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# International Sociological Association *e-bulletin*



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From the editor

The ISA E-Bulletin is now in its third year and ninth issue and continues to receive good support from members. In this issue of the E-Bulletin, I am excited to place before you engaging and insightful voices ranging from established sociologists to those of young sociologists just embarking on their research and academic careers, in keeping with the spirit of diversity and inclusion of this publication. In the general articles section, two pieces by Syed Farid Alatas, from the National University of Singapore and Anurekha Chari from the University of Pune, take us from 'Intellectual and structural challenges to academic dependency' and 'Can microcredit be an effective strategy for gender mainstreaming?'

The interview segment features a conversation between Elisio Macamo, from the University of Bayreuth and Afe Adogame from the University of Edinburgh. The final section of the E-Bulletin carries voices of two sociology graduate students, Alicia Nah and Thomas Alexander, a Malaysian and Australian respectively and based at the National University of Singapore. I am grateful to fellow sociologists who have supported the ISA E-Bulletin as contributors and readers. I look forward to more suggestions, feedback and of course, contributions.

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### Intellectual and Structural Challenges to Academic Dependency<sup>1</sup>

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Syed Farid Alatas, a Malaysian national, is Head of the Department of Malay Studies and Associate Professor of Sociology at the National University of Singapore where he has been since 1992. He obtained his PhD in Sociology from the Johns Hopkins University in 1991. He lectured at the University of Malaya in the Department of Southeast Asian Studies prior to his appointment at Singapore. His books include *Democracy and Authoritarianism: The Rise of the Post-Colonial State in Indonesia and Malaysia* (Macmillan, 1997) and *Alternative Discourse in Asian Social Science: Responses to Eurocentrism* (Sage, 2006). He has also edited *Asian Inter-Faith Dialogue: Perspectives on Religion, Education and Social Cohesion* (RIMA and the World Bank, 2003) and *Asian Anthropology*, with Jan van Bremen and Eyal Ben-Ari (Routledge, 2005). Among his recent articles are 'From Jami'ah to University: Multiculturalism and Christian-Muslim Dialogue', *Current Sociology* 54(1), 2006: 112–132; 'Ibn Khaldun and Contemporary Sociology', *International Sociology* 21(6), 2006: 782–795; and 'The Historical Sociology of Muslim Societies: Khaldunian Application', *International Sociology* 22(3), 2007: 267–288. He is currently in the final stages of preparing a book manuscript for publication on the thought of Ibn Khaldun and is also working on another book on the Ba'alawi Sufi order.

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<sup>1</sup> Keynote address presented at the workshop on 'Coping with Academic dependency: How?' organized by the Asian Development Research Institute (ADRI), Patna, India and sponsored by the South-South Exchange Program for Research on the History of Development (SEPHIS), 4–7 February 2008.

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### **Defining Academic Dependency**

The problem of academic dependency presents itself to us at two levels. At the structural level much of the solution has to do with the awareness, will and resolve of politicians, bureaucrats and administrators, without which the structures of academic dependency cannot be dismantled. Scholars have more autonomy and control where overcoming academic dependency at the intellectual level is concerned. The intellectual activity of generating alternative discourses at several levels with a view towards creating an autonomous social science tradition is discussed in this paper.

My main concern, as far as the state of the social sciences in developing societies or the South is the problem of Eurocentrism and the context within which this exists, that is, academic dependency. I owe my interest in these topics to the lifelong intellectual concerns of my father, Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007) who wrote on, among other things, the captive mind (Alatas, SH 1969a, 1972, 1974) and on intellectual imperialism (1969b, 2000). The idea of intellectual imperialism is an important starting point for the understanding of academic dependency. Intellectual imperialism is analogous to political and economic imperialism in that it refers to the ‘domination of one people by another in their world of thinking’ (Alatas, SH 2000: 24). Intellectual imperialism was more direct in the colonial period, whereas today it has more to do with the West’s control of and influence over the flow of social scientific knowledge rather than its ownership and control of academic institutions. Indeed, this form of hegemony was ‘not imposed by the West through colonial domination, but accepted willingly with confident enthusiasm, by scholars and planners of the former colonial territories and even in the few countries that remained independent during that period’ (Alatas, SH 2006: 7–8).

Intellectual imperialism is the context within which academic dependency exists. Academic dependency theory is a dependency theory of the global state of

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the social sciences. It defines academic dependency as a condition in which the knowledge production of certain scholarly communities is conditioned by the development and growth of knowledge of other scholarly communities to which the former is subjected. Then relations of interdependence between two or more scientific communities, and between these and global transactions in knowledge, assumes the form of dependency when some scientific communities (those located in the knowledge powers) can expand according to certain criteria of development and progress, while other scientific communities (such as those in the developing societies) can only do this as a reflection of that expansion, which generally has negative effects on their development according to the same criteria. The psychological dimension to this dependency, captured by the notion of the captive mind (Alatas, SH 1969a, 1972, 1974), is such that the dependent scholar is more a passive recipient of research agenda, theories and methods from the knowledge powers (Alatas, SF 2003: 603).

Today's knowledge powers constitute a kind of 'world system' of knowledge in which the three core countries, that is, the United States, Great Britain and France, determine the nature of the discourse (Kuwayam & Bremen, 1997: 54). According to Garreau and Chekki, it is no coincidence that the great economic powers are also the great social science powers (Garreau 1985: 64, 81, 89; see also Chekki, 1987). This is only partially true as some economic powers are actually very peripheral as knowledge producers, Japan being an interesting example.

The mode of conditioning of the captive mind in academically dependent social science communities is determined by the dimension of academic dependency that is operating. These are: (a) dependence on ideas; (b) dependence on the media of ideas; (c) dependence on the technology of education; (d) dependence on aid for research and teaching; (e) dependence on investment in education; and (f) dependence of scholars in developing societies on demand in the knowledge powers for their skills (Alatas, SF 2003: 604).

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What is very crucial about the structure of academic dependency is the global knowledge division of labour which is founded on a three-fold division as follows: (a) the division between theoretical and empirical intellectual labour; (b) the division between other country and own country studies; and (c) the division between comparative and single case studies.

I have elaborated on this and given empirical examples elsewhere (Alatas, SF 2003: 607). While there has been recognition of the phenomenon of academic dependency, there have been few attempts to delineate its structure. Among the exceptions are the works of Altbach (1975, 1977) and Garreau (1985, 1988, 1991).

In the section that follows, I shall discuss the first dimension of academic dependency in the context of the related problem of Eurocentrism in the social sciences.

### **Academic Dependency at the Level of Ideas: Eurocentrism in the Curricula**

Academic dependency at the level of ideas is the general condition of knowledge in the South. Although scholarly communities in developing societies have tirelessly pointed out ethnocentric biases in the Western social sciences, the emergence of autonomous, alternative theoretical traditions has yet to be seen, and the dependence on theories and concepts generated in the context of Western historical backgrounds and cultural practices continues. This problem of dependence is linked to the pervasiveness of imitation, a condition conceptualised by Syed Hussein Alatas as 'mental captivity'.

Alatas originated and developed the concept of the captive mind to conceptualize the nature of scholarship in the developing world, particularly in relation to Western dominance in the social sciences and humanities. The captive mind is defined as an 'uncritical and imitative mind dominated by an external source, whose thinking is deflected from an independent perspective' (Alatas, SH 1974: 692). The external source is Western social science and humanities and the

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uncritical imitation influences all the constituents of scientific activity such as problem-selection, conceptualization, analysis, generalization, description, explanation and interpretation (Alatas, SH 1972: 11). Among the characteristics of the captive mind are the inability to be creative and raise original problems, the inability to devise original analytical methods, and alienation from the main issues of indigenous society. The captive mind is trained almost entirely in the Western sciences, reads the works of Western authors, and is taught predominantly by Western teachers, whether in the West itself or through their works available in local centres of education. Mental captivity is also found in the suggestion of solutions and policies. Furthermore, it reveals itself at the levels of theoretical as well as empirical work.

Alatas elaborated the concept in the 1972 and 1974 papers, but had raised the problem in the 1950s, referring to the ‘wholesale importation of ideas from the western world to eastern societies’ without due consideration of their socio-historical context, as a fundamental problem of colonialism (Alatas, SH 1956). He had also suggested that the mode of thinking of colonized peoples paralleled political and economic imperialism. Hence, the expression ‘academic imperialism’ (Alatas, SH 1969b; 2000: 23–45), the context within which the captive mind appears.

Academic dependency at the level of ideas should be seen in terms of the domination of social science teaching and research by the captive mind, the consequence of which is the persistence of Eurocentrism as an outlook and orientation as well as a condition. In teaching, for example, a survey of course syllabi for the history of sociological theory as well sociological theory will reveal a number of characteristics of Eurocentrism. These are the subject-object dichotomy, Europeans in the foreground, Europeans as originators, and the dominance of European categories and concepts.

In most sociological theory textbook or writings on the history of social theory, the subject-object dichotomy is a dominant, albeit unarticulated principle

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of organization. Europeans are the ones who do the thinking and writing, they are the social theorists and social thinkers, what we might call the 'knowing subject'. If at all non-Europeans appear in the texts they are objects of study of the European theorists featured and not as knowing subjects, that is, as sources of sociological theories and ideas. If we take the nineteenth century as an example, the impression is given during the period that Europeans such as Marx, Weber and Durkheim were thinking about the nature of society and its development, there were no thinkers in Asia and Africa doing the same. Therefore, the only non-Europeans who appear in these works are those usually nameless ones, anonymous ones mentioned or referred to by the European thinkers whose ideas are being discussed.

The absence of non-European thinkers in these accounts is particularly glaring in cases where non-Europeans had actually influenced the development of social thought. Typically, a history of social thought text or a course on social thought and theory would cover theorists such as Montesquieu, Vico, Comte, Spencer, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, Toennies, Sombart, Mannheim, Pareto, Sumner, Ward, Small, and others. Generally, non-Western thinkers are excluded. Even when they are, they tend to be cited out of historical interest rather than as sources of ideas. For example, Ibn Khaldun<sup>2</sup> is occasionally referred to in histories of social thought but is rarely seen as a source of relevant sociological theories and concepts. He is merely regarded as a precursor or proto-sociologist.

What the subject-object dichotomy does is to place Europeans and later, North American, scholars in the foreground in the social sciences. One interesting exception, as far as sociology is concerned, is the work of Becker & Barnes in their *Social Thought from Lore to Science*. This was first published in 1938 and

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<sup>2</sup> `Abd al-Rahman Abu Zayd ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Khaldun was born on 1 Ramadan/5 May 732 AH/1332 AD. After receiving a customary education in the traditional sciences ibn Khaldun held posts in various courts in North Africa and Spain. After a number of unsuccessful stints in office he withdrew into seclusion to write his *Muqaddimah*, a prolegomena to the study of history which was completed in 1378 AD and which introduces his *`ilm al-`umran* (science of civilization).

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contains many pages discussing the ideas of Ibn Khaldun (Becker & Barnes, 1961, vol I: 266–279). They say that the first writer after Polybius to apply modern-like ideas in historical sociology was not a European but Ibn Khaldun (Becker & Barnes, 1961, vol I: 266). A few scholars like Becker & Barnes in the nineteenth and early twentieth century were responsible for making Ibn Khaldun known in the West. Becker & Barnes also discussed the influence of Ibn Khaldun's ideas on some European thinkers. Although these influences have been recognized in some early works until today they are hardly discussed in mainstream sociological theory textbooks and courses.

The consequence of this is that the West, particularly the Americans, British, French and Germans, are seen as the sole originators of ideas in the social sciences. The question of the multicultural origins of the social sciences is not raised. Many social thinkers from India, China, Japan, and Southeast Asia during the nineteenth and early twentieth century who were contemporaneous with Marx, Weber and Durkheim are either only briefly mentioned in works on the history of sociology or totally ignored. Examples of such thinkers are José Rizal (Philippines, 1861–1896), Benoy Kumar Sarkar (India, 1887–1949), and Kunio Yanagita (Japan, 1875–1962).

A more serious consequence of all of this is that what dominates in the social sciences are theories, concepts and categories in social sciences that were developed in Europe and North America. This domination has been at the expense of non-European ideas and concepts. I had mentioned earlier that interest in Ibn Khaldun tends to be historical. There has never been much interest in studying his concepts with a view to developing a theoretical perspective for sociological studies. While there are some exceptions, that is, attempts to develop a neo-Khaldunian sociology, they remain marginal to mainstream social science teaching and research.<sup>3</sup> Another example comes from the study of religion. It is astonishing to me that the social scientific study of religion does not take into

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<sup>3</sup> For these exceptions see Gellner (1981: Chapter 1), Michaud (1981), Carre (1988) and Alatas (1993).

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account the conceptual vocabulary of the various religions in its presentation of concepts. Rather, it draws for its concepts almost exclusively from the Christian Western tradition with the belief that these concepts are of universal value. While that may be true, it is equally true that the concepts of Islam, Buddhism and Hinduism have the same potential to be universalized and brought into the social sciences.

