestine. The worldwide national liberation struggles imaginatively impacted progressive public intellectuals everywhere and provide a background for the new intellectual tradition examined in this article.

However, to all appearance, the new twenty-first century political environment—and especially the virulent rise of political Islam—has prompted many to misremember the broader global contexts defining the postcolonial intellectual tradition we discuss in this article. The vibrant and broadly cosmopolitan communities from which Asian,

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<sup>2</sup>Tony Judt, *Reappraisals: Reflections on the Forgotten Twentieth Century* (New York: Penguin Books, 2009).

Middle Eastern and African public intellectuals participated have been either forgotten or dismissed as marginal to postcolonial history. Instead, a history is routinely recycled depicting a squandered Third World reckoning with the unscalable heights of the modern world. It is now common to regard postcolonial intellectuals as confused ‘Third World’ individuals, helplessly obsessed with their own self-made dreams, a serpentine oscillation which—in practical reality—has catalysed the nightmarish explosion and ruins of the Iranian Revolutionary trajectory, of Latin American radicalism, and the liberation movements across Asia and Africa. In this new discourse of imperial self-affirmation, the unleashed fantasies of non-Western intellectuals are deemed responsible for all that went tragically wrong in every colonial aftermath.

### **The Idea of Autonomous Social Sciences:**

We shift the investigative frame to the Malaysian sociologist and public intellectual, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007), who identified and critiqued the conventionalized ‘unthinking’ systemically permeating postindependence Asian scholars and political elites. Alatas articulated theories rooted within local historical contexts, sociocultural realities, and the hopes of populations in contemporary postcolonial societies. Alatas aimed to construct “an autonomous social science,” the fruit of intellectual engagement and political activism, and therefore his work belonged to the humanist tradition of transforming social orders through direct action:

[...] an autonomous tradition cannot develop without the commitment of an intellectual, creative and independent group striving for that tradition.<sup>3</sup>

In Alatas’ “The Captive Mind in Development Studies,” there are two essential categories: “the factorgenic and the actogenic.”<sup>4</sup> Factorgenic

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<sup>3</sup>Alatas, “The Development of an Autonomous Social Science,” 150.

<sup>4</sup>Syed Hussein Alatas, “The Captive Mind in Development Studies: Some Neglected Problems And the Need for an Autonomous Social Science Tradition in Asia,” *International Social Science Journal* 24, no. 1 (1972): 22.

includes “all those matters which are the results of human action, external to man and able to survive longer than an individual or a group.” Actorgenic includes “all those matters which are found within the individual or the group.” Alatas explains:

[...] we should seriously devote increasing attention to the roles of entrepreneurs and political groups in developing societies. All analyses of human behaviour and achievements can be grouped into two broad categories, the factorgenic and the actorgenic. By factorgenic I mean all those matters which are the results of human action, external to man and able to survive longer than an individual or a group. By actorgenic I mean all those matters which are found within the individual or the group. Though in real life there is a strong interaction and interdependence between factorgenic and actorgenic phenomena, at an initial level of comprehension it is fruitful to make a conceptual distinction.

Within the purview of this double concept, Alatas makes the following observation with regard to the concept of a developing country:

economists of underdevelopment and development planners have been, on the whole, factorgenic in orientation. When they discuss problems the picture which emerges is that of anonymous forces bringing about or obstructing certain changes. They discuss the absence or presence of natural resources, the size of the market, the terms of trade, institutional impediments, labour productivity per capita income, and a host of other data...<sup>5</sup>

While conceding the importance of these “anonymous” factors, Alatas charges such development analysis with drifting into the “ahistorical.” He contrasts them unfavourably with the Weberian tradition which includes “concrete empirical discussions of socio-economic groups centred around actorgenic data.” Alatas writes: “our major problems are to my mind best understood in terms of actorgenic analysis. If we desire to break the chain of circular explanation involving the

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<sup>5</sup>Alatas, “The Captive Mind,” 23

continuous repetition of known data and problems, we have to enter a wider area of discourse.” Alatas cites as important the available “moral and mental energies,” the “feelings of groups and individuals,” the “dominant conceptions and ideas,” the “personality traits” of the “entrepreneurs and the power holders” whose decisions “decisively condition a country’s reaction to all its major problems.”<sup>6</sup> Therefore, Alatas argues that it “is not enough to explain how and why development plans fail but who makes them fail and how actorogenic factors operate in the group which causes the plan to fail.”<sup>7</sup> Although Alatas is perfectly cognizant of the crucial role of institutional context, his view resembles that of Amartya Sen, for whom the exclusive preoccupation with institutions in isolation is “institutional fundamentalism,” and who prioritizes positive transformations in public values and meanings as the existential foregrounding of any good institution-building.<sup>8</sup>

Alatas writes: “Citing factorogenic data repeatedly will not help us solve basic problems. It is not enough to explain how and why development plans fail but who makes them fail and how actorogenic factors operate in the group which causes the plan to fail [...] Discussions on the goals and prospect of development planning would then become more fruitful [and] make planning more meaningful and desirable [when] freed from the relatively ethnocentric offshoots which have grown around them.”<sup>9</sup> Any emancipatory development process requires an agentive, creative and meaningful theoretical framework which closely considers the myriad details of local, social, and historical context.

