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Seeking knowledge through a new prism

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THE recent announcement on the setting up of the Institute of Occidental Studies at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and the Dr Mahathir Mohamad Institute of Strategic Thinking at Universiti Utara Malaysia must be regarded as a milestone in Malaysia's intellectual history.

It is an attempt to establish, theorise on, and recreate a system of knowledge production of Europe, the West and that of ourselves.

It is the challenge of knowledge and the revival of an intellectual tradition. Both have to address epistemological problems of theory and of methodology, of perception and of cognition. Both are two sides of the same coin.

The Institute of Occidental Studies, in particular, is an urgent project in the light of centuries of various forms of Western domination and intellectual imperialism.

No, we are not necessarily renouncing the empirical path, nor reinventing modes of knowing. But we cannot deny that our minds are unable to perceive the reality of the world and that our intellectual tools are incapable of understanding information that surrounds our daily life.

It is not an intellectual luxury to engage in the problems of perception and cognition. It is the scholarship of anti-scholarship. It is a challenge to "de-orientalise" knowledge at the individual, academic and political levels, in the light of Edward Said's contention of Orientalism as a discourse.

In order to understand Occidentalism we have to place it against Orientalism.

In Orientalism, Said analyses the various discourses and institutions which constructed and produced the entity called "the Orient".

He contends that without engaging in a discourse on Orientalism, we cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to construct and manage the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.

At the same time, European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself apart from the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self.

In a sense, he argues, Orientalism is a library or an archive of information held together by a family of ideas and a unifying set of values proven in various ways to be effective.

The Occident thus represents the Orient - supplying Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; more importantly, it allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing common characteristics.

The endeavour to study Europe and the West must be carried out with caution so as not to repeat the tradition of Orientalism. We must discard the naive notion of countering Orientalism in the study of Europe and the West; if this study is dominated by our biases, then it will only be a continuation of the tradition of cultural domination in Orientalism.

No, we are not talking about a "genuine" Islamic/Malay/Malaysian/ Asian approach to knowledge, science, culture and politics.

What we mean here is the pursuit of an intellectual tradition of declassifying knowledge and various disciplines - the result of over 500 years of European intellectual history.

Scholars at the institute have to rethink existing theories on and methods employed in cultural and intellectual life.

For example, religion has been marginalised in the social sciences. This is inconsistent with our belief in religion.

Occidental studies have vast ramifications on human sciences covering a wide range of disciplines such as Malay studies, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, literature, history, political science, media studies and the sociology of science and knowledge.

Our notion of the social sciences, for instance, bears the stamp of Orientalism and its Enlightenment genesis. Is there such a thing as "social sciences" in the first place? The discipline is actually a construct of the European understanding of man and society. The result is that our study of the social sciences is largely a continuation of the European experience.

Professor Datuk Syed Hussein Alatas was the earliest among us to demystify the myth of the backward, passive, feminine, weak, eccentric, exotic, sawo matang lazy native.

In him perhaps, we have an early representative of the "Occidentalists," breaking the Orientalist tradition in our intellectual midst.

The forum on the direction of Malay studies held in February this year by the Academy of Malay Studies, Universiti Malaya, and recently, the colloquium on Communication and the Human Sciences organised by the Faculty of Communication and Media Studies and the Centre for Intellectual History and Malay Thought, at the Institute of Knowledge Advancement, Universiti Teknologi Mara, reflect critical concerns over the foundation of such disciplines.

Such probings should not be seen as the antithesis of Orientalism.

The Institute of Occidental Studies and the Dr Mahathir Mohamad Institute of Strategic Thinking will be engaged with a society, a culture and a system which in many respects is different, yet similar, to our own.

In probing the thoughts of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, one finds a discourse of both East and West, of the geography, history, culture, economics, science, politics and technology of Europe and the West and that of Asia, the Muslim world, the Malays and the South; their collusion and co-operation.

The Prime Minister's speech during the recent UMNO assembly was certainly not his first on European history. He discussed it in his book *The Malay Dilemma*.

Both Europe and non-Europeans - known as the "Other" in Orientalist discourse - share a common humanity.

There are many affinities on the historical and cultural levels. Both have stereotypes of each other, both commonly use certain words or concepts which evoke different, perhaps opposite meanings altogether.

Words and concepts such as "revolution," "democracy," and "nationalism" court different responses, evoke different associations and traditions and allude to a different history.

So we have to ask ourselves: why study Europe and the West? Why is European history and Western civilisation significant to us and our quest for progress?

There are certainly strategic, political, economic and cultural interests in studying other peoples and civilisations.

But there is more to it. The problem of not knowing our "Other" selves gives rise to the plight of not knowing ourselves, our thoughts, cultures, religions, history and even our souls because we have always been looking at ourselves from the prism of the "Other".

Hence, our history does not belong to us. It belongs to Europe and the West.

Yet European history is also our history. It is world history and the history of Islam for Orientalism cannot censor the contributions of Islamic civilisation to the West, which culminated in the Enlightenment of which modernity is its child.

Admittedly, our sources of knowledge about Europe come from popular culture. This mental map is drawn from the images and visual constructs of Europe and the West which do not represent reality.

If the West is blind to us, we are also blind to them.

The emergence of the idea of "the West" was central to the Enlightenment, which was very much a European affair. It was characterised by Reason, Empiricism, Science, Progress, Individualism, Tolerance, Freedom, Uniformity of human nature, Secularism and Universalism.

Such features are unique to Europe but not universal for mankind. And we owe it to ourselves to understand ourselves in relation to the uniqueness (and not the universalism) of Europe and the West.

New forms of political, academic and policy discourses and metanarratives by the likes of Fukuyama, Habermas and Foucault arose in the past five decades.

The newly formed Institute of Occidental Studies and the Dr Mahathir Mohamad Institute of Strategic Thinking should not ground their projects on any oppositional matrix (that of placing Orientalism diametrically opposite Occidentalism) but should acknowledge the intertwined histories of Europe and the rest of the world.

Both institutes would have to look for the best scholars keen to venture beyond their specialised disciplines.

Multi-disciplinary scholars are not good enough. What is crucial are students and scholars who value the fluidity of knowledge and acknowledge the limitations of compartmentalising it.

The Dr Mahathir Mohamad Institute of Strategic Thinking may need to have a programme on Occidental Studies. Similarly, the Institute of Occidental Studies may need to include the thought systems of Mahathir and of the Malays.

We do not want to be like Bernard Lewis' The Man in the Baghdad Cafe - culturally disoriented, intellectually confused and historically disillusioned. His consciousness is transformed, perhaps some would say dislocated. While experiencing Western culture, at the same time he is hostile to it. He is a stranger to himself. He needs the West to represent him.

The scholar of the Occident and Mahathir's thought bridges the rejection of orientalist thinking and the denial of the differences between Europe, the West and the non-Western world.

What is needed is an evaluation of such differences. The scholar's project cannot be a continuation of history for it merely reinforces the study of Orientalism. He must not wait for the Orang Putih to tell him what to think, how to think and when to think.

As it is, we are already poor at theorising, perhaps due to a misplaced conviction that the function of theory itself is irrelevant to national and industrial needs.

The scholarship that is to emerge from the endeavours of the two new institutes must recognise the value of theorising.

Our weakness at theorising only strengthens and further empowers those who study and represent us. But it is not easy to move away from Orientalist thinking embedded in our subconscious.

"The relationship between the Occident and the Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony and is quite accurately indicated in the title of K.M. Panikkar's classic Asia and Western Dominance," wrote Said in Orientalism.

It is time the native spoke for himself.

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