### **Reversing Academic Dependency via Writing and Research**

The logical consequence of the critique of Eurocentrism in the social sciences is to urge and agitate for a kind of intellectual movement that would eventually result in an autonomous tradition of the social sciences. This tradition would generate and apply universal social science thinking in an autonomous fashion to specific problems in a way that is not imitative and uncritical conceptually and methodologically (Alatas, SH 2006: 9). It would result in what I have called [\[1\]](#)alternative discourses in the social sciences[\[2\]](#). Alternative discourses are defined as:

... those which are informed by local/regional historical experiences and cultural practices in the same way that the Western social sciences are. Being alternative means a turn to philosophies, epistemologies, histories, and the arts, other than those of the Western tradition. These are all to be considered as potential sources of social science theories and concepts, which would decrease academic dependence on the world social science powers. Therefore, it becomes clear that the emergence and augmentation of alternative discourses is identical to the process of universalizing and internationalizing the social science. It should also be clear that alternative discourses refer to good social science because they are more conscious of the relevance of the surroundings and the problems stemming from the discursive wielding of power by the social sciences ... As such, alternative discourses could be advocated for Western social science itself. (Alatas, SF 2006: 82–83)

The practice of alternative discourses in the social sciences stands for

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universalization at varying degrees of universality:

1. At the simplest level, relevant social science would insist on a cautious application of Western theory to the local situation. An example of this would be economic dependency theory.
2. At a higher level of universality, both indigenous and Western theories are applied to the local context.
3. 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 Ibn Khaldun's theory of state formation to the Mongol conquest of China.
4. The highest level of universality refers to the application of indigenous theory from within and without one's own society to areas outside of one's own area.

Levels two to three require increasing degrees of creativity. Our success with reversing academic dependency will be determined by our ability, not merely as individuals but as collectivities and institutions, to push the limits and boundaries of such creativity. Consider as an example the study of religion. Social scientific concepts originate from cultural terms in everyday language. Consequently, they present problems when brought into scientific discourse and are used to talk about areas and periods outside of those of their origins. The result is a distortion of the phenomena that they are applied to. By the eighteenth century 'religion', from the Latin *religio*, came to be used as a scientific concept, referring to belief systems other than Christianity. When 'religion' is applied to beliefs other than Christianity, for example, Islam or Hinduism, there is an implicit or explicit comparison with Christianity, which results in an elision of reality and a cultural Christianization of these other belief systems in the sense

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that it is the characteristics of Christianity which are attributed to these other 'religions'. This has become a problem in the social sciences because of the fact that it was European Christendom that became dominant culturally, resulting in the cognitive hegemony of European knowledge. This does, however, suggest the possibility of alternative constructions of other religions. This would require the study of the various and not just Christian-originated constructions of different belief systems.

According to Smith, Hinduism is a particularly false conceptualization, one that is conspicuously incompatible with any adequate understanding of the religious outlook of the Hindus. Even the term "'Hindu' [an Indian or non-Muslim inhabitant of India] was unknown to the classical Hindus. 'Hinduism' as a concept they certainly did not have" (Smith, 1964: 61, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 102, n 3). The term 'Hindu' has its origins in antiquity as the Indo-Aryan name of the river Indus, which is its Greek transliteration (Smith, 1964: 249, n 46, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 83)<sup>4</sup>. It is from this usage that the terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' gradually acquired their descriptive and geographical denotations. Muslim scholars such as al-Bīrūnī (AD 973– ), writing in Arabic, used the term *al-Hind* to refer to the Indian subcontinent, but when they referred to the people of that subcontinent or aspects thereof they were referring to what they considered the indigenous and non-Muslim inhabitants of India. In Persian and Urdu the corresponding geographical term to *al-Hind* was *Hindustān*. Things *Hindustān* referred to whatever that was indigenous to India and non-Muslim (Frykenberg, 1989: 84). The English 'Hindu' probably derived from the Persian. The term 'Hindu' appears in the *Gaudiya Vaisnava* texts of the sixteenth century (O'Connell, 1973: 340–3, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 84), probably as a result of Muslim influence. The usage here is consistent with that in the Muslim texts of the premodern Arabs and Persians. Even in the modern period, this negative definition of Hinduism is found as evident in the Hindu Marriage Act. The Act

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<sup>4</sup> Smith's source is Spiegel (1881, Vol 1, lines 17–18, A, line 25: 50, 54, 246).

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defines a Hindu, among other things, as one 'who is not a Muslim, Christian, Parsi or Jew by religion ...' (Derret, 1963: 18–19).

The terms 'Hindu' and 'Hinduism' in reference to religion, and a unitary one at that, was for the most part, a modern development. In the eighteenth century it began to be used to denote an Aryan, Brahmanical or Vedic-based high culture and religion by European Orientalists such as Halhed, Jones and Müller (Frykenberg, 1989: 85–86). It is this usage that was adopted by the early Indian nationalists themselves like Ramohun Roy, Gandhi and Nehru (Frykenberg, 1989: 86). This 'new' religion was founded on the ontology and epistemology contained in the *VarnĀsramadharmā* and encompassed the entire cosmos, detailing as part of its vision a corresponding stratified social structure (Frykenberg, 1989: 86).

What is important in these developments, as far as the intellectual Christianization of Indian beliefs systems is concerned, is that: (i) the belief systems of the inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent (excluding Muslims, Jews, Christians and Parsis) came to be regarded as religion; (ii) these beliefs systems were seen to constitute a single religion; and (iii) were founded on a system of Brahmanical doctrines based on the *Catur-Veda* (Four Vedas) (Frykenberg, 1989: 86). It is in these senses that characteristics of Christianity were read into Indian beliefs.

Gradually, the newly christened Hinduism also came to encompass the 'low' tradition or what is nowadays referred to as 'popular', 'temple', 'bhakti', 'village', or 'tribal' Hinduism (Frykenberg, 1989: 87).

This is a construction at odds with indigenous thinking and experience as there was never such a thing as a single all-encompassing religion (or *dharma*, for that matter) called Hinduism or any other name that can be traced to the Vedas and that characterize the beliefs of the non-Muslim, non-Jewish, non-Christian, non-Parsi population of India. Instead, what happened was a process of reification, that is, an ideal type of the 'Hindu' religion was constructed and assumed to be a description of the real Indian society. As Deshpande suggests,

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this is a 'case of simulated identity which over the years has been accepted as true identity' (Deshpande, 1985, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 101).

Looking at South Indian examples, Frykenberg tells us how this happened in practical terms beginning in the nineteenth century. Modern Hinduism is a:

... form of corporate and organized and 'syndicated' religion which arose in south India and by which highly placed and influential groups of Brahmans, supported by Brahmanized Non Brahmans, did most of the defining, the manipulating, and the organizing of the essential elements of what gradually became, for practical purposes, a dynamic new religion. Moreover, this process of reification, this defining and organizing of elements which they did, occurred with the collaboration, whether witting or unwitting, with those who governed the land. (Frykenberg, 1989: 89)

This was facilitated by the process of centralization, rationalization, and bureaucratization of information (Dykes, 1854: 232, cited in Frykenberg, 1989: 89) which had two bases. One was the interaction between local officials and the rulers, examples of which are the patronage of cultural events and the policy with respect to temples and their administration. The latter entailed the collection and preservation of information (historical, archaeological, artistic) (Frykenberg, 1989: 89, 91, 92, 94) that served to concretize a concept that was gradually developing in the minds of colonial scholars and administrators, and local elites.

In the previous section it was suggested that the intellectual Christianization of 'religion' is a special case of the application of an exclusive definition of religion. The exclusivity of the definition is smuggled into the concept unwittingly. The result is a specific type of construction of religion determined in the first place by the elements smuggled into the concept of religion to begin with. I have argued that the elements smuggled into the understanding of Islam and 'Hinduism' are derived from Christianity.

The application of a universal concept of religion would not result in such constructions of individual religions because the elements that make up the universal concept of religion are derived from all religions, apply to all of them

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with varying degrees of significance and are, therefore, neutral, in the sense that one is not led by the very concept of religion to read into a particular religion the traits of another. The neutrality of the universal concept of religion would extend to all related concepts in the study of religion. A universal concept of religion implies neutrality for all other concepts applied in the description and analytical study of religion. The reverse is also true. A non-universal concept of religion, such as an exclusive one, would render all other concepts in the study of religion non-universal.

Therefore, the use of the conceptual vocabulary of one religion to talk about another is not in itself a problem if the concept of religion in operation is the universal one. For example, in the sociology of religion, concepts such as sect and denomination are defined in terms of another concept, that of the church. Since the idea of the church as a religious organization does not exist in other religions, the use of concepts like denomination and sect for other religions runs the risk of resulting in an intellectual Christianization of these religions.

We may, however, go beyond the critique of the intellectual Christianization of Islam or Hinduism and study alternative constructions of these religions. An example would be Al-Biruni on what is now called Hinduism. Abū al-Rayhān Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Bīrūnī ( /973–445/1048) aimed to provide a comprehensive account of the civilization of India, including the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, science, customs and laws of the Indians. This section concentrates on al-Bīrūnī’s construction of the religions of India.<sup>5</sup>

The work of al-Bīrūnī that can be considered as sociological is his study of India. His *Kitāb mĀ li al-hind* (*The Book of What Constitutes India*) aimed to provide a comprehensive account of what he called ‘the religions of India and their doctrines’. This included the religion, philosophy, literature, geography, science, customs and laws of the Indians. Of special interest to sociology is al-

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<sup>5</sup> I consult both the original Arabic, the *Kitāb fĀ tahqĀq mĀ li al-hind* (al-Bīrūnī, AH 1377/AD 1958 [AD c1030]) as well as Sachau’s English translation, *Alberinu’s India* (Sachau, 1910). Dates in brackets indicate the year in which the work was written. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations in English are taken from Sachau’s translation.

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Bīrūnī's construction of the religions of India. Al-Bīrūnī considered what we call 'Hinduism' as religion centuries before Europeans recognized Hinduism as not mere heathenism.

In attempting a reconstruction of al-Bīrūnī's construction of 'Hinduism' it is necessary to point out that it is inadequate to rely on Sachau's English translation of the Arabic original. The translation, which was undertaken in the late nineteenth century, reads into Arabic terms, nineteenth century European ideas about what Hinduism was. For example, in his preface in the Arabic original al-Bīrūnī refers to 'the religions of India' (*adyĀn al-hind*) (Al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958[c1030]: 4) while this is translated by Sachau as 'the doctrines of the Hindus' (Sachau, 1910: 6), leading one to assume that al-Bīrūnī conceived of a single religion called Hinduism.<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, this was not the case.

We begin our reconstruction of al-Bīrūnī's construction of the religions of India with the title of his work: *KitĀb al-BĀrĒnĀ fĀ tahqĀq ma li al-hind min maqbĒlat fĀ al-`aql aw mardhĒlat*. This can be translated as *The Book of What Constitutes India as derived from Discourse which is Logically Acceptable or Unacceptable*. As noted by Sachau (1910: xxiv), al-Bīrūnī's method was to allow Indians to speak in order to present Indian civilization as understood by Indians themselves (Sachau, 1910: 25; al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958[c1030]: 19).<sup>7</sup> Al-Bīrūnī quotes extensively from Sanskrit texts those parts of the texts which he had either read himself or which were communicated to him.<sup>8</sup>

The second chapter of the *TahqĀq ma li al-hind* was translated by Sachau as 'On the Belief of the Hindus in God', whereas the Arabic original has it as 'On their Beliefs in God, Praise be to Him'. Moreover, the term 'Hindu' does not appear in the Arabic text and the term '*hind*' does not have religious connotations. Sachau writes 'the Hindu religion' in his translation (Sachau, 1910: 50), whereas the Arabic original has no equivalent (al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958[c1030]: 38).

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<sup>6</sup> In fact, a study of Sachau's translation may be more a study of the intellectual Christianization of the religions of India than of al-Bīrūnī's work on India.

<sup>7</sup> For more on al-Bīrūnī's method see Jeffery (1951).

<sup>8</sup> On al-Bīrūnī's knowledge of Sanskrit, see Chatterji (1951) and Gonda (1951).

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The account of the creed of the Indians begins in chapter two with an exposition of their belief in God, by which al-Bīrūnī means the same God that is worshipped by Jews, Christians and Muslims. The exposition begins with an account of the nature of God, with reference to his speech, knowledge and action (Sachau, 1910: 27–30; al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958 [c 1030]: 20–22).

We are then told that this is an account of the belief in God among the elite. Here al-Bīrūnī is making a distinction between ideas associated with a high tradition and ideas held by the common people, as far as the conception of God is concerned (Sachau, 1910: 31–32; al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958 [c 1030]: 23–24).

What we get so far is a picture of a monotheistic religion based on a determinate number of books, the *Patañjali*, *Veda* and *Gita* (Sachau, 1910: 27, 29; al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958 [c 1030]: 20–21). The Veda was ‘sent down’ to Brahma (*anzalahu `alā brāhma*) (Sachau, 1910: 29; al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958 [c 1030]: 21), which Al-Bīrūnī understands as the First Power (*al-quwwah al-awwalī*) (Sachau, 1910: 94; al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958 [c 1030]: 71). Al-Bīrūnī draws an analogy between the Christian trinity and the three forces of Brahma, Narayana (second force) and the Rudra (third force). The unity of these three forces is called Vishnu, sometimes called the middle force and sometimes conflated with the first force (Sachau, 1910: 94).