This view suggests, as in the tradition of Mahatma Gandhi, “an idiom very different from that of the European Liberal-Labour radicals or the Marxists,” but which “his followers [millions of both sexes and all classes, castes, religions and regions] had little difficulty in understanding” in its message of “political and social rights” and

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<sup>6</sup>Alatas, “The Captive Mind,” 23.

<sup>7</sup>Alatas, “The Captive Mind,” 24.

<sup>8</sup>Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (London: Penguin, 2009), 57.

<sup>9</sup>Alatas, “The Captive Mind,” 24-25

“democratic socialist development.”<sup>10</sup> It follows that a profound political importance attaches to Alatas’ theories for the objective process of economic and political unification of nations overcoming legacies of the colonial yoke. Also like the Gandhian strategy, Alatas’ cosmopolitanism embraced an anti-imperialism that avoided “degenerating into ‘reverse’ racism of any kind.”<sup>11</sup>

Alatas embraced the social science tradition, while rejecting “the unreality of the basic assumptions, misplaced abstractions, ignorance or misinterpretation of data, and an erroneous conception of problems and their significance” resulting from an “uncritical demonstration effect” in the spreading of “social science knowledge in Asian countries.”<sup>12</sup> He rejects a kind of inflationary ontology identifiable with Eurocentrism. Alatas promotes a social science tradition based not on “laws of society” deduced from perfected individual psychology (John Stuart Mill) but applying scientifically disciplined intelligence to problems of social reform in concrete contexts driven by moral motivation (John Dewey). He nevertheless identifies universal foundations for the “social science tradition,” comprising “factors peculiar to [that tradition] that distinguish it from other traditions.” These include: “(1) The raising and treatment of definite problems, (2) the application of definite methodologies, (3) the recognition of definite phenomena, (4) the creation of definite concepts, and (5) the relation with other branches of knowledge.”<sup>13</sup>

Alatas therefore links the epistemic character of his Social Science project to the Marxian tradition of transforming the world rather than merely passively understanding it as a fixed reality. Alatas’ ‘autonomous social science’ is intended to liberate: “what were the factors conducive to the birth of such a tradition and what were the serious impediments? In order to liberate, one must first understand the condition of bondage. This led

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<sup>10</sup>Bipan Chandra, *The Writings of Bipan Chandra: The Making of Modern India from Marx to Gandhi* (Hyderabad: Orient Black Swan, 2012), 18.

<sup>11</sup>Chandra, *Writings*, 15.

<sup>12</sup>Alatas, “The Captive Mind,” 11.

<sup>13</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 151.

me to the problem of the captive mind.”<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the existing imitative practice has done untold harm: “Asian scholars are still under intellectual domination. The pattern and effects of this domination can be easily traced [...] Whole nations have been subjected to ill-conceived planning with serious consequences.”<sup>15</sup>

Alatas defines the “Captive Mind” as the consequence of the “intense bombardment on the developing societies of an ever-growing volume of literature from the West resulting in uncritical assimilation by the scholars of developing societies.”<sup>16</sup> The failure to produce an original and emancipatory social science in postcolonial contexts is the legacy of a colonial system “which did not have a functioning group of independent scholars.”<sup>17</sup> The colonial afterlife persists in postindependence scholars who have “picked up the habit of discourse, employing a stock of general concepts and method of analysis [while] clearly not focusing on the distinctive features of this society [i.e. Malaysia]. This is nothing but imitation of instant scholarship that abounds in the fields of economics, political science, sociology and development studies.”<sup>18</sup> The word “instant” indicates a prefabricated template, requiring no further reflection, only a passively “imitative” reproduction of fixed guideline answers. These answers were strictly laid down by unquestioned authorities in the wealthy and powerful universities and research institutes of those rich countries which were the erstwhile colonial masters of Asian countries from Malaysia to India.

It follows, Alatas argues, that discursive productions are so tightly defined by genre types that texts on different Asian countries are interchangeable. This renders them irrelevant abstractions bound only by superficial discursive conventions. Alatas noted that “more and more Asian scholars of the demonstration effect type are being

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<sup>14</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 150.

<sup>15</sup>Alatas, “The Captive Mind,” 10

<sup>16</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 150.

<sup>17</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 150.

<sup>18</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 151.

produced and diffused.”<sup>19</sup> Haunted by this impression of superficiality in established academia, Alatas did an experiment while teaching in Singapore:

Several years ago, at the National University of Singapore I read out in class an article on education written by a sociologist. The entire class thought that this was the situation of education in Singapore. But this was not so. This article was about another Asian country. I merely substituted the name ‘Singapore’ in place of the country’s original name. The strange thing was that it clicked. There was nothing wrong with the content. It dealt with a general concept and processes, and attempted causal analyses of the kind that are valid everywhere. When I told the students that the article was not about Singapore, they were truly shocked.<sup>20</sup>

### **Alatas’ Cosmopolitan World:**

Alatas’ project of launching new and creative analytical strategies focused on dynamic Asian social realities invokes a specific ‘tradition’ of humanist universalism. This ‘tradition’ is grounded in ongoing dialogic exchange with multiple social science streams from around the globe. Alatas writes: “Ignoring a valuable contribution from the West is as negative as uncritically accepting whatever is served on the academic platter.”<sup>21</sup> Alatas’ social scientific investigation therefore transcends the new game of ‘nativism’ that gained considerable influence over public imaginations in many Asian countries at around the same time. His writings never entertained the revivalist fantasy of a total cultural rebirth realized through violent rupture away from the West. This is why he writes: “The domination of the greater part of mankind by Western civilisation has led to certain positive as well as negative effects. Our concern in the field of the social sciences is to identify these two effects and to avoid the negative ones.”<sup>22</sup> In the principle

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<sup>19</sup>Alatas, “The Captive Mind,” 11.

