Social Science in a Non–Western Milieu

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The main purpose here is to draw attention to some of the basic issues concerning the role of social science and higher education in Southeast Asia. Because of the speaker's obviously limited experience, all the views and interpretations have to be drawn somewhat from a Thai situation and perspective. It is only hoped that the line of discussion could in a general way be of some relevance to that of the region as a whole. The term "social science" is to be used in singular number throughout this paper, for reason to be clarified in the course of discussion.

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First of all, something needs to be said about the state of social science itself. The position taken in this paper is that, in the realm of scientific knowledge and endeavour, it is hardly plausible to distinguish between Western and non-Western, or whatever categorization. The main task of social science in trying to understand the social phenomena is, according to Friedrich Hayek and Karl Popper, "to discover the laws by which whole societies develop and, on the basis of these laws of historical development, to make predictions about the future."[1] In this very transcultural sense, despite all the historical and cultural diversities social science is to address itself to, there is indeed a unity of purpose and value in all scientific pursuits: physical or social, Western or non-Western alike.

Historically and on the basis of professional achievement, the West must be fully recognized as the source of both intellectual inspiration and substantive matters. This is a matter of historical fact. Nevertheless, by its very nature, science cannot be said to belong exclusively to any geographical or cultural groups of people. This line of reasoning is not meant to convey nationalistic or anti-Western chauvinism of any sort. Quite the contrary. The point at issue here is that what actully involved amounts to a great deal more than simply identifying or selecting "Western" ideas and then finding ways and means for their adaptation to the Southeast Asian context, as seems to be the theme of this seminar. As a profession and to be true to the spirit of scientific endeavour, there is a real need, among indigenous but western trained

social scientists especially, for a radical change in academic outlook as well as for conceptual innovation that is particularly responsive to the needs and problems of their own societies. Eugene F. Miller's view on political science is very instructive in this respect:-

> "A political science worthy of the name will reconceptualize the world and act to implement its new visions. It will serve as an irritant, as an opponent of established systems and verities. Political science, thus practiced, will serve both to increase our knowledge by disclosing the potentialities and limits of political life and to humanize the political sphere by enlarging the scope for creative action."[2]

These words reflect part of the current issues involved in an epistemological debate among Western scholars on the nature of political inquiry of the post-behavioural

age. Much of what is referred to political science can also be said of the science of society in general. Putting aside the activistic aspect of the problem which may be found rather out of tune with this present forum, one can discern the very meaning and purpose of social inquiry which, fortunately, has just been passing beyond the stage of simplistic behaviouralism of the 1960's with an over emphasis on empirical data. This, again, is not to minimize the importance and valuable contribution of the Positivistic or empirical approach to social studies. It will certainly have its place in our academic interest. After all, theoretical perspectives have to be tested against observation and experiment, all of which constitute science. Moreover, there always lies the danger of a theory or generalization that has no basis in fact.[3]

In social science, approach and methodology are not just a matter of technique and expertise, but essentially represent an attitude of mind. that is to say, a kind of moral proposition. Behaviouralism, for all its claim of scientific objectivity, is no exception. In its simplistic form, as has already been observed, "...assumptions about man and society that guide behavioral research have been drawn from the prevailing political ideology. Consequently, the goodness or normality of the established system is presupposed in research and theorizing alike."[4] It is not too difficult to see that this is basically a static and fatalistic view of life which, according to Wolin, offers "no signicant choice or critical analysis of the quality, direction, or fate of public life."[5] The flaw and dliemma of behaviouralism needs

to be stressed here if only for the fact that it is still very much in voque for many a social scientist who, for lack of nothing much better, loves to see things almost entirely in terms of certain methodologies and conceptual frameworks for their own sake. It is mental outlook such as this that makes social studies rather unfruitful and sterile. It would be even more so in traditional environments of Southeast Asia.