Sociologically speaking, a distinction has to be made between the abstract, metaphysical ideas of the high tradition and the literalist, anthropomorphic ideas of the common people.

Al-Bīrūnī is, therefore, referring to a specific Vedic-Sanskritic religion that revolved around the worship of Brahma, which today in retrospect is often seen as a branch or sect within Hinduism, and which was historically a minor tradition among the more major traditions of Vaisnavism, Saivism and Saktism (Klostermaier, 1989: 53). Al-Bīrūnī refers to the tradition around Brahma as a *dharma*. *Dharma* refers to, among other things, a system of socio-ethical laws and obligations, including a system of social classification based on the division of

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society into *varnas* (castes) (Klostermaier, 1989: 46). To the extent that the Islamic concept, *din*, approximates ‘religion’, Al- Bīrūnī would have understood *dharma* as religion as he translates *dharma* as *din* (al-Bīrūnī, 1377/1958 [c 1030]: 30; Sachau, 1910: 40).

Clearly, the task for those concerned with the problem of the neglect of ideas emanating from non-Western societies, and for those concerned with a more universalistic approach to knowledge, is to counteract Eurocentrism in the social sciences by reversing the subject-object dichotomy, bringing non-Europeans into the foreground, recognizing non-Europeans as originators, and turning attention to the non-European concepts and categories. This should be done not with the idea of displacing modern social science but to truly universalize. The task should not be to develop a social scientific tradition that is equally parochial as the one being critiqued here.

It is theoretical work that is crucial to undertake. These works have to be more than descriptive. For example, there are many works that describe Ibn Khaldun’s theory, but there has been a negligible amount of theory building that would result in what we may call neo-Khaldunian social theory, that is, work that goes beyond the mere comparison of some ideas and concepts of Ibn Khaldun with those of Western theorists 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; Alatas, 1993). The stress here should be on drawing upon hitherto marginalized and untapped sources of knowledge.

### **Reversing Academic Dependency via Teaching in the Social Sciences**

Essential to counteracting Eurocentric discourse is bringing non-European ideas into teaching in mainstream social science courses and into mainstream social science textbooks. Due to the relatively greater autonomy that university teachers

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have, compared with teachers in the schools, we would be able to inject more non-European content into the courses that we teach. There is no reason why social thinkers such as José Rizal (Philippines, 1861–1896), Benoy Kumar Sarkar (India, 1887–1949) and Kunio Yanagita (Japan, 1875–1962) cannot be introduced into a course of social thought and theory, for example. This is something that I and a colleague at the National University of Singapore, Vineeta Sinha, have been doing for some years. We departed from the conventional classical sociological theory course that is usually confined to teaching Comte, Marx, Weber, Durkheim, de Tocqueville and other Europeans of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. We have introduced Ibn Khaldun, José Rizal, Sarkar and other non-Western social thinkers and teach their ideas systematically. At the same time, we do not neglect Western thinkers. Still, when it comes to Western thinkers such as Marx and Weber, the focus is on those topics generally neglected in similar courses taught in Europe and North America, such as Marx's concept of the Asiatic mode of production, his views on colonialism in India or Weber's work on Islam and Confucianism. The details of how the course was revamped were reported in the journal *Teaching Sociology* (Alatas & Sinha, 2001).

### **The Prospects for Academic Dependency Reversal**

As scholars there is much we can do at the individual level in our research and teaching to spread awareness about the problem of academic dependency and go beyond merely talking about the problem to actually practising alternative discourses. Counteracting academic dependency and Eurocentrism in the social sciences also requires our being active in terms of conscientizing students and scholars about the problems of academic dependency and the need for alternative discourses and popularizing non-European ideas by regularly and continuously organizing panels or presenting papers at mainstream social science conferences. This is a matter of organization and funding but also requires a lot of will on our

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part. Syed Hussein Alatas, in one of his last publications, suggested that the International Sociological Association organize a session at the World Congress of Sociology on the issue of an autonomous sociological tradition in order to ‘alert sociologists throughout the world to pool their attention on this extremely vital need for the development of sociology’ (Alatas, SH 2006: 17).

Indeed, the South is not lacking in creative and original thinkers. Many examples of alternative discourses can be cited from various countries in Asian and Africa. I have documented some of these in my *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science*. Of India, Syed Hussein Alatas said:

A tradition can be expected to emerge. By tradition it is not meant the mere presence of disparate studies of local or regional subjects by indigenous scholars. Apart from the traits we have earlier cited, there is one significant overriding trait of a tradition, that is, the continuous discussion of a set of major problems and ideas in the course of long duration, decades or centuries, reflecting the cumulative development of knowledge concerning particular subjects. An example is the discussion on the French Revolution or periodization in European history. (Alatas, SH 2006: 15)

But, whether such a tradition can emerge in much of the South will depend on our ability to make changes in policy, change the reward systems in institutions of learning, reduce corruption and inefficiency, and remove national and local politics from the centres of learning. In other words, this requires nothing short of the non-interference of the fools in the entire art, science and business of education. But, the fools are dominant.

Alatas, in fact, had also suggested the creation of sessions on a new theme – the sociology of the fools. By this, he meant the sociological fool as opposed to its counterpart, the sociological intellectual. Sociologists should not only be interested in the sociology of the intellectual but also in the sociology of the opposing type, the fool. The concept of the fool is not only an original concept and example of the type of creativity needed for an autonomous social science tradition, it also points to a diagnosis of the problems that alternative discourses

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face in societies dominated by fools in positions of leadership (Alatas, SH 2006: 17).

Alatas had started discussing the topic of the fool in his book *Intellectuals in Developing Societies* (1977: Chapter 4). Fourteen characteristics for the definition of the sociological concept of the fool and the concrete consequences of power-wielding fools were discussed. Leaders and administrators who are fools stamp their own peculiar foolish imprint on whatever thinking and practices they undertake. For example, in their corrupt practices, 'their corruption bears the imprint of the fool. When they are honest, their honesty can be naïve and immature' (Alatas, SH 2006: 17).

I feel that throughout his intellectual life, my father lived in fear of our society being taken over by the fools. Among the traits of the fools are: (i) the inability to recognize a problem; (ii) the inability to solve a problem if told to him; (iii) the inability to learn what is required; (iv) the inability to learn the art of learning; and (v) not admitting that he is a fool (Alatas, SH 1977: 45). Furthermore:

The revolution of the fools which had occurred in many developing societies was to a great extent due to the colonial period. The colonial government did not pay much attention to the creation of high-calibre administrators in the colonies. During that time all the thinking at national levels was done by the colonial government abroad. The commercial and industrial houses were similarly foreign-based. Education in the colonies was mainly geared to provide clerical service or tasks at a subsidiary level. After independence following the Second World War, there was a sudden increase in the volume and intensity of administration and other decision-making centres covering diverse projects which were introduced in increasing numbers by the newly independent states. During this period there was a shortage of intelligent manpower to deal with the sudden increase of planning and administration, both in the official and in private realms, in the newly independent states. Hence the rise to power of the fools. Once the fools came to power, they perpetuated their own breed. With the fools came nepotism, provincialism, parochial party politics, to condition selection and ascent in the hierarchy of administrative power. Fools cannot cope with a situation where merit and hardwork

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are the criteria of success, and so corruption is the hallmark of the rise to power of the fools, making a farce of government tenders and leading to bureaucratic intrigues to gain office or promotion. Where fools dominate it is their values which become society's values, their consciousness which becomes society's consciousness. (Alatas, SH 1977: 45–6)

Such is the context within which the critique of academic dependency and the call for alternative discourses is made. Does our society have the leadership of sufficient integrity, resolve, and bravery to combat imitative and cultural slavish ideals that are among the causes of academic dependency to begin with?

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### **Can Microcredit be an Effective Strategy for Gender Mainstreaming?<sup>9</sup>**

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#### **Introduction**

‘Gender mainstreaming’ an approach to women’s development emerged in the early 1990s. This approach grew as a concern of the international women’s movement to develop alternative strategies and in order to move women’s issues out of periphery into the ‘mainstream’ of development decision-making. Gender mainstreaming has been referred to as a comprehensive strategy that involves the

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<sup>9</sup> The article is developed out of a research project entitled ‘Gender Mainstreaming as Development Policy: Microfinance Programme for Women’ funded by the Centre for Social Studies and Humanities, University of Pune. The entire study is published as a CSS Occasional Paper Series 2007–08, by the Centre for Social Sciences and Humanities, University of Pune. This project is part of my doctoral project on ‘Citizenship, Development and Gender: A Study of Three Microcredit Programmes’ under the supervision of Sujata Patel, Department of Sociology, University of Pune. I am obliged and grateful to her for helping me in conceptualizing this research project. I also thank Maithreyi Krishnaraj, Medha Kotwal and Kalindi Deshpande, the peer reviewers of the project for their comments.

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integration of women-oriented programmes and gender issues into the development institution. In India this policy was present as early as in 1974, although not conceptualized in the terminology of 'gender mainstreaming'. The *Towards Equality Report* stated the need to incorporate women's issues into every aspect of development process of the country. Evaluation of different development programmes in India reveals that women's incorporation into the development process has not led to a simultaneous change in unequal power structures. I argue that gender mainstreaming, which calls for the integration of women into all sectors of development is bound to have limited success unless the patriarchal structures, which determine women's status and position, is challenged.

Gender mainstreaming is not an end in itself, but a strategy, an approach to achieve the goal of gender equality. Mainstreaming involves (a) incorporating gender concerns in planning, policy and implementation to provide effective rights and dignity to the disadvantaged (b) women-inclusive social, political, and economic institutions, (c) transforming cultural structures of power within the home and outside, (d) ending domestic and public violence, (e) recognizing women's work (productive and reproductive) and contribution to the economy as well as their economic agency (Kelkar 2005). Micro credit has been considered an important programme for gender mainstreaming.

Microcredit programme is celebrated by the Indian state and international development institutions as an 'ideal' poverty alleviation programme for women. It is defined as 'provision of thrift, credit and other financial services and products of very small amounts to the poor in rural, semi-urban and urban areas enabling them to raise their income levels and improve living standards'. The programme is based on the principle of activating self-help among women and is considered as being empowering. The government has accepted microcredit programmes as a tool for addressing women's economic, political and social concerns and has encouraged its expansion.

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The patriarchal nature of the state raises the question of whether the state would be able to mainstream gender issues (Swaminathan 2002). In the debate on the institutional mechanisms for the delivery of microcredit programmes there is an emphasis on implementation of the programme by institutions, organizations and groups other than the state. In the plan of action of Microcredit Summit 1997, the responsibility for achieving the goals of the summit was placed on ‘the thousands of existing NGOs, cooperatives, credit unions, grassroots groups and poverty banks’ (Swaminathan 2007). Presently government, semi-government, non-government organizations and mass-based political groups organize women through microcredit.

Drawing on Joseph (2007) and Swaminathan (2007), I argue that the official microcredit programme has been marked by the neo-liberal philosophy. Until the late 1970s India was a ‘developmental state’, which believed in taking a proactive role in shaping the path of its development. The 1980s and 1990s inaugurated a period which defined a minimalist role of the state. Termed ‘neo-liberalism’, it allowed for the free working of the market and a belief that it would solve the problems related to poverty. Microcredit is conceptualized as a programme that, by giving the poor access to credit and forming self-help groups of women it will solve poverty and empower women.

Contrary to this position, scholars have argued that microcredit does not always have a positive impact on poverty alleviation because the official programme does not have the capacity to displace patriarchal structures that bind women (Goetz & Sengupta 1996). Further by focusing only on ‘economic’ issues, it fails to address the way deprivation of nutrition and health, increasing violence and insecurity are affecting women as economic actors. Without addressing these questions it is not possible for women to get empowered. In this context it is important to analyze critically one, the design and growth of microcredit programmes in India as a neo-liberal programme and two, the strategy of using microcredit programmes to mainstream gender.

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The paper has four sections. Section 1 discusses the nature of the microcredit programme in India. Analysis of the microcredit programme as a neo-liberal policy is present in Section 2. Section 3 contains a discussion of microcredit programme as a strategy to mainstream gender. And finally Section 4 has the conclusion.

### **Section 1: Microcredit Programme in India**

The concept of microfinance has become a major developmental tool in many parts of the world in recent years. Today the term 'microfinance' refers to credits/loans, savings, insurance; transfer services and other financial products targeted at low-income clients. Microfinancing generally covers the following activities: microcredit, micro savings and micro insurance. Microcredit refers to a small amount of money loaned to a client (individual or a group) by a bank or an institution without a collateral. Micro savings are deposit services that allow one to save small amounts of money for future use. Micro insurance is a system by which people, businesses and other organizations make a payment to share risk (Khandelwal 2007). The term 'microcredit' commonly used means microcredit mainly by the private sector, including the NGOs, where the private sector controls the disbursement and determines the terms and conditions attached to each loan.

In this paper I focus only on microcredit.