<sup>20</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 156.

<sup>21</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 150.

<sup>22</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 151.



of concretion, or fact confronted with alternatives, Alatas adopts a pragmatic and consequentialist schema rather than utopian totality. He calls for more opening—not closing—of new horizons in the global intellectual space, envisioning an inclusive cosmopolitanism embracing postcolonial experiences, histories, and realities.

Until now, then, we have established that Alatas coined the concept of ‘the Captive Mind’ to debunk the conventional ‘un-thinking’ defined by professional practices of simple reproduction of Western thought by non-Western intellectuals in the social sciences. Alatas calls for a new ‘tradition’ of social science theory rooted in the collective imaginaries of Asian societies: the singular modes of living, seeing and making social existence through imaginary significations lacing together a society and defining its moral claims to change. Democracy is not the institutional reflection of an idealized image of property law contracts projected as the transcendent motive for social cohesion (i.e., the “social contract” tradition), but the framework for applying intelligence to the ethical and practical problems of the given society. To illustrate how this issue concerns concealed epistemic power inequalities, Alatas proposes a thought experiment:

Can you imagine a Japanese writer writing a book on the American national character, published in Japan, reviewed by a Japanese scholar, popularized by the Japanese propaganda machinery and eventually sold in the United States, resulting in thousands of [American] students seeing their own country through Japanese eyes?<sup>23</sup>

The reverse situation, where Western scholars set the standard for societies they have scarcely encountered, has persisted despite the end of Empire. It has inflicted, Alatas argued, a crisis of creative reflection upon social problems in non-Western societies:

Intellectual imperialism conditions the mental attitude of those

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<sup>23</sup>Syed Hussein Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism: Definition, Traits, and Problems,” *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science* 28, no. 1 (2000): 30.

who have been caught in its web. Apart from encouraging docility, it stifles creativity. As a result of being dominated by intellectual imperialism scholars cannot become creative. They spend their time imitating. They spend their time trying to be acceptable and trying to gain approval from the group whom they look up to [i.e., in a power relation].<sup>24</sup>

Alatas hence indicates the emulatory behaviour to which capital gives rise within a stratified order of power and prestige, because its power to allow or refuse access to institutional resources shapes the destinies of millions. Domination of one country over another persists within spaces of exile, or the wider liminal zone, defining the parameters of independent countries and the metropole as power constructs. This was also the subject of Sudanese author Tayeb Salih's 1966 *Season of Migration to the North*.<sup>25</sup> The novel depicts how the speech act, as conditioned by the colonial aftermath, is stuck in forced repetitions through the underlying force of hidden layers of historical violence. The two principal characters, the unnamed narrator and Mustafa Sa'eed, represent a typology of alternative "us" and "others" constructions. They are two Western-educated Sudanese intellectuals still struggling to achieve national liberation in the colonial aftermath, upon a topography crisscrossed with the power legacies of Empire. We might very well compare Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923-69) to the revolutionary Mustafa Sa'eed, whose murderous acts of violence echo the Orientalist fantasies of his women victims, a closed loop immortalized in *Richard Wright's 1940 Native Son, which examines the psychological linkage between systemic deprivation of autonomy, blind anger, repressive condescension, and retaliatory violence as a political dead end:*

In all of [Bigger's] life these two murders were the most meaningful things that had ever happened to him [...] Never had he had the chance to live out the consequences of his actions [...] Blind anger had come often and he had either gone behind his curtain or wall,

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<sup>24</sup>Alatas, "Intellectual Imperialism," 30.

<sup>25</sup>Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (New Hampshire: Heinemann, 1970).

or had quarrelled and fought. And yet, whether in running away or in fighting, he had felt the need of the clean satisfaction of facing this thing in all its fullness, of fighting it out in the wind and sunlight, in front of those whose hate for him was so unfathomably deep that, after they had shunted him off into a corner of the city to rot and die, they could turn to him, as Mary had that night in the car, and say: ‘I’d like to know how your people live.’<sup>26</sup>

Mustafa Sa’eed, like Al-e Ahmad, desires a total and radical break from the West in the colonial aftermath. Alatas, by contrast, more resembles the unnamed narrator who endeavours to build his nation based on the reform of power abuse and improvement of public institutions. Contemporary Iran, one may argue, is to all appearances the outcome of Wright’s “closed loop” approach while other parts of Asia—for example, postindependence Nehruvian India—reflected for several decades the creative reform model promoted by Alatas. The comparison brings to mind Marcus Aurelius’ citation: “the best revenge is not to be like your enemy.”