On the other hand, there is inherently a historical dimension to be taken into account. Hwa Yol Jung, notably, speaks of social existence as the life-world, i.e., the world of lived experience which is to serve as the foundation of any explicit act of conceptualization in philosophy or science. That also means the socialized world wherein exist "complex living

relationships of man to man in culture, in society, in history, and in politics." Furthermore, the life-world is by nature "dynamic and changing, which means that it is historical. As there are different cultures, moreover, there are different versions of the life-world."[6] A grasp of the historical dimension, therefore, is essential for an objective perspective on social reality and inquiry. The strength of the historical relationship, as Donald G. MacRae rightly asserts, is such that to be required and expected of social science:-

> "(E)very contribution to social science is at once a document of and a clue to the structural and cultural situation of its time and place,...(and that) discoveries, original work in social science, assume new values in new situations. It

> is never safe to assume that we have exhausted or even fully incorporated the endeavour and insight of the past by our own work"[7]

All these considerations should form the basis upon which to judge the academic value of social studies. But then the possibility and potentiality of scientific pursuit assumes, in actual fact, much beyond individuals' intellectual effort and energy. Social science is certainly not born or exists in a vacuum, but, no less than natural science, has its intellectual roots in a certain social and cultural value. In this regard, mention must be made of the disparate social backgrounds of modern Western society and tradition-bound cultures of Southeast Asia. In a comparative study of the concepts of freedom and equality, C.G. Weeramantry,

former Supreme Court judge of Sri Lanka, indeed makes a point in referring to the radical transformation of Western society following the Reformation and the Renaissance, whereby:-

> "The questioning of authority, however sacred or well-entrenched, the stimulus of sudden impact with ancient cultures, the opening up of new worlds which unleashed both mind and society from their traditional moorings- all these had in Europe broken up the ancient form of social ordering, released the individual from the group and sent forth the concept of individual freedom and equality as the legacy of that age to all others"[8]

The spiritual link of these historic movements to both philosophical and scientific regeneration in the West is obvious. Thus followed the age of Enlightenment, of Rationalism. And like those

of the classical Greek, human mind came round in earnest to question and inquire into the nature and problem of man and society.

Clearly, Southeast Asian societies have experienced no such social and cultural upheaval. In spite of colonialism and accompanying modernization, there still remains a strong sense of continuity with the "traditional moorings" of the past. Social science, if the term may be used at all in such a context, came in chiefly as part of the modernizing efforts on the part of political elites. There has been little, if any, social and cultural basis for scientific outlook and attitude necessary for rational inquiry. This from-the top-down process of development has, and still does have, a peculiar bearing on the state and problem of social "science"

of to-day. As a matter of fact, the state of social science in Southeast Asia has been closely linked with that of higher education whose primary function it is to promote technical training as well as transmitting traditional heritage and value. Thai higher education is one notable case in point. Emphasis is on the practical use of knowledge introduced, or imported rather, and presented in a ready-made fashion. One suspects that similar thing also applies to elsewhere in Southeast Asia. In Thailand, for example, higher education can be said to have started with the establishment of the Civil Service College after the abolition of the Royal Page School in 1910, and then elevated to the status of Chulalongkorn University six years later. The main course of study was concerned with public administration, with

a little bit of economics and public finance, etc., to accommodate the trainning of personnel for various tasks in the government service.[9] All in all, the primary purpose of university education remained basically the same as in the old Royal Page School days, that is to say, to produce government officials, but only on a larger scale and with more variety of technical skills. Government service may not be the sole objective of higher education nowadays with the proliferation of tasks and technical know-how required both in the public and private sectors. But the traditional concern with the technical and practical remains fundamentally unchanged, albeit in the changing environment. The situation is not much helped, but may be to become even worsening, with the increasing so-called specialization and thus compartmentalization of social reality into various

"disciplines", a symptom of misguided educational modernization especially as far as the undergraduate programmes of study are concerned. Of this more to be later discussed.

Such a state of affairs raises yet another basic question as to the role of higher education particularly in the context of the developmental problem facing Southeast Asian societies. The real task of the university as generally understood, not necessarily in the Western but strictly in the academic sense, is the advancement and dissemination of knowledge. But then there is always the problem of what kind of knowledge to focus upon so as to make it relevant for creative action.[10] The approach to and expectation of education, as desribed above, may have fulfilled some of the needs arising at the most initial stage of nation building. As social and

political life and relationships become increasingly complex and new critical problems emerge, however, there is bound to arise the new demand for quite a different type of educated manpower. Which also means a completely new orientation in social studies among the Southeast Asian institutions of higher learning, if they ever wish to be able to grasp a true perspective of their changing social realities. For, as L.A. Coser would like to remind all of us :

> "...If the mind is chained to the immediate demands of the practicalities of the hour, it loses that autonomy without which it becomes a simple machine for 'doing things'."[11]