Statistics on microcredit reveal that it has a massive outreach among poor women all over the world. Internationally as of 31 December 2006, more than 3,100 microcredit institutions offered microfinance services to more than 92 million clients, over 80% of whom are women (Harris 2007). In India the picture is no different. The Indian government started microcredit programme in 1992 and since then has promoted two models: the Self-Help Group Bank Linkage

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Programme (SLBP)<sup>10</sup> and the Microfinance Institution model (MFI)<sup>11</sup>. The SLBP programme runs under the aegis of National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)<sup>12</sup>. It has covered around 41 million persons in 2006–07, of whom over 90% are women and about half of them poor. Further under the MFIs model 10.5 million households were reached by March 2007. Thus SLBP and MFIs models taken together have reached about 50 million households in India (Ghate 2007).

From the 1980s onwards, microcredit programmes promoted by international development and financing agencies argue that providing credit generates self-employment opportunities for the poor, especially poor women. This helps in reducing poverty and leads to their empowerment. The concern with women's access to credit and assumptions about its contributions to women's empowerment are not recent. Mayoux (1995, 2000) states that from the early 1970s women's movements in a number of countries became interested in the degree to which poverty-focused programmes and credit cooperatives were actually used by women. The problem of women's access to credit was emphasized for the first time at the first International Women's Conference in Mexico in 1975. This led to the setting up of the Women's World Banking Network and the production of many manuals, articles and documentation on women's access to credit.

In India a number of organizations like SEWA, Annapurna Mahila Mandal and Working Women's Forum with origins in the traditions of unionization and the Indian women's movement identified credit as a major constraint in their work with informal sector women workers. Proliferation and

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<sup>10</sup> SHG Model refers to the direct lending to self-help group by public banks. Here the groups may be formed either by NGOs or by banks.

<sup>11</sup> MFI model refers to wholesale lending to MFIs by private banks and funding organizations, which in turn lend to groups of women.

<sup>12</sup> NABARD was established by an act of parliament in 1982. It was set up as an apex development bank with a mandate for facilitating credit flow for agriculture rural industries and other allied economic activities in rural areas. NABARD initiated a pilot project of 500 SHGs in 1992 as its bank linkage programme.

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mushrooming of government- and NGO-sponsored income-generating schemes, which included a range of credit and savings components, was developed in the 1980s after the Nairobi International Women's Conference in 1985 (Mayoux 1995, 2000).

Post-1980s one can perceive a pressure on the organizations to form groups of women for microcredit purposes. For example 97% of Grameen Bank's seven million borrowers are women. Coyle (2001: 134) argues that microcredit programmes that push for women's participation is based on the three issues. It includes that of equity (women are more credit-disadvantageous than men), impact (women tend to share the benefits of an improved income with family and community) and good business (women have proved to be better credit risks). Justification for the emphasis on women is that they are poorer than men, have less collateral and are more credit-constrained. Further it has a positive effect on family in terms of better access to health, nutrition and education. Given its widespread impact it becomes necessary to analyze the existing literature on microcredit.

### **Section 2: Review of Literature on Microcredit**

In the existing literature on microcredit there are two trends. One position positively evaluates the programme and emphasizes its role in alleviating poverty and leading to women's empowerment. The second position put forth by feminists have critiqued microcredit programme on the ground that it has not really led to women's empowerment and the issue is far from resolved. On the issue of poverty alleviation scholars argue that microcredit does not reach the poorest and in many cases the poorest are deliberately excluded from microfinance programmes (Simanowitz 2002; Scully 2004).

'Targeted microcredit programmes' have a strong anti-poverty focus as they aim to increase incomes and smoothen consumption. Microcredit has now

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emerged as an anti-poverty instrument in many low-income countries. Microcredit programmes maintain their poverty focus by using an exogenous criterion to screen out non-poor groups. Usually a land-based criterion is used, as land ownership is associated with wealth and landlessness with poverty. International aid and donor agencies have accepted and promoted microcredit as a poverty-reduction programme. The first initiative was at the Microcredit Summit 1997, where global movement to reach 100 million of the world's poorest families, especially the women of those families with microcredit for self-employment by 2005 was launched (Draft Declaration, Micro Credit Summit, Washington DC, 2 November 1997). In the words of the President of the World Bank, James Wolfensohn:

... microcredit programmes have brought the vibrancy of the market economy to the poorest villages and people of the world. This business approach to the alleviation of poverty has allowed millions of individuals to work their way out of poverty with dignity. (Microcredit Summit 1997, cited in Irmi Hanak 2000: 313)

Later, the United Nations declared 2005 as the Year of Microcredit. This was translated into massive investment in this sector, in the form of grants, projects, conferences, workshops, and many other activities in order to encourage and facilitate the growth of the programme. This legitimization was reiterated with the Nobel Peace Prize 2006 being awarded to Muhammad Yunus and his Grameen Bank of Bangladesh. The Nobel Foundation justified this decision by stating that by reducing poverty through microcredit it would, in the long run, ensure peace in the world.

In India the government accepted the self-help group strategy as a major programme in mitigating poverty. To this end funds were allocated, targets were set and central and state government promoted groups all over the country (Fernandez 2006: 24–28). At present there is a major drive by the government to

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implement all development programmes through the formation of SHGs for women.

Academic researches on microcredit focusing on poverty reduction argue that it can help to substantially reduce poverty (Khandker 1998; Littlefield et al 2003; Dunford 2003). This is because access to credit can contribute to a long-lasting increase in income by means of a rise in investments in income-generating activities and to a possible diversification of income. It can contribute to an accumulation of assets and provide cover for risks. Microcredit may have positive spill-over effects such that its impact surpasses the economic and social improvement of the borrower (Sinha 1998: 1–2).

Evaluation of microcredit programmes has also focused on its capacity to lead to women's empowerment. This kind of evaluation of microcredit programmes as a 'panacea of all problems for women' was initially made at the Micro Credit Summit in 1997, where microcredit intervention was acknowledged as a powerful tool to end economic dependence of poor women. Microcredit programmes, through their contribution to women's ability to earn an income, was assumed to initiate a series of 'virtuous spirals' of economic empowerment, increased wellbeing for women and their families, and wider social and political empowerment (Mayoux 1995). Further most microcredit programmes are group-based on the assumption that bringing women together in groups will be more empowering than individual lending. It is argued that credit programmes empower women by strengthening their economic roles, increasing their ability to contribute to the family's income, helping them to establish their identity outside the family, and giving them experience and self-confidence in the public sphere (Pitt and Khandekar 1995; Hashemi, Schuler & Riley 1996; Osmani 1998; Jain & Moore 2003: 7–8).

Scholars who have critically analyzed the programme argue that it does not lead to poverty alleviation nor does it bring about women's empowerment. Many critics show that microcredit does not reach the poorest (Scully 2004) or

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that the poorest are deliberately excluded from microfinance programmes (Simanowitz 2002). The extreme poor often decide not to participate in microcredit programmes since they lack confidence or they regard the loans as being risky (Ciravegra 2005). Further the core poor are often not accepted in group-lending programmes by other group members and by staff members because they are seen as a bad credit risk (Hulme & Mosley 1996). The way microfinance programmes are organized and designed – they emphasize ‘timely repayment’ – may lead to the exclusion of the core poor, who do not have regular incomes.

In India specifically, the focus was on promoting SHGs without developing adequate capacity building. The problem was that the SHG was promoted as a one-dimensional strategy to eradicate poverty. Undue importance was placed on credit without focusing on other initiatives such as creation of livelihood options, infrastructure, access to market and inputs necessary to increase productivity. In India there was a dominance of the number game and each and every MFI (with exceptions) were blindly forming SHGs without planning and training them for sustainability.

In addition, on the issue of microcredit programmes leading to women’s empowerment there are many contestations. One must realize that ‘empowerment’ is not an automatic consequence of women’s access to savings and credit or group formation per se. In many cases the benefits may be marginal. Women’s own interests may be subordinated to those of household poverty reduction and programme financial sustainability. Scholars such as Goetz & Sen Gupta (1994), Ackerely 1995, Montgomery, Bhattacharya & Hulme (1996), Rahman (1999) and Kabeer (2001) have all argued that one has to be cautious in evaluating microcredit programmes. They argue that the patriarchal social structure in most developing countries precludes women’s empowerment through provision of credit and, under some circumstances, may even worsen their situations. Though men often control women’s incomes, all the same lending to

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women still enhances household welfare (Pitt & Khandker 1996). Scholars are also critical of the conventional methodologies often used to measure 'empowerment', as this concept is tricky and vague, difficult to define, measure and identify. Scholars who develop indicators to measure empowerment often do not take into consideration women's own perceptions of empowerment (Mayoux 1995). Jain & Moore (2003) argue that concerns of micro finance about 'gender equity' needs to be analyzed critically. The question is how far the big microcredit programmes were focused on women because they were simply better and more worthy borrowers or because they were found to be more pliable members of organization that demanded a great deal in terms of attendance in meetings, engagement in ritual and tolerance of strong and public moral pressure on loan defaulters.

Despite such criticisms, microcredit has become an all-encompassing developmental tool to address the twin issues of poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. Thus it is crucial to examine the period in which microcredit was conceived and promoted aggressively as a developmental programme for the developing nations. I argue that microcredit is a programme of a neoliberal state and that by itself it does not lead to either poverty alleviation or women's empowerment.

### **Section 3: Microcredit Programmes as a Neo-liberal Policy in India**

In India, as mentioned above, microcredit programmes are currently being promoted as a strategy for both poverty alleviation and women's empowerment. Women's empowerment and participation have been at the forefront of debates about credit provision since the late 1970s. Access to credit has always been an important resource for the Indian poor and women as they have an unmet need for it (Shram Shakti 1988).

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From the mid-1980s, microcredit programmes officially became an integral part of the development policy of the Indian state. Fernandez (2006) argues that the first official interest in microcredit in India was through informal group lending that took shape during 1986–87 on the initiative of NABARD. While the SBLP, anchored by NABARD, has the patronage of the state and formal banking institutions, a parallel system of MFIs<sup>13</sup> promoted by non-statal agencies has been depending almost exclusively on subsidized external grants to finance both social mobilization and on lending. Both target the poor and women, predominantly (Nair 2005).

SBLP is the larger model and dates back from the NABARD-initiated pilot project of 500 self-help groups in 1992. In this linkage programme the role of NABARD is very important. Since 1992 it has promoted and monitored the SHG programme, provided funds for capacity building and innovation, and helped change policy to create an enabling environment. The SBLP approach involves the formation of groups, especially that of women. The SHGs has a set of byelaws devised and agreed by the members themselves. These include rules for monthly savings, lending procedures periodicity, timings of meetings, etc. The group lends money to its members and maintains meticulous accounts and records. After a certain period of disciplined functioning – from six months to one year – the group becomes entitled to a loan from the bank where it has an account.

As of March 2006, there were about 3 million SHGs in India. Of these, about 1.6 million are linked to banks. Further by March 2005, the programme had provided credit to 1,618,456 SHGs with a membership of over 120 million poor people, making it the largest microfinance initiative in the world (Fernandez

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<sup>13</sup> The range of MFIs emerging comprise: (a) not-for-profit MFIs such as societies and trusts (legal forms of NGOs) that lend to borrowers, usually organized into SHGs or into Grameen bank-style groups and cooperatives; (b) mutual benefit MFIs especially cooperatives, some like the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) Bank registered as urban cooperative banks, while new ones, especially in Andhra Pradesh, are increasingly emerging as MACS under the new cooperative acts; and (c) for-profit MFIs incorporated as non-banking financial companies such as BASIX and SHARE Micro-finance Limited (Fisher & Sriram 2002: 43).

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2006). Thousands of institutions are involved in promoting microcredit, which include government, semi-government, banks and NGOs. For example in 2004–05, there were 573 banks (commercial, regional rural and cooperative) lending to the SHGs through 41,323 bank branches. Further there were 4,323 NGOs and other agencies involved in the promoting, training and mentoring of SHGs, and which also undertook capacity-building activities<sup>14</sup>. SLBP is skewed in favour of the southern states, particularly Andhra Pradesh, having almost 39% of the total linkage.

This widespread network was strengthened in the past two financial years. Recent figures show that as of March 2007, 29.24 lakhs SHGs in 587 districts of the country have been credit-linked to 44,500 branches of 50 commercial banks, 352 cooperative banks and 96 regional rural bankings (RRBs). The cumulative credit which has flown to these groups is Rs 18,040.74 crore and the cumulative refinance drawn from NABARD is to the extent of Rs 5,446.49 crore (NABARD 2007, cited in Satish 2008: 77). These figures show the widespread networks of microcredit programmes.

In the following paragraphs, I am going to analyze the underlying logic of the microcredit programme that shapes it as a neo-liberal development policy. Within a neo-liberal regime poverty is perceived as lack of access to resources and not as a structural inequality. It is in such a context that programmes such as microcredit are developed, which provides women with easy access to credit, without transforming the unequal structures of power. The analysis of the neo-liberal features of the programme is done under three aspects, the ideology and

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<sup>14</sup> Capacity-building training done by NGOs has over 23 training modules spread over an year and half. It includes modules such as structural analysis of society, analysis of local credit sources, self-help affinity groups, community-based meetings, communication, affinity, vision-building, organizational goals, planning resource mobilization, rules and regulations, book-keeping and auditing, leadership, conflict resolution, collective decision-making, common fund management, self-assessment, group graduation, linkages with other institutions, building credit linkages, federations, credit plus and analyzing gender relations in the family and community (Fernandez 2006).