A larger backdrop to Alatas’ epistemic reflections is to be found in the central twentieth-century debate about “independent thought.” In the Soviet Marxist camp, this was dismissed as “bourgeois.” Important Eastern European dissidents and philosophers of science like Michael Polanyi, however, argued that “autonomy of thought” is not only the basis for scientific practice but also a free society.<sup>27</sup> The Autonomy of Science debate originated when Polanyi was invited to the Ministry of Heavy industries in 1930s Moscow. His 1935 conversation with Bukharin, editor of the Party newspaper *Pravda* and leading Kremlin theoretician, exemplifies alternative twentieth-century Left “development” paths. Both embraced modern science as a social ideal, discussing the “scientific” rationale for Soviet government conduct. Bukharin declared “pure science,” truth-seeking regardless of extraneous influences, the illusion of contradictions in capitalist society.

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<sup>26</sup>Richard Wright, *Native Son* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1970), 231.

<sup>27</sup>Michael Polanyi, *Science, Faith and Society*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), 8.

Independent initiative, Bukharin held, is unnecessary. Individual and communal concerns harmonize as a “whole” through the Five-Year Plan. Bukharin’s denial of an intrinsic *link between economic development and political freedom* constituted a denial of the central value in everyday *communication*, for party dogma replaced its function in resolving the perennial contradictions of rapidly changing modern societies. This debate indirectly paved the way for Thomas Kuhn’s paradigm theory.

Alatas partakes of this twentieth-century social science tradition that shifted centrality to the communicative act in pursuing democratic social transformation, emphasizing “the role of human sciences in the dialogue among civilizations.” This included the “participation in and monitoring of public discourse with the objective of breaking stereotypes and unsettling commonly held notions that typically translate into prejudiced views.” This extended to “formal education of the public at all levels, that is, primary, secondary and tertiary education, such that intercivilizational encounters, the multicultural origins of modernity, and the variety of points of view, inform the development of curricula.” Alatas champions public non-conformity, willingness to pursue radical reform, and the popular masses having a share through direct action in the changes that need be brought about in post-colonial power configurations.

The desire or courage to think for yourself and be critical of conventional thinking defines Alatas’ “humanist” vision of the Captive Mind. It is not uncommon among “radical” scholars to dismiss this tendency as “liberal,” but it underpins the essential quality of any truly radical way of thinking which aims to challenge any dominant discourse. These debates mainly took place in the 1960s and 1970s, during the Cold War, and Alatas makes a unique contribution to them from the perspective of non-Western societies whose rich and profound cultural histories had been marginalized and degraded by Empire.

Alatas proposes a process of theory making to counter the resulting creative paralysis constricting Asian intellectual culture, which he calls

the “autonomy of the social sciences.” His two interconnected ideas, the “Captive Mind” (condition of un-thinking) and the “new social science tradition” (postcolonial theory making), are joint elements in his vision of a new cosmopolitanism:

The emancipation of the mind from the shackles of intellectual imperialism is the major condition for the development of a creative and autonomous social science tradition in developing societies.<sup>28</sup>

To justify its rule and protect its interests, Empire had to articulate a historical narrative ideologically purveying an image of its benevolence and of native inadequacy. These myths, Alatas argues, had a concealing function. Undermining the legacy of such official belief systems, Alatas points out, requires the rigours of objective scholarship:

Certain neglected phenomena crucial to the history of Malaysia and Indonesia, such as the destruction of the trading classes by colonial rule, had to be seriously studied and the sociological mechanism bringing about the destruction had to be described in order to understand the motives of the aliens to describe the natives as ‘lazy.’<sup>29</sup>

Alatas therefore urges a prolonged process of intellectual struggle to remake the established order of ideological power across diverse civil society plateaus, to overcome their historically unbalanced military, political, and economic power orders.

### **The Last Muslim Intellectual:**

Hamid Dabashi, in his elegantly written new volume, is fascinated with the world and time of Iranian intellectual Jalal Al-e Ahmad, a literary figure, essayist, and author of the influential *Gharbzadegi* (*Occidentosis*). Dabashi calls Al-e Ahmad “the last Muslim intellectual.” We find it valuable to place Dabashi’s presentation of the “last Muslim intellectual” in conversation with Alatas’s idea of the “Captive Mind.”

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<sup>28</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 44.

<sup>29</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 27.

Alatas and Al-e Ahmad hailed from the same generation of non-Western intellectuals who sought to re-envision their respective societies on their own terms while also self-consciously participating in the larger spaces of the modern world. Al-e Ahmad's thoughts drew inspiration from literary and cinematic premonitions of the modern world as bound to an inevitably apocalyptic path. He regularly criticised the "unthinking" of the Iranian modernizing elite, yet his was an alternative conception of "unthinking," one based on the contagious disease of modernity that he labelled "Gharbzadegi:"

[...] Albert Camus, Eugene Ionesco, Ingmar Bergman and many other artists, all of them from the West [...] all regard the end of human affairs with despair. Sartre's Erostratus fires a revolver at the people in the street blindfolded; Nabokov's protagonist drives his car into the crowd [...] These fictional endings represent where humanity is really ending up [...] crushed under the machine ...<sup>30</sup>

It follows that the West had already been fully contaminated by the Gharbzadegi disease, while in Asia there still remained some hope for a cure. The comparison between Alatas and Al-e Ahmad throws new light upon twentieth-century anti-colonial thought by highlighting the crucial practical differences entailed by alternative modes of thoughts. Too often these differing modes of thoughts are blurred together in a nebulous anti-modernism. By underlining the differences, we also starkly display the enduring legacy of these alternative modes of thoughts in today's brand new but retro world.