This is the crux of the matter. Without that autonomy of mind, any talk of social science worthy of the name is

just nothing but a wishful thinking. One may indeed wonder if this could not also be said of natural science and humanities. That is how the issue of academic freedom comes into the picture. For the purpose of this discussion, we are concerned here, not so much with intellectual self-satisfaction of those in the teaching profession, as with those crucial and fateful undergraduate years of study which generations after generations of our potential leaders in various fields have to undergo, but in the process of which the mind is left so unprepared for any meaningful search for objective knowledge. The two sides of the problem, the teaching and the learning, are of course closely related. Both are required, for an objective perception and understanding of social reality, to first and foremost indentify their "inherited opinions" which form part of the existing

body of knowledge about society and then subject them to critical scrutiny.[12] On the teaching side, there seems to be everywhere no lack of exertion for academic freedom in this specifically creative sense. Perhaps this is phenomenal of the modern age in which scholars all over the world have become more or less exposed to the scientific way of thinking. Social science in the sense of critical studies thus becomes a fact of life, a sort of counter-culture phenomenon, whether one likes it or not. Thai intellectual community, again, illustrates the similar trend of development. Although still in its embryonic stage, the phenomenon also points signicantly to the cultural and historical nature inherent in the field of social studies, as mentioned above. While the current modes of inquiry in the

popular "disciplines" like economics and political science, still rest complacent, and thus bogged down, with all kinds of jargons and platitudes, there clearly emerges an intellectual movement, even if sporadic, which aims at raising the whole question of historiographic validity in all aspects: social, political, and economic Here one can refer to the examples of both Thai and Western Scholars alike in this new stream of academic activities.[13]

Such liberal and critical approach is indispensable if a society ever seriously hopes to emancipate itself from the past errors. But of more importance is the crucial question of turning the emerging scientific outlook and alertness into the academic programmes of study. The point is to allow ample room for dialogue with an eye towards reality, in place of docile acceptance of "inherited opinions" which,

as Bertrand Russell notes of almost all education, are promted and formulated by a political motive, whereby:-

> "Hardly anything is done to foster the inward growth of mind and spirit: in fact, those who have had most education are very often atrophied in their mental and spiritual life, devoid of impulse, and possessing only certain mechanical aptitudes which take the place of living thought."[14]

The problem of moral lapse is no doubt even more real in the field of social studies, which is particularly susceptible to political sensitivity and sanction. With such built-in educational background and without the dynamics of the Reformation and the Renaissance to fall back on, the task of social scientists in promoting critical reexamination of "inherited opinions" is bound to run counter to

overwhelming odds in the somewhat anti-intellectual climate of Southeast Asia, be it political, or cultural, or simply habit of mind. This inevitably gives rise to divergent senses of academic purpose and expectation. It is in a way symptomatic of identity crisis, as partly reflected in the curriculum orientations, lines of approach, and teaching strategies.

Whatever cultural and political constraints, however, all the confusions and discrepancies are in no small measure attributable to the lack of vision on the part of the academic communities themselves. Most, if not all, come under quite another sort of constraint, that is specialization syndrome. One cannot be certain if this is due to blind following of the Western way or it is part of the current state of knowledge, as aptly commented upon by J. Robert Oppenheirmer that:-

> "If we look at what is known, the proportion that is known by specialized groups is very large, and the proportion that gets back into the common knowledge of man is very small... We have, then, a predominance of novelty on the present scene, and also an absence of common knowledge, or at least a growth of specialized and available knowledge, but not vital, living knowledge."[15]

As a result, not only the science of society comes to be artificially divided into various disciplines, but within each there appear increasing profileration and subdivision of courses of study. Each discipline or each course is treated as an end in itself with little, if any, effort to relate or refer to anything outside. Undergraduates in increasing number are left, willy-nilly, to their own resources to find out about the world if they happen

to care to. But what supposed to concern them most are to be not much more than the tests and examinations, as well as available jobs ahead. With the rapid expansion of higher education, the undergraduate teaching programmes become increasingly unmanageable and are left much weaker than before. The general tendency is to turn more attention to post-graduate levels as a most convenient way out of the whole issue of higher education. But this only leads to even narrower specialization for lack of broadness in intellectual outlook that should have gained from undergraduate training.