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the design of the microcredit programme and the assumptions regarding women within the programme.

### *Ideology of the Microcredit Programme*

Ideologically microcredit programmes are market-based programmes that focus on the individual's enterprising nature. Hanak (2000) and Joseph (2007) argue microcredit's neo-liberal inclinations are clearly revealed in the position of the World Bank and other international aid agencies. According to them these institutions portray poverty as a locally and individually created, and therefore a locally and individually solvable, problem. In this regard microcredit that helps to raise household income in monetary terms, falls perfectly in line with such an approach. Hanak further argues that relegating the responsibility for poverty to the individual microcredit programmes have come to partly replace poverty-alleviation policies that rely on providing services such as health or education programmes to communities. Microcredit thus creates an image of poor who would themselves work their way out of poverty.

In this sense one has to understand that successful microcredit programmes are essentially businesses that have succeeded by doing two things. One, they have devised and pursued a business strategy that is appropriate to the particular features of the market in which they operate and the clients they intend to interact. Secondly, these organizations have been able to design structures and procedures that enable them to run efficient banking such as providing financial services that match their client needs, keeping transaction costs low, minimizing the leakage of funds through loan default or the misappropriation of money by staff. Thus one has to realize that good repayment rates are the result of social and institutional pressure rather than the benign-sounding 'social collateral' as it is projected by international and national microcredit and funding organizations (Jain and Moore 2003: 7–8).

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### *Design of the Microcredit Programme*

With regard to the design, one very important aspect is the notion of profit ingrained within the programme. One has to realize that it is a resource-creating programme, that ensures that banking institutions make profits. The organizers charge exorbitant rates of interest, almost an average of 24–25% per annum. This is more than what moneylenders charge the poor (Joseph 2007; John 2005). These rates are higher than the corresponding rates charged by commercial banks or other financial institutions. For example, real interest rates in 1992 varied from 15% per annum in Bangladesh for Grameen Bank to 45% in Bolivia for loans advanced by Banco Sol<sup>15</sup>, and 60% in Indonesia for loans advanced by Badan Kredit Kecamatan<sup>16</sup> (Hulme & Mosley 1998, cited in Swaminathan 2007).

In India the interest rates on microcredit projects are also very high. It is very interesting to understand the process through which the interest rates are determined. For example, NABARD delivers microcredit through the SHG-Bank Linkage Programme in three ways. In two of the variants, the banks lend directly to the SHGs who on-lend to members and in the third variant, NGOs act as intermediaries between banks and SHGs. In terms of interest rates, the final interest rate includes a margin charged by each ‘particular link in the credit chain’. Thus NABARD provides refinance to commercial banks at 7.5% per annum, banks on-lend to NGOs at 10–15%, NGOs then lend to SHGs at 12–24% and the groups lend to individual members at 24–26% per annum (Chavan & Ramakumar 2002, cited in Swaminathan 2007).

Microcredit enterprises thus will have to generate very high rates of profit and returns to be sustainable to the borrower. Swaminathan (2007) cites Mosely (1999: 377) that ‘in the era of financial liberalization, NGOs are free to charge whatever interest rates they wish in order to cover the (at present very

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<sup>15</sup> Microfinance Institution.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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considerable) costs of institution building, supervision, experimentation and insurance'. In the neo-liberal times, the transfer of the task of serving the credit needs of rural borrowers from the banking system to NGO-controlled microcredit projects does not reduce transaction costs but in effect, transfers transaction costs – higher transaction costs to the donors as well as to the borrowers (Swaminthan 2007).

Further in this programme all the stakeholders, which includes the state, the banks, politicians and NGOs profit. For the state it is harnessing the 'hidden wealth' of the poor (history of no defaults and willingness of the poor to pay high interest rates) and it becomes easy for them to put the onus on the loaned, the banks make profits as the interest rate is high, for the politicians these women's groups are 'vote banks' and finally for the NGOs these programmes are a source of funding and economic profit as they charge very high rates of interest.

### *Assumptions Regarding Women within the Microcredit Programme*

The microcredit programmes create an image of women as 'ideal, dutiful, hardworking, resourceful, responsible and efficient', who would single-handedly and smilingly carry the burden of the family, community and the nation. Microcredit programmes assume that all women are 'budding entrepreneurs'. In a neo-liberal state, the agenda on gender and development focuses on efficiency rationale, where through microcredit programme 'groups women accessing easy credit and proving themselves to be efficient managers' is emphasized (Joseph 2007). This emphasis on 'women as efficient managers' focuses on 'language of efficiency' and on women (rather than the relational concept of gender), which places them as 'good subjects' against the marginalized men who are regarded as both 'incapable and irresponsible' (John 1999: 119–20). Further in this framework women are expected to be responsible, bear the burden of the family, household and community without complaining (Nair 2007).

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This image of women so generated and celebrated in the neo-liberal economy has strong implications on the 'terms and conditions' on which women are asked to enter the market. In times when the market has been 'granted ideological legitimacy' there is a perceptible change in the way notions of development and the economy are debated. This perspective not only emphasizes the importance of the informal sector for the market economy, but also argues that the 'success' of this sector shows that high productivity is possible with low capital costs. This has a specific gendered implication. It raises the issues of work and working conditions, working hours, level of income, safety and security in the informal economy.

Importantly since women predominate this sector, it is their creativity and potential that needs special attention. John (1996, 2004: 247–248) makes a very interesting argument. According to her the international discourses, especially of the World Bank variety, are on their way to underwrite development literature in India. She argues that this is visible in the documentation relating to literature on incredible tasks poor women perform, their often greater contributions to household income despite lower wage earnings, their ability to make scarce resources stretch further under deteriorating conditions. Now there is a *crucial* shift in signification, these findings are not so much arguments about exploitation as much as proofs of efficiency. As the Gender and Poverty Report of the World Bank concludes, poor women are clearly more efficient economic actors, with greater managerial and entrepreneurial skills than men, thus women require greater access to resources, especially credit and social services. Therefore micorcredit programmes should target women. This argument is very crucial as it exposes the underlying exploitative nature of the programme.

Therefore to accept that by becoming part of the microcredit programmes women and through it the market, women would be empowered is not realistic. The economic 'empowerment' logic inherent in microcredit programmes, though necessary for further emancipation, is never sufficient. In policy approaches this

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argument uses women as an instrument rather than a liberatory process for her. The argument goes like this: make women economically independent and they will use their earnings to promote family welfare, improve their children's nutrition levels, and educate their children (as opposed to men who may not do so). It should be borne in mind that financial markets per se cannot adequately address the structural aspects of intra-household relations, social and cultural norms that influence integration and exclusion of women, gender division of labour, gendered distribution of roles, resources and responsibilities. In development practices it is assumed that responsibility automatically translates into authority (Krishnaraj 2006). It does not happen so in everyday practices. Patriarchal ideology increases the 'responsibility' of the marginalized without a corresponding increase in authority.

Discussions in the above paragraphs highlight that in a neo-liberal state market-based solutions are the norm. The strategy is to bring 'people' into the market, organize them so as to control them. In this regard the formation of self-help groups of women to access microcredit is a relevant example. It is believed that if the poor can be provided access to small amounts of capital, they could be empowered to become independent and productive members in the market. This would, in turn, help the poor and make a dent on rural poverty. Thus micro finance programmes that are primarily engaged in the promotion of small-scale enterprise have an obvious appeal in an era characterized by the strength of neo-liberal ideas about the benefits of the market and private enterprises. The promoters do not realize that by emphasizing microenterprises, they encourage efforts to create employment in the informal sector focusing on 'self-employment' with the assumption that all poor are 'budding entrepreneurs'. Thus rather than designing programmes that address the structural causes of poverty and women's powerlessness, individual-based solutions such as microcredit are being put forth (Joseph 2007: 3216).

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Despite such criticisms the fact that the programme is growing stronger and there is widespread proliferation of it, it becomes important to understand whether and how it can be used as a strategy of gender mainstreaming. Microcredit programmes are conceived by many developmental institutions as a part of a broader empowerment strategy including unionization, cooperative formation and mobilizing around gender issues like domestic violence and dowry as part of the wider women's movement. In the next section I discuss the potential of the programme to be a strategy for mainstreaming gender.

### **Section 4: Microcredit Programme: A Strategy to Mainstream Gender**

A specific aspect of gender mainstreaming relates to the importance of the process and not the end. The important aspect within microcredit, which could be used for building a process of transformation, refers to the concept of 'self-help groups'. Historically it has been proven that 'groups' can be mobilized to act as agents of change and thereby create a 'space' for themselves. I draw from the works of Agarwal (1994), Carr et al (1996) and Deshmukh-Ranadive (2002) who focus on the critical importance of group formation among women through self-help groups. To transform a 'group' from a savings and credit group to one that negotiates for power, access to resources and articulate their concerns, the groups have to undergo a long process of conscientization. Just formation of groups does not necessarily attribute to a radical space. This radicalism can be generated only when the design of the microcredit programme allows 'space' for the articulation citizenship rights.

Specific to microcredit interventions, Agarwal (1994: 42–44) and Carr et al (1996: 193–198) argue that 'group' is a medium through which essential services such as credit, childcare, and healthcare can reach poor women. Not only do 'groups' help women to increase their bargaining power, but they also provide a forum to 'place their voices' before the authorities. Further, women's groups have also acted as a collateral for the individual woman's loans who would

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otherwise have been deprived of access to credit because of her lack of ownership of land, property and other assets.

In particular Carr et al argue that 'groups' act as 'mutual guarantee' and as collateral to savings of women's groups. Critically women lose fear and gain confidence when they come together in solidarity and oppose exploitation at the household level, the workplace and the community at large. Specifically, Agarwal argues that women, organized into groups for better delivery of credit or other economic programmes, have in many cases also been able to challenge gender violence and/or restrictive social practices such as female seclusion. Indeed for women to even participate in group meetings often requires them to challenge and overcome the constraints of social norms. Thus Agarwal argues that the process of fulfilling 'practical gender needs cannot be always be delineated from that of fulfilling strategic gender needs'.

The above argument of Agarwal is important, as following neo-liberal policies of downsizing social sector expenditure, social rights, which have been taken for granted in a welfare state, have come under threat. It is especially in the areas of healthcare, education and child benefits (Yuval-Davis 1997) that the impact is being felt. Mukhopadhy (2007: 172) argues that the negative effect of the development model pushed by globalization is seen in the loss of livelihoods, the reinforcement of social inequalities, the marginalization of people and the exploitation of the environment. In the developing countries, it has affected people's access to food, security, infrastructure, water, sanitation and social security. These policies have a greater negative impact on poor women where the pressure on their meagre resources has increased and they find it very difficult to 'efficiently' manage their families.

In times when the livelihood of the poor is fated to be determined by market forces, the 'practical gender issues' are as much crucial as the 'strategic'. In a neo-liberal state to make construct a binary of the 'practical and strategic' (Moser 1989: 1800–1804) is false. There needs to be a recognition of the fact that

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gender concerns is related to an assessment of the material needs of women and its impact on and relationship with discrimination within the family (Chari 2006). Many grassroots movements of people have challenged this exploitative model of development with its negative effects on people.

These issues are critical attributes in the discussions and the debate on how development programmes can aid women's quest for empowerment. Policy planners and women activists asserted that once women are provided with minimum basic needs, then women will be empowered. Therefore, they contend that the state has to provide these needs to women through development programmes. Microcredit was such a programme that provided access to a critical resource such as 'credit'. However, the manner in which the programme is visualized, conceived and implemented is predominantly within the mainstream development thinking. It partially caters to practical needs of women rather than strategic, as Moser defines it.

The reason is because there is no linear relationship between empowerment and the expansion of spaces; be it at physical, economic, socio-cultural, political and mental levels (Deshmukh-Ranadive 2002: 76–79). She argues that the most important condition for empowerment to take place is an expansion of mental space. This expansion occurs through two factors: one when women operate through collectives (a form of groups) and second, when there is information dissemination. According to her, women may come together for various reasons, that is the point of entry may be to protest against alcoholism in men, discrimination in wages, microcredit, a dairy cooperative, and so on, but it is this collective that allows women to express themselves on the injustice they face. Information dissemination, on the other hand, is critical as it helps to unleash a process of empowerment through two process: one, knowledge of structures of power within which lives are placed and second, information about rights and duties both as citizens of civic societies and as members of families. Thus

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information is an important source of power and instrument of social mobilization.

To the above argument I would like to add a third element, which is the 'perspective' and ideology of the information disseminated. I believe that to convert the groups into 'spaces' that challenge dominant power structures, the information disseminated should be radical and gender-sensitive in its perspective. Unless it is so, it is not possible to develop emancipatory spaces for women. To this end the role of the women's mass-based political movements that mobilize women into microcredit programmes become very important. It is only when there are attempts to make women politically conscious that they would initiate a discussion to articulate their concerns. Thus to create 'transformatory spaces' within groups it is necessary that it is gender-sensitive in its perspective.