Dabashi's recent critique of our remembrance of events like the Iranian Revolution and Al-e Ahmad provides one illuminating departure point for understanding the contemporary world.<sup>31</sup> We comparatively analyse Al-e Ahmad and Alatas, two outstanding individuals of the same generation who shared kindred intellectual and political concerns.

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<sup>30</sup>Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis: A Plague from the West*, trans. R. Campbell, ed. Hamid Algar (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1984), 227.

<sup>31</sup>Hamid Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual :The Life and Legacy of Jalal Al-e Ahmad* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

Dabashi urges us to remember important twentieth-century figures in new ways, freed from Eurocentric theoretical distortion, or misassessment born of the violent passions of the time. Al-e Ahmad, by Dabashi's account, was the "last Muslim cosmopolitan." An entire world became extinct with his passing. The unique qualities of an irretrievable era also passed from the Earth shortly after Al-e Ahmad's death. Dabashi writes:

After the Iranian revolution of 1977–9 came the devastating Iran–Iraq war of the 1980s, then the two successive US invasions of Iraq in the 1990s and 2000s, the Afghanistan invasion in 2001, the Green Movement of 2008–10 in Iran, and then the Arab Spring of 2010–12, then the rise of the criminal

gang of ISIS, followed by the mayhem in Syria and the Saudi genocide in Yemen.<sup>32</sup>

This citation from Dabashi powerfully poses the following problematic: the twenty-first century witnesses a decline in both Liberal Humanism and Marxism, but do we live in a better century? Analytically remembering Al-e Ahmad and Alatas as distinctive but related visionaries is one way to avoid falling into forgetfulness about the past, but to recall its genuine complexity and even its promise.

Al-e Ahmad and Alatas shared a definition of twentieth-century intellectual vocation by their both being public intellectuals. Both would have embraced such description. Alatas' key idea, the "Captive Mind," and Al-e Ahmad's, "Gharbzadeghi," were both articulated to radically critique postcolonial modernity while imagining an alternative future. For Al-e Ahmad, the intellectual horizon was tainted by polarized ideologies, all covertly enslaved by industrial modernity: "all of these 'isms' and ideologies are roads leading to the sublime realm of mechanization."<sup>33</sup> He sought a secure ontological ground beyond the conflicted intellectual confusion of the times, a space of being and belonging to provide a shelter.

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<sup>32</sup>Dabashi, *The Last Muslim Intellectual*.

<sup>33</sup>Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 29.

Unlike Al-e Ahmad, Alatas presents the “Captive Mind” as a sociological category. For Al-e Ahmad, as a literary essayist, “Gharbzadeghi” has a deeply metaphysical connotation. Al-e Ahmad strikingly depicts “Gharbzadeghi” analogously with the spread of a contagious virus: “I speak of [‘Gharbzadegi’] as of tuberculosis.” The infectious disease “Gharbzadegi” preserves the outer aspect of its victims while corrupting them from inside, like a latent infection: “[‘Gharbzadegi’] more closely resembles an infestation of weevils. Have you seen how they attack wheat? From the inside. The bran remains intact, but it is just a shell.” Although tuberculosis and weevils are only metaphors, Al-e Ahmad concludes: “At any rate, I am speaking of a disease: an accident from without, spreading in an environment rendered susceptible to it.”<sup>34</sup>

We ask: What differences in intellectual traditions explain the differing critiques of these two pioneering thinkers on the postcolonial experience of modernity? What is the significance of those differences for political practice within the spheres of public activism, social revolution, and ultimately nation-building? For both their time, as well as for ours. Alatas is especially concerned with an imperial politics of extraction that simultaneously silences its victims on the basis of their exclusion from educational and other power circuits:

I met a leading traditional healer who used to supply some British writers with information. He was not able to make the finished product, as he had not been taught to write, he did not know how to use footnotes, and was not able to write essays. The colonial scholars took the data and just published them without any acknowledgement or further analysis. This was then distributed. There is a parallel here between economic exploitation and the exploitation of knowledge.<sup>35</sup>

Alatas’ theory combines Marxian analysis of exploitation with assessment of how knowledge acquisition is systemically abused within

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<sup>34</sup>Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 27.

<sup>35</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 25.



the same process. But Alatas does not reduce all knowledge acquisition to an intrinsically coercive process, in contrast to Heidegger's harmonizing powers of "restored" being. Alatas' major difference from Al-e Ahmad is in this aspect. Al-e Ahmad certainly had a passionate early interest in imagining a so-called postcolonial intellectual paradigm through a rich cosmopolitan dialogue with Western traditions from Existentialism to Marxism. As Dabashi himself acknowledges, this dialogue on alternative paradigms is mostly limited to Al-e Ahmad's earlier period. This was subsequently followed by Al-e Ahmad's later period, when he became influenced by Ahmed Fardid and German romantic thought. In this latter context, Al-e Ahmad advanced his key idea of "Gharbzadeghi." Comparing Alatas and Al-e Ahmad provides the opportunity for a new discussion on Alatas's "Captive Mind," which urges postcolonial intellectuals and the educated middle class to re-learn independent, open, and creative thought in the social sciences, in the aftermath of the colonial mould.