All these are familiar enough. But the point is that such academic value and orientation fails to live up to the actual and chronic needs and problems of rural societies of Southeast Asia. For this, social science has a clear role to play

and this calls for innovation of ideas and approach to be able to cope with our own predicaments. In fact, the needs and problems of Southeast Asian societies were fully recognized over ten years ago in a UNESCO report, especially concerning the problem of social change and urban-rural disparities[16] which have been kept even widening as one full decade has now gone by. The nature of the problems has particular implication for study and teaching programmes. And this is well in line with the liberal and critical approach mentioned above. A critical scrutiny of "inherited opinions" again, is not an end in itself, but to serve conceptually as the path towards more objective understanding of social reality. There is also, one might add, a philosophical perspective in that, in the process of inquiry into the past and present, one can learn to sense some

direction of change for the future.[17] Not only as liberal studies, but even as professional training, social science can also fulfil the need for more relevant manpower in creating a body of administrators and social workers capable of appreciating the social foundation of development such as the concept of social justice.[18] Institutions of higher learning cannot remain forever indifferent to the phenomenon of social and economic disparities. But to be able to contribute to creative resolution of the social and cultural problems, they have to revitalize and redirect their academic sense of purpose, now so disintegrated, and then to reorganize the study programmes accordingly. Present divisions of the subject matter may provide some heuristic or administrative convenience. But they must be readjusted and kept within bound enough

to preserve the fact of unified social science that sees social life and problems, not as compartmentalized living, but as a totality.[19]

One final point of caution. Emphasis on historical and cultural dimension is certainly not to advocate parochialism or inward-looking type of education. That would defeat the whole purpose of what has been said all along. The essence of social science is to promote scientific attitude and capacity for rational inquiry. But this is not to make social studies purely liberal and intellectual vocation either. No society in Southeast Asia can afford such a luxury. The need for the technical and practical subject matter for "doing things" still has its place. Only that we need to give closer and more intensive attention to historical and cultural insights and at the same time to attach

primary importance, to start with, to questioning things rather than answering questions in the process of learning. Only in this way can a foundation really be prepared for making any original and creative contribution to the pool of knowledge which otherwise would remain lopsided and consequently politically biased one way or another. The main thing is to make the academic truly academic and therefore truly positive.

Footnotes

1. Referred to in Eugene F. Miller, "Positivism, Historicism, and Political Inquiry", The American Political Science Review, Vol. LXVI, No. 3, September, 1972, p. 797.

2. Ibid., p. 815

3. Stephen Cotgrave, The Science of Society: An Introduction to Sociology, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1979, Preface, p. 8.

4. Miller, Op.cit., p. 809

5. As cited in Miller, Ibid.,

6. As described and cited in Miller, Ibid., pp. 812-814.

7. Donald G. MacRae, "Adam Ferguson", in Timothy Raison (ed.), The Founding Fathers of Social Science, Penguin

Books, 1969, pp. 12-13; see also Miller, Ibid., p. 797

8. C.G. Weeramantry, Equality and Freedom: Some Third World Perspectives, Colombo, Hansa Publishers Limited, 1976, p. 13.

9. Chatthip Nartsupha, "Economic Discipline in Thailand", and Likit Dhiravakin, "The State of Knowledge of Political Science", in State of Social Sciences in Thailand, Bangkok, The Social Science Association of Thailand, 1974, pp. 22-23 and 68-69 respectively.

10. Cotgrave, Op.cit., p. 43.

11. As cited in Cotgrave, Ibid.,

12. Miller, Op.cit., p. 861.

13. See of example, Benedict Anderson, "Studies of the Thai State", paper submitted to the conference on The State of Thai Studies, Chicago, March 30, 1978;

Nidhi Iawsriwong, Prawatsat Ratanakosin Nei Pra Rajaphongsawadan of Ayudhya (History of Ratanakosin in the Dynastic History of Ayudhya), in Thai, monograph published by The Social Science Association of Thailand, February, B.E. 2521 (1978).

14. Bertrand Russell, Principles of Social Reconstruction, London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1916, reprinted, 1954, p.103.

15. J. Robert Oppenheimer, "Science and the human community", 1959, cited in Higher Education and Development in South-East Asia, UNESCO and the International Association of Universities, 1967, Vol. I p. 258.

16. Ibid., pp. 95-97.

17. J.P. Nettl, "Strategies in the Study of Political Development", in Colin Leys

(ed.), Politics and Change in Developing Countries, Cambridge, The University Press, 1969, p. 13.

18. Higher Education and Development in South-East Asia, Op.cit., p. 207.

19. Ibid., pp. 220-221. See also Anderson, Op.cit., p. 58-59; Immanuel Wallerstein, "Some reflections on history, the social sciences, and politics", in The Capitalist World-Economy, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. xi.