### **Section 5: Conclusion**

Gender mainstreaming refers not to the goal but to the process, which in certain cases is more important than the end. In this paper I have argued two things. One, microcredit is a neo-liberal programme of the government. Secondly, the strategy of using microcredit as a means to mainstream gender will succeed only if the ideology and visions of the NGO and political movements are sensitive to the cause of gender equality. Rowan-Campbell (1999, 2006:22) states that one of the flaws of a mainstreaming strategy as it is currently employed is its absence of any attempt to influence the organizational ideology and consistently challenge the ideology of patriarchy. It is thus a converse of the feminist movement, which mainly challenged patriarchal ideology, rather than its structure. The following quote says it all:

Gender mainstreaming is bound up with the gynocentric drive for gender equity within development. Feminists expect this approach to transform development, alleviate poverty and correct deficiencies and inefficiencies at the socio-economic level, which are assumed to be produced by an inattention to gender

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within development projects and programmes. It is difficult to comprehend how adherents could have such high expectations. (Saunders 2002: 37)

All the approaches that have tried to integrate women into the development process within the existing patriarchal structures have failed. I argue that to have a maximum impact, the perspective should be to challenge the structures of inequality. Microcredit by providing access to 'credit' by forming SHGs of women have the potential to mainstream gender. To do so the SHGs need to be formed by women's political groups ideologically influenced by feminist ideology of social transformation.

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### In Conversation with Elísio Macamo

Interview by Afe Adogame

Elísio Macamo is Assistant Professor in Development Sociology at the University of Bayreuth, Germany. He was born and grew up in Mozambique. He studied in Xai-Xai, Maputo (Mozambique), Salford (England), London and Bayreuth. He was Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Bayreuth, Research Fellow at Centro de Estudos Africanos in Lisbon and AGORA-Fellow at Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. He serves on the scientific advisory board of the journals *Afrika Spektrum* and *Indilinga – African Journal of Indigenous Knowledge Systems*, is a member of the executive board of the German African Studies Association (VAD eV) and a member of the scientific committee of CODESRIA (the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa). His major interests are the sociology of religion, knowledge, politics and risk. His current research is on the sociology of risk, namely, how local communities in Mozambique cope with insecurity and uncertainty. His book publications are: *Um País cheio de soluções*. Maputo: Edições Meianoite – Essays (2006); *Trepar o País pelos ramos*, Maputo: Editora Ndjira – Essays (2006); (ed) *Negotiating Modernity – Africa's Ambivalent Experience*. London/Dakar: Zed Books/CODESRIA (2005); *Abecedário da nossa dependência*. Maputo: Editora Ndjira – Essays (2005); Macamo, Elísio, Huo, Teles (Org), *A leitura sociológica – Um manual introdutório*, Maputo: Imprensa Universitária (2004); Clausen, Lars, Geenen, Elke, Macamo, Elísio (eds) *Entsetzliche soziale Prozesse. Theoretische und empirische Annäherungen*, Hamburg: Lit (2003); Elkana, Yehuda, Krastev, Ivan, Macamo, Elísio and Randeria, Shalini (eds) *Unraveling ties – From social cohesion to new practices of connectedness*, Frankfurt am

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Afe Adogame, a Nigerian, obtained his PhD in History of Religions from the University of Bayreuth in Germany. He is Assistant Professor and currently teaches Religious Studies and World Christianity at the University of Edinburgh, UK. Prior to this appointment in 2005, he was Teaching/Senior Research Fellow at the Department for the Study of Religion and Institute of African Studies, Bayreuth University from 1995–1998 and from 2000–2005. He was Senior Fellow at the Harvard University Center for the Study of World Religions, Cambridge, MA, USA, in 2003–04. His broad research interests include interrogating new dynamics of religious experience(s) and expression(s) in Africa and the African Diaspora; the interconnectedness between religion and migration, globalization, politics, economy, media and the civil society. He has published extensively in these and other related topics. He is the author of *Celestial Church of Christ: The Politics of Cultural Identity in a West African Prophetic-Charismatic Movement* (Peter Lang, 1999); and co-editor *European Traditions in the Study of Religion in Africa* (Harrassowitz, 2004), *Religion in the Context of African Migration* (Bayreuth African Studies, 2005); *Christianity in Africa and the Africa Diaspora: The Appropriation of a Scattered Heritage* (Continuum, 2008), *Unpacking the New: Critical Perspectives on Cultural Syncretization in African and Beyond* (Lit, 2008). He is the General Secretary of the African Association for the Study of Religions. He is also a member of other international professional bodies including the International Sociological Association, Association for the Sociology of Religion, Society for the Scientific Study of Religion British Association for the Study of Religion, African Studies Association, American Academy of Religion and the German Association for the History of Religions to mention a few. He serves as Associate Editor for *Studies in World Christianity* (Edinburgh University Press); Member, Editorial Advisory

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Board, *Journal of Religion in Africa* (Brill); Member, International Advisory Board, *Africa Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Africa in a Global World* (Brill); Board Member, Research Committee on Sociology of Religion RC22 of the International Sociological Association (representing Africa, 2006–2010).

**Afe Adogame (AA):** In most of your writings you are often fond of negotiating identity? But who are you?

**Elisio Macamo (EM):** I'm one of those people made possible by modernity. I lived the first 10 years of my life under Portuguese colonial rule in Mozambique. I experienced its humiliating and dehumanizing side, especially through seeing how my parents and older relatives were treated by the system. When the country became independent in 1975 I had a quick induction into modern milleniarism and I experienced the power which hope turned into a sense of mission can have on the imagination of people. Multi-party democracy in most of Africa in the late eighties and early nineties, as well as my training as a sociologist, gave me an opportunity to take stock of what has happened to me over the years. I've come to the conclusion that I've been making myself all through the events that have provided context for my life. So, that's what I am, an identity in the making. In my spare time I am a sociologist working on development issues at the University of Bayreuth in Germany.

**AA:** In your earlier work 'What is Africa?' you seem to suggest the invention of Africa. Could you shed light on who invented Africa and for what end? If invented, and so what?

**EM:** Well, my argument in that book (published by Duncker & Humblot, Berlin, 1999) can indeed be construed as a case for the invention of ... but what I actually

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do is a sociology of knowledge of the debate among African intellectuals concerning the question whether there is an African philosophy. I was fascinated by this discussion which seemed to reach its peak in the late eighties and early nineties, and I wanted to understand what made it possible and what it meant. This forced me to go back in history and engage with the writings of the likes of Crummel and Blyden through Nkrumah, Nyerere, Senghor and Oruka, Bodunrin, Wiredu, Hountondji, all the way to many others who are still very active, such as Mudimbe and Appiah. I emerged with the idea that the debate documented the making of Africa by Africans themselves to the extent that they accepted the gauntlet thrown to them by modernity to situate themselves in history. I tried to make a case for the idea that we concede too much to Europe or to the West by insisting that Africa is their invention. Rather, we should also be sensitive to the fact that by engaging actively with colonialism, rejecting or embracing aspects of its structural and ideological presence in our midst, we were basically taking centrestage in our own history, producing ourselves as thinking, active and historically sensitive individuals. So what, you ask. Well, indeed, so what? I'm still working on that. In the meantime, though, I take comfort in the aesthetics of it all. I'm proud to be a member of a people with such a strong hold on life. Not many have gone through what we have gone through in history and stayed alive to tell the story. This perseverance is fascinating!

**AA:** As one of the youngest, enterprising development sociologists and researcher in Africa, what particular challenge(s) does research in and on Africa pose to you and to your contemporaries irrespective of their academic orientation and background?

**EM:** Oh, Afe, you are very kind! Basically, I think that research in and on Africa poses to all of us the same kinds of challenges that research in and on anything else poses to scholars. We work with concepts, theories and methodologies and

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are always confronted with the question of their suitability to our objects. The moment one stops posing this question, one is lost. Of course, we need to be sensitive to the particular circumstances of the African continent, especially its trajectory in the production of knowledge. I usually make a distinction among three types of knowledge on Africa, namely, traditional, colonial and African. Traditional knowledge refers to pre-colonial knowledge, ie the everyday knowledge which communities on the African continent required for their own reproduction. By colonial knowledge I mean the kind of knowledge that represented Europe's will to power in Africa, ie knowledge that served the purpose of bringing Africa under foreign domination. African knowledge is emancipatory knowledge, it is the knowledge that Africans produce in order to achieve freedom. Although these types of knowledge correspond to rough historical periods often they overlap and don't die away. The production of 'African' knowledge is the main challenge that all of us face who are engaged in research in and on Africa.

**AA:** How do you mean that colonialism, far from being the vehicle for the 'civilisation' of Africa was an important factor in denying modernity to Africa?

**EM:** Colonialism was central to what I consider to be the ambivalence of modernity in Africa. Ideologically, it promised 'civilisation' through progress, emancipation and order. At the same time, however, it blocked all the access routes to its promise through its own practice of making Africans subjects of Europe's will to power. Take the regulation of native labour in Portuguese colonies in Africa: On the one hand, it was based on the idea that wage labour would free Africans from the constraining hold of their 'traditional' communities and led them into the revolution of rising expectations that would spur them on into modernity. On the other hand, however, the needs of the colonial state in terms of cheap labour-forced administrations to conjure up an 'African society'

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that was functional to the colonial state's inability to care for the increasing number of Africans not attached to 'traditional' communities. In so doing, it denied the very modernity which its discourse promised.

**AA:** Quite realistically, what would you consider to be Africans' experience of modernity and social change?

**EM:** Our experience of modernity and social change is the experience of a tension between promise and denial. It's a tough predicament, for often our voice is made possible by the very things that we have to criticise in order to move forward. I call this 'the paradox of modernity in Africa'. Africa as a viable intellectual category for Africans was made possible by our critical engagement with modernity, an engagement which has often rested on the rejection of modernity's progressive claims.

**AA:** In what way(s) is the African experience of modernity unique and relevant for wider social theory, offering valuable analytical insights?

**EM:** I think that it is unique in the sense that it predisposes us to be sensitive to the discursive nature of the tools of the social sciences. Concepts are words, theories are merely coherent strings of words, and methods are our decisions on how we want to make sense of the world. Our experience of modernity allows us to be cynical about these things and that's a good pre-condition for an awareness of the limits of science and its tools.

**AA:** How would you critically reflect on the role of development aid in the production of non-Western countries – particularly African, but maybe using Mozambique the country you know best – as social realities?

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**EM:** Well, development aid is based on the colonial type of knowledge I was talking about earlier on. It is knowledge for domination which, as far as I am concerned, is quite legitimate. The onus is on us to appreciate this and know how to deal with it. We appreciate this by taking a critical distance towards the good intentions of development aid and not allowing them to numb our minds. You see, development aid, much like colonialism, promises a bright future, but makes it dependent on doing things which it considers essential and fundamental. It fits well into Karl Popper's definition of historicism. It is totalitarian and tyrannical in the name of a better future. It promotes silence because being critical of it is often construed as a rejection of the future which it promises. However, if you embrace it, like many African governments have been forced to do by real politics, you give up history, precisely the thing that generations of Africans have fought to recover. So, knowing how to deal with development aid consists, in my view, of holding on to history, ie resisting the transformation of our countries into arenas for the trial of technical solutions and insisting on making our own mistakes. Development aid poses a major threat to politics and it is upon us to resist this.

**AA:** May I take you a bit further on this point? In your reflection about Mozambique, particularly with reference to structural adjustment programmes (SAPs), you opined that the most intriguing problem faced by the social sciences is not so much the inability to produce a critical theory, but rather its uselessness. Could you unravel this enigmatic illusion?

**EM:** I was actually engaging with a very perceptive comment made by a Portuguese social scientist, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who deplored the absence of a critical theory at a time when there is so much to criticise. I argued, in contrast, that the problem was not that no critical theory was being produced. Rather, the problem was that we are living at a time dominated by the general complacency of a few very powerful institutions, countries and people which turn

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any critique, no matter how coherent and well formulated, into some sort of anachronism or ungratefulness. I am deploring the disappearance of debate from the public sphere driven by neo-liberal fundamentalism and by our growing failure to recognise that one of the strengths of liberal democracy has been its ability to provide room for discussion based on the honest acknowledgement of other people's right to an opinion. I understand the right to an opinion not merely as the acceptance of the fact that people have a right to hold different opinions than mine, but rather as the acknowledgement of the duty that falls upon me to engage truthfully with them in the public interest. Everyone is shouting right now, but no one is engaging with anyone else. This is what I mean by the uselessness of critical theory. There is no room for debate. Therefore, we need to recover this room as a matter of urgency.

**AA:** Ever since its inception the sociology of religion has been dogged by the problem of defining its object. What is your view on this?

**EM:** I don't think you will like my answer. I think that the object of the sociology of religion is society, as Emile Durkheim has shown very well. Better still the object is social relations as aptly shown by Max Weber. Religion documents society or social relations, so it is only fair that we should define its object in this manner.