Unlike the "Captive Mind," Al-e Ahmad's idea of "Gharbzadeghi"—coined by Fardid and appropriated by Al-e Ahmad—lacks many positive qualities due to its provenance in pessimistic traditions of understanding the human condition: 1) it originated from Heidegger's notion of the "darkening of the world;" by definition, this is an anti-humanist vision. It envisions salvation in a return to the roots and is defiantly hostile to cosmopolitanism. It concerns cultural authenticity: "we [Iranians] are like strangers to ourselves, in our food and dress, our homes, our manners, our publications, and most dangerous, our culture [...] If in the beginning of the Constitutional era the danger brushed up against us, it has now touched our souls."<sup>36</sup> Lastly, it is a deeply deconstructive idea, without corresponding positive vision, except for the militant anti-modernism that vaguely alludes to utopia beyond everything in the "modern" present. Alatas articulates a different conception of the colonial aftermath for intellectual culture in countries recovering from domination:

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<sup>36</sup>Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 57-8.

with the political edifice of the colonial state gone, the thought structure continues to operate but in a different form outside the area of obvious political control [...] There is a kind of intellectual bondage that is not directly brought about by intellectual imperialism. This is the phenomenon of the captive mind in the non-Western world [...] In brief, a captive mind is one that is imitative and uncreative and whose thinking is based on Western categories and modes of thought.<sup>37</sup>

We compare Alatas and Al-e Ahmad in terms of their distinctive intellectual vocations. Alatas lived his life as a public intellectual, like Al-e Ahmad, while also being a serious sociologist engaged in debates and discussion within social and scientific communities worldwide. Alatas had a sharply analytical mind. He carefully explained and documented his arguments, despite clear political motivation. His concept of the “Captive Mind” is built upon the criterion of verifiability, not a fictitious category like “being” or “authenticity.” It must be “studied through empirical observation.” He wrote, citing K. William Kapp: “the current disenchantment with the rate of economic development in many countries is the result of the inadequacy of theoretical frameworks to diagnose the nature of the problem and to prescribe appropriate course of action.”<sup>38</sup>

Alatas’ hypothesis is based on the observation of the functioning of institutions. He starts by defining the “Captive Mind” as “a product of higher institutions of learning, at home or abroad, whose way of thinking imitates, and is dominated by, Western thought in an uncritical manner.” From this, the following characteristics follow: “It is uncreative and incapable of raising original problems [...] Its method of thinking depends on current stereotypes [...] It is incapable of separating the particular from the universal, and consequently fails to adapt the universally valid corpus of knowledge to the particular local situations.”<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 37.

<sup>38</sup>Alatas, *The Captive Mind*, 11.

<sup>39</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 37.

Alatas is exceptional among late twentieth-century intellectuals in deeply thinking through the crisis of modern universalism. The “Captive Mind,” he argues, is “fragmented in outlook,” that is, it lacks universality.<sup>40</sup> His committed universalism was exercised as careful self-criticism of his own beliefs, not empty self-congratulation. For example, Alatas pursued the following inquiry:

There already exists an idea of an American or European social science tradition. Though both draw upon a common universal fountain of social science knowledge, yet we do speak of an American or European social science tradition.<sup>41</sup>

This passage, and many others, show that Alatas explicitly never doubted the universality of a “fountain of social science knowledge.” We never find any entertainment of the Heideggerian idea of modern science as a disguised Will to Power eradicating every variety of local cultural being. However, Alatas does argue that the “Captive Mind” is “alienated from the major issues of society” and “unconscious of its own captivity and its conditioning factors,” which are the

“result of Western dominance upon the rest of the world.”<sup>42</sup> Alatas is concerned with how modern science, although universal, can be appropriated by wealthy and powerful nations to the exclusion of poorer ones, not merely in terms of access to its benefits (i.e. medicine, health care, goods), but in terms of an epistemic problem he called the *tertium comparationis*.

As a comparative device serving scientific research, Alatas took no issue with the *tertium comparationis* as such. He presents one example:

Christianity and Islam are subsumed under religion. The problem with this is that the characteristics of religion are derived from Christianity to begin with. Therefore, the supposedly general scientific concept ‘religion’ is culturally defined by Christianity.

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<sup>40</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 37.

<sup>41</sup>Alatas, *The Development*,” 151.

<sup>42</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 37.

Islam is looked at in terms of Christianity, rather than compared to Christianity in terms of a *tertium comparationis*, a general concept of ‘religion.’<sup>43</sup>

What this amounts to is saying certain categories taken for scientific generalizations are, upon examination, determined by concealed cultural prejudices. The *tertium comparationis*, to function seriously and accurately within the field of sociological research, must be subjected to the rational scrutiny of a world community of social scientific inquirers. Alatas invokes something not far from Thomas Kuhn’s “paradigm theory” in the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. This has nothing to do with an uncritical acceptance of dogma as we might imagine in theocratic social orders or religious institutions. It is about the polyvocal upshot of ongoing research among multiple institutions and individuals, and how a consensus forms and then transforms, in modern secular domains of knowledge production. Its history is defined by established norms that preside at a wide pan-institutional level. These norms are partly the upshot of broader social changes (for example, military interests, international business, changes in higher education, etc.) but at another (and this is where Kuhn’s theory happens) there is a community of working scholars whose combined research and teaching practices produce a body of theoretical consensus. With this evolving consensus comes the eruption of paradigm changes in the history of scientific thought, what Kuhn calls revolutions. This, however, is where Alatas proposes a more controversial idea in the “Captive Mind.”

Alatas is a what we might call a new cosmopolitan intellectual. That is, he is a person who cares deeply about Asia, particularly the predicaments of postcolonial Malaysia/Indonesia, while also holding a broader “humanist” vision. For example, Alatas cites how “Malinowsky spent a couple of years in the Trobriand Islands in the Pacific,” from where “he succeeded in evolving a theory of human behaviour [that was] a landmark in the history of cultural anthropology.” Alatas took no issue with the veracity of the theory. However, he urgently

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<sup>43</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 37.

queried “why he succeeded and not our own scholars.” Alatas finds the reply in a frozen posture of subservience towards the erstwhile colonial master that obstructs the flow of “self-confidence” and “creativity.” Alatas writes: “[Malinowsky] had no complexes. He did not feel compelled to imitate. He was not interested whether his writing would be accepted by this or that journal. He spent his time thinking and evolving his theory.”<sup>44</sup> It is a hidden problem of power inequality.

Alatas adopts a scholarly distance to articulate the idea of the “Captive Mind,” comprising on the one hand a claim that the “native” elite is demonstrably unable to think beyond the colonial worldview (and, therefore, unable to conceive an appropriate *tertium comparationis* through rational criticism of Eurocentric scientific hegemony, thereby triggering a new paradigmatic revolution at the transnational level). None of this is a Heideggerian argument against modernity, but a scientific variant of paradigm theory. It takes full account of the devastating mental impact of colonial conquest in non-Western countries around the world. Alatas, meanwhile, proposes the break with the “Captive Mind,” or the postcolonial impasse, through a positive vision of building a humanist cosmopolitanism based on creative thinking and a pragmatic approach to solving specific problems. Alatas emphatically encouraged a cosmopolitan approach to knowledge production:

One crucial question has to be answered if we wish to see the growth

of an autonomous social science tradition in Asia. Should Asian social science isolate itself from that of the West and the rest of the world? Definitely not. On the contrary, there should be greater and continuous attention paid to knowledge developed elsewhere, particularly in the West. But the problem is to select the significant from the trivial.<sup>45</sup>

For Alatas, the collective selection process of fact confronted by alternative lines of public action constitutes the core of the social

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<sup>44</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 31.

<sup>45</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 153.

scientific vocation. Al-e Ahmad, by contrast, was an undisciplined, larger than life figure, with a unique and original Persian writing style expressing dynamism while being blunt, enunciated rhythmically in a way both pleasing and arresting. Al-e Ahmad's ideas were deeply seductive, but not necessarily intellectually productive. In his own words, Al-e Ahmad was a man of the "pen." He wrote: "I am professionally a teacher. Yet I am not devoid of preaching either. I don't know what I am."<sup>46</sup> Beyond his considerable literary talents, Al-e Ahmad was a genuine wonderer, driven by the certainty that something was deeply wrong with how the world is set up. He spent his entire short life in search of an answer—from Boston to Washington DC, from Israel to Iran's rural areas, while also reading widely about histories and events in revolutionary countries like the Soviet Union, and dynamic Western capitals like Paris or Berlin. The experience of Israel provoked Al-e Ahmad to speculate: "I as an Easterner [prefer] an Israeli model over all other models of how to deal with the West. How to extract from its industries by the spiritual power of mass martyrdom [...]"<sup>47</sup> In effect, Al-e Ahmad imaginatively opened new secular spaces for politicization which borrowed the structure of traditional religious ritual—thereby defining nation-building as a religiously rooted process of constructing and endowing national meaning to secure collective identity.

We needn't doubt Al-e Ahmad's sincerity in seeking a new postcolonial vision of the world. His very life was almost a performance and a novel, "written" in his daily actions inspired by a vision he ceaselessly projected to all other Iranians. He became almost an icon, a semiotic entity like the Bastille might mark the French Revolution in people's minds all over the world. Al-e Ahmad was a master of capturing the imagination through his writings and actions. For example, his Meccan Pilgrimage resulted in *Khasi dar Mīqāt* (Lost in the Crowd), a monumental if highly entertaining rethinking of religion and modern politics written entirely from the perspective of one among millions of massed faithful in their human ordinariness. Al-e Ahmad was by his

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<sup>46</sup>Al-e Ahmad, "*Kārnāmāh-i Sih Sālḥā*," (Tehran: Revagh Publisher, 1984), 159.