**AA:** Elsewhere, you have argued that the sociology of religion is only interested in religion to the extent that the practical manifestations of the latter can help sociologists describe and analyse society in a better way. To what extent has this been the case for sociology of religion in Africa?

**EM:** I think that generally speaking there have been a considerable number of studies of religion in Africa. I'm not sure if it would be appropriate to call these

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studies 'sociology of religion' given what I have said concerning the object of this discipline. My feeling is that we have not yet quite managed to articulate our empirical observations of religious life and phenomena in Africa with the relationship between historically constituted social order and individual agency. We are still describing phenomena. The American sociologist Randal Collins, for instance, has a very thought-provoking thesis concerning the role of irrationality in the possibility of social order which suggests to me that some of the problems we have with order and stability in Africa are due to the fact that we are too rational. In fact, when you think of it you realise that we have a very practical and down-to-earth approach to religion, but I have not seen this documented in any way in terms of what it means to social order in Africa other than the usual drive to see religious life in Africa as an instance of the exotic. There are, of course, exceptions. I'm thinking particularly of the work of Benneta Jules-Rosetta, whose symbolic interactionist approach to religion in central Africa has given me much food for thought.

**AA:** You again noted that while Africa has been undergoing rapid social change over the past century, no equivalent intellectual engineering has taken place. In a controversial way you contended that there is no such thing as a sociology of religion in Africa, and that it is more appropriate to write about the study rather than the sociology of religion in Africa. What exactly do you mean by this?

**EM:** I mean precisely what I have just said. Take Durkheim's approach to religion. He used his insights to make sense of society and, thereby, formulate an intellectual approach, namely, sociology. You could also take Weber. His studies of religion enabled him to work out with great precision his idea of the rationalisation process which is so central to our understanding of modern society. I see no similar proposal in Africa and this is not for lack of equally brilliant scholars. We simply have not taken the time to go farther than our empirical

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observations allow us to do. But we need to do this, more or less along the lines of Kwame Bediako, who sought to articulate such phenomena with a kind of social structural logic in our history.

**AA:** Is it not ambiguous to suggest that African sociology of religion has never been sociological?

**EM:** It is, but that is because we have not been accurate in our use of words. We have studied religion, but we have not necessarily done it in a sociological manner. Remember Peter Berger's distinction between social problems and sociological problems. Our interest in religion in Africa reflects our social interest in the phenomenon, but not necessarily our sociological interest in the sense of trying to understand what makes religion socially relevant.

**AA:** You have argued that sociology of religion is imposing itself on the study of religion in Africa. Is this not really a contradiction of terms?

**EM:** No, not at all. Curiosity may have killed the cat, but it is also the mother of serious scholarship. Amassing empirical data gets tiresome at some stage. Mountains of data force you to classify, sift through categories, build typologies, etc. In so doing, you begin to seriously engage with society.

**AA:** If you were to receive a generous research grant of \$1 million to revolutionise sociological scholarship and research, what exactly would you do with it?

**EM:** I would probably commission a study on the meaning of 'revolutionising sociological scholarship'! No, seriously, I would encourage younger scholars to revisit everything that has been written about Africa and tease out lines of enquiry

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that were not pursued, but had the potential to bring us closer to truly African forms of knowledge. By 'African' I don't, of course, mean any essential cultural category. Rather, I mean ways of perceiving the world that are fully cognisant of our historical legacy as a modern construct and pursue our freedom forcefully.

**AA:** How would you advise young African scholars to go about doing a sociology of religion in Africa in an age of globalisation where African countries are still caught up in socio-economic and political quagmires? Can we actually teach sociology from an African point of view?

**EM:** These are actually two questions. The first one is easier to answer. The 'age of globalisation' is, of course, shorthand for neo-liberal intolerance that reduces intellectual pursuits to instrumental reason. Young African scholars should not allow their intellectual curiosity to be constrained by the demands of those who say that Africa has more urgent problems to solve. The most urgent task at hand is actually finding out what the most urgent task is. In other words, the social sciences in Africa face the huge task of formulating the problems of Africa, not of finding the solutions. Development aid has the solutions. We need to search for the problem. Like Gadamer said, there are more answers than questions in the world. It is our task to look for these questions. The second question is tough because it sounds like a trap. What does it mean to teach sociology from an African point of view? What is an African point of view? What is a point of view? What will get better from teaching sociology from an African point of view? Our understanding? Our concepts? Our theories? Our continent? Ourselves? Maybe we are faced with a different sort of problem. Maybe the problem is to learn to use the tools of scientific enquiry without these pangs of conscience that keep whispering to us the fine print of the copyrights which some people think their cultures have over science. We need to develop this unconstrained attitude to modern artefacts celebrated by Kwame Anthony Appiah in his analysis of the

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sculpture of the 'man on the bicycle' in his book on Africa in the philosophy of culture.

**AA:** It is really great talking to you again. Many thanks for your attention!

**EM:** You are most welcome!

### **What They Don't Teach You in Graduate School**

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Alice M Nah is a Phd Candidate at the Department of Sociology, National University of Singapore (NUS). She holds a Masters of Social Sciences (Sociology) from NUS. She has conducted research on the Orang Asli, the minority indigenous peoples of Malaysia, and refugee populations seeking asylum in Malaysia. She has published in *Social Identities*, *Geografiska Annaler B*, *Urban Studies*, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography*, and has three book chapters in edited collections. Her Phd thesis concerns policies and practices related to migration in Malaysia.

These are some lessons they don't teach you at graduate school. They are lessons that are hard to communicate within a bounded, structured classroom. They are learnt through experience as a social researcher – by doing, being and interacting. Sometimes they are learnt with pain or trepidation, as you make mistakes, take risks and explore frontiers.

You learn that you are located within an academic community that cuts across time and space. This community is structured through nodes, networks, and

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the production and circulation of specific resources. It has its own social order, rules and hierarchy, and is constituted by connections, both personal and impersonal. Its members speak (and therefore gossip); it has its own intrigue. Its members can be friendly or hostile, generous or selfish, genuine or pretentious, satisfied or disgruntled. There are established norms and standards to maintain – it is therefore a community that maintains boundaries, punishing and rewarding, accepting and rejecting.

You learn that to be effective in this community, you need to be humble and yet discerning. You need to give, for the value of knowledge is in its circulation, not mere possession, and it is fruitless to keep it to yourself. However, you must be wise enough not to share all your secrets to those least grateful. You learn to be wary of those who steal your work, block your progress, and hide opportunities. They may be the ones closest to you; they are often your peers and immediate seniors. They are the ones who prioritize, above all, their own ambitions.

You learn to appreciate scholars who truly believe in your work. They open doors for you; they give you sound advice, constructive feedback, and timely words of encouragement. They tend to be mature scholars who don't see you as immediate competition and who truly believe that you can make a positive contribution, either empirically or to the development of your academic discipline. They are the ones who strengthen you when you are plagued with self-doubt. By their simple acts of kindness, they invest in your life. It is wonderful when this is your supervisor, but you will also benefit from finding other scholars to help and guide you along your way.

You learn that you are in a relatively weak position when you first collect data. You depend on the generosity of gatekeepers and respondents, who have to find time in their busy schedules to meet an unknown, novice researcher. You learn that the hardest part about fieldwork is waiting. Waiting for interview dates, for approvals letters, for people to reply to emails and phone calls. You learn that

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there are three important skills you need as a researcher: how to be nice, how to be patient, and how to listen.

You learn that you become known within the communities that you study, as well as in the ones connected to them. You are observed and talked about; you are known by your questions, responses, action and inaction; by whether you keep your promises and are accountable to the people you examine. You develop a reputation. Many researchers seem to forget that they too, are scrutinized, even as they gaze upon others. Many enter into a community, build relationships for the purpose of extracting data, and then disappear for long periods, only to return for more information and disappear again. They are like uninvited guests who come on their own terms, eat and leave, and boldly come again.

You learn that the most practical research questions are the ones that remain unanswered for actors on the ground – by practitioners, advocates, leaders, government officials, workers, children. You learn that they are often unconcerned about the fancy theoretical arguments you learnt in graduate classes. This, in itself, does not make your quest for theoretical advancement irrelevant, but the most powerful theories are the ones that are relevant to the lives of ordinary people.

You learn the importance of contributing back to the communities, and that this can be done in very simple ways. You can teach, run small group discussions, share your analysis, distribute your writing, introduce new ideas, connect people, share opportunities for further learning, propose names for scholarships, and act on behalf of the suffering. The selfish researchers are the ones who excuse themselves too easily from such action, saying (and believing), ‘I am supposed to remain objective’, but then are ready to speak publicly as high-profile experts when there is media attention, and unashamedly receive huge grants to conduct further studies.

You learn about the political nature of research, speaking and writing – particularly if you live in the milieu that you study. You learn about the

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significance – and irrelevance – of your own words. Scholars who live ‘outside’ or away are relatively sheltered from this. The greater their distance – in space, time, and social standing – the less impact their words have upon own lives. They have greater flexibility about what to write or say, and how and when. Even if their analysis is poor, irrelevant, or just plain wrong, their everyday lives can continue without great difference. They can always make a career change, take on another project, or move on to another topic somewhere else in the world.

Those who are embedded in the social contexts they analyse are directly implicated by their own work. They are both social researchers and commentators; their observations shape society, in greater or lesser form. They receive more immediate feedback. They write for a ‘living world’, a world that happens around them. They know that they have a role to play, and that the only question is whether or not they have the courage to say what needs to be said at the right time.

You learn that you need to grapple with ethics and emotions, and that all the formal training you receive on these are always insufficient in practice. There is a moral burden attached to being a possessor of knowledge – it is greater when the population you study is struggling, and when there are few people who are willing and able to act on their behalf. All social researchers have to answer the same questions: What are my ethical obligations to the people I study? Can I witness their struggle and not do anything? Is it acceptable – not just to the academic community but also to myself – if I use this knowledge only to further my own career goals?

You learn that the academic community is uneasy about bringing emotion and ethics into intellectual work, although this is crucial. Emotions are too unstable, too subjective, and they reduce our credibility. They compromise the dignified tones we use in order to convince our peers that our work is sound. We prefer to leave ethics to theologians and philosophers, and emotions to psychologists and counsellors. Most researchers are anxious to keep ethical

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standards in order to avoid stepping into the same traps as our predecessors – those who (inadvertently) violated the rights of respondents; those who could have acted in the service of colonialism, imperialism, racism or fascism. We are aided in our judgement by guidelines and procedures produced by our institutions. We are forced to think through such matters as we tackle cumbersome paperwork required by bureaucratic ethics committees. At the end of the day, however, we are morally responsible and answerable for our own work.

You learn that you need to discover about yourself as much as you study about others – with insight, your judgement as a social researcher is more sound. You realize that you sometimes defeat yourself. When you encounter new information that challenges your existing schemas, when you find data that contradict your norms and values, your mind acts – almost independently and subconsciously – to suppress this knowledge. You rebel against yourself; you struggle to accept what you have discovered. This is inevitable if you push the boundaries of knowledge. You open yourself up for surprise. If you don't, you cannot progress – you get stuck in a way of thinking. Such knowledge puts you in dilemmas.

You also learn the importance of humility and perseverance. For most people, depth of knowledge is obtained after floundering about for long, anxious periods. You must come to grips with your own ignorance and painstakingly discover terrain already mapped by others before you can make further advancements. You learn that others have already attained leaps in knowledge, and that what you find exciting today has already been discussed for years. You learn to accept your own insignificance, your own irrelevance. But as you gain experience, as you spend years working on the same topic, you learn to master dynamic systems of meaning. You learn the simple art of interpreting the significance of the new data you obtain. You realize that you have developed an instinct, a 'sixth sense', of how a piece of information fits into the overall picture, and are better able to estimate its implication.

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You learn that knowledge changes you, both in terms of how you understand the world, and how you are located in it. You realize, with some surprise, that you are not the same person you were before you began on your quest. You also learn that as you accumulate knowledge, your social position changes. You become more powerful in some ways, and can even be threatening to some. By your learning, you hold latent power – the power to expose or conceal, reveal or deceive. You learn that you are responsible for making choices about what to do with this knowledge.

These are some lessons they don't teach you at graduate school. They are lessons you cannot escape from learning. It is through this learning that you understand who you are, what your role is, and, through your choices, take your place in this world.

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### **Three Months in the Field**

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Thomas Barker is currently a PhD candidate in sociology at the National University of Singapore. Prior to this he earned an MPhil from the University of Birmingham, UK, and degrees in Applied Physics and Indonesian. He has been variously engaged in a range of other projects, most recently a flurry of short film-making, earning screening at the 2006 Singapore Resfest.

By the time this essay is finished I will have been two months in the field, but as I begin to write, only two weeks. I have been asked to write about the experiences of being a young researcher in the social sciences. Having reflected on my situation in the field during this time there are a number of issues that are worth discussing here. Indeed, our field of inquiry seems to be replete with such writing, in the form of fieldwork notes, memoirs and personal reflections. Not to mention how-to guides. I, however, have not read any of these despite being encouraged to do so by my teachers. The closest I have come is reading the biographies of other practitioners in the arts, most recently Orson Welles and David Lynch. Here at least I do not want to talk about the lives of famous men, but about the lives of many, the place of the academic and researcher amongst the social and some broader questions related to our field of sociology/anthropology.