<sup>47</sup>Al-e Ahmad, *Safar bih Vilāyat-i 'Izrā'īl* (Tehran: Revagh Publisher, 1984), 52.

own account, and of those who knew him, a deeply intelligent and sensitive man who was also confused by the appalling reality of the world around him. The Iran of his lifetime suffered from disease, autocratic modernization, and a police state, all in the aftermath of foreign occupation and decades of revolutionary struggle. We are not to be surprised that his searching imagination wandered to widespread possible explanations, and he entertained the notion that perhaps the cause of Iranian freedom had been genuinely held in the hands of anti-constitutionalist figures like Sheikh Nouri:

To me, the corpse of that great man hanging on the gallows is like a flag they raised over this country after two-hundred years to symbolize the ascendancy of Gharbzadegi.<sup>48</sup>

That a reactionary cleric who vehemently opposed the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906-11) should become a symbol of the struggle against “Gharbzadegi” proves that the term is not synonymous with Alatas’ the “Captive Mind.” Al-e Ahmad reveals the nature of this difference by citing the ideological source of “Gharbzadegi” in German romanticism: “(Ernst) Jünger and I were both exploring more or less the same subject, but from two viewpoints. We were addressing the same question, but in two languages.”<sup>49</sup>

That is, Al-e Ahmed embraced the “question” of forgotten “authentic being” late in his literary and activist career. Alatas was concerned with a less utopian type of recollection. He was concerned with how the victims of prolonged oppression require a catalyst to reignite their self-confidence and to break free from internalized abuse patterns:

The emancipation of the mind from the shackles of intellectual imperialism is the major condition for the development of a creative and autonomous social science tradition in developing societies.<sup>50</sup>

## **Humanism and Revivalism:**

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<sup>48</sup>Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 59.

<sup>49</sup>Al-e Ahmad, *Occidentosis*, 25.

<sup>50</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 44.

Upon a superficial reading, Alatas' thought could be viewed as similar to a Heideggerian roots revivalism. This, however, would be a rudimentary error of intellectual judgement. In contrast to the prevailing Heideggerianism of many post-colonial theories, Alatas does not declare modern science a Western episteme—he instead claims that legacies of Western imperialism have historically monopolized a modern science tradition that should rightfully belong to humanity as whole. He writes:

A reflection on the meaning of indigenization and autonomous development should not be taken as a mere wrangling on terminology. It reveals the nature, function and genesis of the scientific spirit, the forward movement of humanity, the necessity to break with the past to forge something new but at the same time to preserve what is considered as valuable from the past. The spirit of indigenization cannot facilitate the development of the social sciences.<sup>51</sup>

Alatas is not a positivist, but an adherent of science as creative and ever-evolving collective inquiry. That is, science is not a monovocal product but a polyvocal process: “In public discourse and formal education, human sciences need to facilitate the dialogue among civilizations to inculcate an attitude founded on appreciation, understanding, interest, and compassion for the cultures and worldviews of the other.” The paradigm shift in conceiving science as a social process made possible by the everyday dialogic practices of countless participants through myriad institutions is traceable to the late nineteenth-century writings of Charles Peirce, and impacted Pragmatism (John Dewey), Phenomenology (Edmund Husserl), Structuralism (Alexandre Koyré) and important religiously inspired paradigm revaluations (Michael Polanyi). All of these outlooks retained an Enlightenment universalist foundation, while criticizing specific traditions within that foundation (i.e. the “social contract” as we saw earlier). Alatas belonged very much to this spirit of fundamentally democratizing our understanding of the meaning and practice of modern

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<sup>51</sup>Alatas, “The Development,” 155.



science.

Alatas, too, is a universalist, championing “genuine knowledge,” but liberated from the historical fetters of entrenched imperial power abuse that manifests itself in a culturally conditioned but usually unconscious ontological inflation.

Human sciences must go beyond merely correcting the fallacies and distortions of public discourse. They must attack the root of the problem, which is the problem of Eurocentrism in social science education that ultimately informs public discourse. The problem has to be dealt with at the level of knowledge production in teaching and research. This in turn would mean a greater need for interaction among scholarly communities in the various civilizations.<sup>52</sup>

The above citation underlines Alatas’ commitment to modern universalism which remains open to dialogue with the past as well as a wide variety of different narratives. Moreover, the fundamental feature of Alatas’ argument is to denounce the hardened and inflexible hegemony of a Eurocentric universalism that both shut out Alatas’ own ideas and helped to create a situation of sustained subordination of the Global South in the twenty-first century. As the following citation shows, the two problems are interconnected:

I am not suggesting that we should close our minds to genuine knowledge from any part of the world. We should assimilate as much as possible from all sources, from all parts of the world, all useful knowledge. But we need to do this with an independent critical spirit, without turning our backs on our own intellectual heritage. The phenomena of servility and intellectual bondage are not the same as genuine creative assimilation from abroad.<sup>53</sup>

The different genealogies underlying the two ideas, “Gharbzadegi” and the “Captive Mind,” can be represented as follows: “Gharbzadegi” is

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<sup>52</sup>Syed Hussein Alatas, “The Role of Human Sciences in the Dialogue Among Civilizations,” *Development and Society* 31 (2002): 265.

<sup>53</sup>Alatas, “Intellectual Imperialism,” 27.

a philosophical/literary concept originating from the German intellectual tradition of the counter-Enlightenment. Al-e Ahmad, and also Fardid, were in conversation with Western literary and philosophical interlocutors who imagined the modern world as the “darkening” of the human condition. As we read in the original Heideggerian articulation, this “disease” began in the West but spread to global proportions through technology and science, having been seeded in ancient Greece through the labours of rationalism and at the expense of meaning-bestowing mythic understandings of being. Alatas’ “Captive Mind,” by contrast, proposes a sociological concept which—while it may hold certain elective affinities with “Gharbzadegi”—is a deeply productive idea which sees the requisites for social progress in both conversation with Western traditions and selectively preserving the cultural past as an inhabitant of any meaningful and autonomous present.