I am writing this in my capacity as a PhD candidate in sociology, currently doing fieldwork in Jakarta. The topic of research was born from a curiosity about the prevalence of so-called 'pirated' films and the way in which they were so pervasive in Indonesian film culture. This became an entry point into a complex

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sociological topic of research that involves the informal economy, consumption and production, capital and the role of the state amongst others. Fieldwork involves extensive participant observation and infiltration of the film markets and networks of Jakarta, surveys and interviews with film consumers and interviews with people in the film industry. As piracy disrupts the connection between production and consumption for the film industry, and hence the cycle of capital, a number of questions emerge pertinent to this process. First, who is behind piracy, how does it operate and where does their money go? Secondly, how does the Indonesian film industry confront this problem, especially given that it is going through a recent resurgence? Thirdly, who does not consume pirated film for reasons other than finance? Through these angles, a detailed understanding of the interests and actors of piracy can be approached.

Neither fieldwork nor the PhD itself is easy. This topic, especially, is challenging and these first two months have not gone to plan. In particular, the quest for knowledge about the pirate industry seeks information from people whose very operations depend on keeping that information to themselves. Moreover the persistent question at the back of my mind asks: Who is this research for? Besides myself, this research that delves into the logic of an illegal economy may only be read and be of any benefit to governments, police and other anti-piracy operations whose mission and politics I do not necessarily agree with. Although I may conceal my informants' identities and prevent individual prosecution, my contribution to knowledge may, however, adversely affect them in a more systematic way. These people are not only reticent towards an outsider, especially one seeking information but there is on my part a persistent question of benefit. This value of knowledge is, nonetheless, at the very heart of the social sciences but there is not always such controversy or challenge in the topics we study.

This leads into a general feeling that I have had whilst researching this topic that it is more like anthropology than sociology. I can see anthropology

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similarly challenged by its desire for knowledge weighed against its intrusion into and exposure of other peoples' lives. It is also the methodologies that I have employed in studying the pirate markets and industry that give this impression. Sustained interaction and socialising, forming friendships, building trust are all established methodologies from anthropology. It reminds me of the appendix in *The Religion of Java* (1960) where Clifford Geertz describes his period of fieldwork. Sociology does not have such a pronounced concern with fieldwork and from the outside seems more concerned with surveys and statistics.

In this understanding of fieldwork as akin to anthropology, I benefitted from two illustrious teachers during the first two years of coursework. Roxana Waterson taught a practical course on ethnographic films, introducing her students to the history and discipline of ethnographic film through film and text but also subjected her students to the technical aspects of film-making. Through the process of making 10-minute biographical documentary we were made more aware of the issues involved in subjecting someone to be studied. Maribeth Erb likewise introduced issues of ethics in academic work through the history of the discipline. The personalised way in which she showed this history reminded us that the anthropologist is a social agent and not outside the context of being studied. Both introduced to their students the critical nature of their work, and showed in a general way how important the role of the researcher is in the social sciences.

This was made possible in a school that has not divided anthropology and sociology into two separate departments. Although valid arguments exist on both sides of the debate, and I do not contend to take any position here, I merely wish to make an observation about the combination of anthropology and sociology in the one department. Studying in a non-Western country (Singapore), the historical division between the disciplines, a product of Western history, makes little sense. The differences between the disciplines are multiple and have changed over time but in a general sense anthropology was traditionally the study of non-Western

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people whilst sociology was the critical study of Western society itself. Once transferred to a non-Western context and after a century, this separation is no longer predominant for, who now is the subject? Both disciplines have universal value and have converged to a large degree, but there are still difficulties in teaching sociology such as described by Sinha & Alatas (2001). It has been a running debate amongst us graduate students about the differences between the two, but I think as a result of the cross-pollination we are academically richer.

If doing fieldwork is more akin to anthropology than sociology, what then of Jakarta in 2008? Jakarta is not the small East Javanese centre of Geertz's anthropology, but a metropolis of over 15 million people, connected through globalisation and consuming products of the post-industrial economy. In this contemporary, urban context the term 'urban anthropology' may better describe this work and Doreen Lee's essay 'Taking the Streets: Activism and Memory Work in Jakarta' (2007) stands out as a recent example. We are not studying the 'traditional' societies of anthropology, that is, communities and societies outside the paradigm of modernity, that offered the anthropologist a largely self-contained society but rather complex, urbanised populations.

For the researcher the methodological problem comes in terms of depth of engagement. For an anthropologist of Geertz's ilk, once in the field he would have had little choice but to be a part of life in the town. Malinowski in the Trobriands is another classic example. However, studying a fringe group in a metropolis as someone born and raised in the city creates additional problems. This shared urbanity has its benefits as in the case of Lee (2007) where she clearly has an affinity with the subjects she studies despite coming from the US. Yet a shared urbanity also means that research could be conducted from the room of a five-star hotel just as it could be from equivalent living conditions to the research subjects. The richness of Malinowski's and Geertz's work comes from their having lived in propinquity with their subjects and the long-term insight gained.

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For me on the other hand, living between different worlds is something that has questioned my own subject position as a researcher.

This points to a change in the underlying social difference between researcher and subject. Previously this difference was racial as anthropology was a product of the racism ingrained in colonialism. Over time and through the process of maturing and self-criticism, this racial stigma has been superseded. It is still hard as a white, Australian male to not be sensitive to this history and to this criticism as I am reminded of my race every day in Jakarta. It is also not without benefit, for being white carries its own advantages in Indonesia due to the generally favourable attitude Indonesians have towards Caucasians. Being white is also difficult for I am conspicuous and arouse suspicion when I start asking questions.

What has quickly become apparent whilst doing fieldwork in Indonesia is that the issue of race is far less salient than that of class. As mentioned above, this does not mean that the issue of race is not there but rather that class confronts the researcher's values which are more than skin-deep. As sociologists have been at pains to show, attitudes towards race are socially constructed and, therefore, can be challenged and deconstructed socially. Class does not have this benefit. Our shared humanity transcends race, but social inequality remains and we retain our individual positions in the relations of production and in the social hierarchy. This has been sharply apparent in the interactions I have had with my subjects. Whilst race and what it seems to represent is initially a point of difference, as time goes by it is class manifested through life opportunity, security of income, education that mark the divide between us. Moreover, this remains largely unarticulated and whatever sympatheses and experiences of my own, my own class-based upbringing has placed me in a privileged position.

It is this question of class that has confronted me intensely whilst conducting research. The difficult realisation that this situation forces upon the individual is the acculturation to the system of class privilege that doing research

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presupposes. Seeing myself in this privileged position in relation to my subjects challenges many of the assumptions and ideas I have myself. The gap in economic conditions and economic security between researcher and subject in this case is acute. To research the poor, itinerant and informal is to confront very clearly my own economic and social privilege and brings into serious question the ethics behind my subjecting them to a research agenda. Whatever ethics clearance I have received from my university cannot address the differences in privilege that differentiate the researcher from his subject.

Reading the work of other sociologists and anthropologists I find this class awareness distinctly lacking. My criticism is that we academics all too often fail to understand and recognise our own class position when we research and write, as we are mostly from the middle and upper classes. The lack of class awareness – of both herself and her subjects – is obvious in Lee's (2007) essay mentioned above. Her essay describes the middle-class student protest movement of 1997–98 that brought down President Soeharto and the way in which they negotiated the streets during the protests. Her essay is elucidating in the way it tells the story of street politics through its practitioners, but at no point does she critically reflect on who those people are. It is not just her shared urbanity that allows her to do this – and I speculate she is also from the city – but more importantly their similar class backgrounds. The lack of class awareness is clear in the way she describes their movement as if it is representative of all street politics in Indonesia. The student protests were spectacular, they did force Soeharto to resign, but they were extremely brief. She says nothing about other political confrontations or activities on the streets, and nothing at all about the very gendered nature of Indonesia's public space. Separating her political agenda, her class bias from her anthropological analysis is difficult.

Although this is an undeveloped critique, and based on my own frustrations whilst doing fieldwork, I think the point is valid and a theme I would like to develop in further work I undertake. We academics still need to be more

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critical of ourselves so as to continually develop the social sciences. The current trend of cosmopolitanism is a perfect example, which says more about the socially and economically privileged position and social circles of its authors than it does about social reality. Indeed, it may be wishful thinking and representative of the emergence of a globally mobile class of people. For the majority of the world's population and my research subjects, global immobility caused by a number of restraints is still the norm.

The additional problem that this raises is the discomfort of subjecting other people to research. Not just the power to study other people but having the institutional backing to do so. It raises many questions about the nature of the institutions that are universities and the very ethical principles they are founded upon. Certainly, there is the training and the humanistic concern that we can bring to the process but this does not necessarily abrogate the premise of research and the relationships it involves. By accepting the burden and privilege of being a researcher and being able to observe and comment on other peoples' lives requires a recognition of that privilege and a sensitive and ethical approach to research. With privilege comes responsibility.

### **Research Ethics**

Like most academic research conducted today, this project had to be approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Research has become increasingly dictated by the demands of bureaucracy, in my case by both my home institution and in Indonesia by the government. Both remind the researcher that research is conducted in a world of risks and interests, and that the research is not purely academic. There inevitably arises conflict between the needs of research and the needs of the university to impose its order on research parameters. The process of pre-fieldwork review was helpful in that it forced me to assess the work I was going to do and to seriously consider some of the risks and conflicts involved

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once in the field. The ethics of review boards and the ethics I have been grappling with above, however, are two very different things.

Ethics review boards, as I had to clear in Singapore, do not address this fundamental issue of privilege. These boards are more concerned with the ethics of risk, and whether the research in question will place the subjects in a position of potential harm. Its second function is to insulate the university from litigation from subjects by placing the research into the realm of legal contract, aka consent forms. The world of consent forms can be a long way away from the reality on the streets, and none of my subjects involved in illegal activity would ever sign any of these forms. A compromise was found by maintaining anonymity throughout.

Additional demands are placed on the researcher by the Indonesian government which asks that all research be approved by the Department of Research and Technology (Ristek) although it is possible to conduct research without this permission. To go through this procedure is to engage the Indonesian bureaucracy across a number of departments in a way that approaches Weberian nightmare. Even after 10 years of *reformasi*, this process is still frustrating and the requirements on arrival in Indonesia can take up to two weeks to complete. In my case, as of the beginning of 2008 this authority had shifted from LIPI, the Indonesian Institute of Sciences who had administered this research for many years, to Ristek. This, however, was not accompanied by any transfer of institutional knowledge and the result was even more excruciating.

Indeed, this situation provides reason to go outside the system. Having this research approval may avoid the authorities from detaining you but it may not guarantee that government departments will give you the information you request. Likewise, ethics approval expressly forbids me from engaging in illegal activity myself. The question that confronts me is not the grey area between what I have agreed on paper and what is done in the field, but rather where is the line between legal and illegal? And how does being witness to illegal activity fit into this

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problem? Studying the illegal, of course, requires some complicity but, again, where is the line drawn?

Research ethics become particularly complicated when who you thought was the girlfriend of your key informant is, in reality, a girl he is grooming for sex work. [should this be made more specific, ie ‘Research ethics became particularly complicated when the lady I thought was the girlfriend of my key informant was, in reality, a girl he was grooming for sex work.’ To state this in general terms assumes that such an event is not unusual in most research projects?] The focus on much of the pre-fieldwork ethics is to ensure that the research poses little or no risk to the participants or informants. However, to be in a situation where a third party is being maltreated, is a different case for the researcher to handle. To interfere in the context under study and to help the girl get out is possibly desirable from the perspective of human rights or human compassion. However to do so would introduce complications into the situation for both herself and me. This is exacerbated by the fact that the girl is 17 years old and behaving petulantly, unaware of what she is really being dragged into. The most I could do was to subtly tell her that her fate was similar to those of a group of Indonesian women on television who had been arrested in Malaysia for illegal sex work. My message, unfortunately, seems not to have got through for she is still with him.

The same informant is a seller of pornography DVDs, and the reason for my association with him, but he is also a young alcoholic. It is, therefore, strange that I have no qualms about him selling pornography, arguably more socially consequential and immoral, whereas I am challenged by his alcoholism. He is an informant because he sells DVDs and this is his primary source of income. Yet when we drink together, either just the two of us or with other DVD sellers, I see the effects the alcohol is having on his health. If this were a purely functional friendship this would not be a problem, but because I can see him descending into this and am concerned about his long-term welfare I feel somehow responsible or

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obliged to do something. Yet, at the same time, I feel trapped by the situation at hand and especially of running the risk of being too moralistic.

Increasingly, I have seen my own work being more concerned with the issue of ethics. As a researcher I have to balance myself between what I believe with the demands of research that necessitates certain conflicts between the demands of that research and what I believe as an individual. There are no hard and fast rules for research and its ethics because each situation develops its own dynamics and vested interests. This has also got me thinking of ethics in a broader way as a topic of further sociological study. This experience so far and the struggle of research have been a very good teacher in this regard. Research is, as everyone tells me, a very difficult and personally challenging process. I had not expected it to challenge me in the way that it has.

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