

# Merdeka and the captive mind

**I**N the early 1970s, Professor Syed Hussein Alatas spoke on the captive mind on several occasions – one in Kuala Lumpur, the other in Zurich and on two occasions in Australia. These were preceded by the paper titled *The Captive Mind in Development and Planning* in 1969.

The main idea behind the paper was the influence of imitation thinking on our conception of planning and development.

In the course of four years since the 1969 paper, he found that the captive mind has clearly become “a very serious problem of higher education in the entire developing region.” Some 50 years have passed. The condition has not changed.

At that time, there were three universities in the country and three institutes of higher learning which eventually became universities at different times.

Now the number of public universities have increased to some 20. And there are more than 30 private universities in the country.

In a 1974 paper, Syed Hussein discussed the phenomenon of the captive mind and remedial steps that can be taken.

It would still be useful for us to walk through what a captive mind is, much or all of it resonates what our universities are.

The following defines the captive mind:

- \* Ways of thinking in the fields of sciences and contemporary knowledge dominated by western thought in an imitative and uncritical manner.
- \* Is uncreative and incapable of raising original problems.
- \* Is incapable of devising an analytical method independent of current stereotypes.
- \* Is incapable of separating the particular from the universal in science and thereby properly adapting the universally valid corpus of scientific knowledge to the particular local situations.
- \* Is fragmented in outlook.
- \* Is alienated from the major issues of society.
- \* Is alienated from its own national tradition, if it exists, in the field of its intellectual pursuit.
- \* Is unconscious of its own captivity and the conditioning factors making it what it is.
- \* Is not amendable to an adequate quantitative analysis but can be studied by empirical observation.
- \* Is a result of Western dominance upon the rest of the world.

These are not conclusive. Syed Hussein also explained that one can still find uncreative, imitative, fragmented and alienated minds in the West and anywhere in the world.

However, the counterpart of the captive mind does not exist in the West.

In the 1974 paper, he delved into “the conceptual repertoire of the kind of social sciences that should tackle Asian societies.”

Confining to the field of history as representing the social sciences and the humanities, Syed Hussein cited that a scholar of history assimilates the modern techniques of historiography developed in the West. The techniques possess general universal validity.

He asserted that if a European historian got his facts wrong on Asian history, the captive Asian historian was able to correct him.

But what the Asian historian has not done is the reappraisals of the fundamental presuppositions of historical interpretations.

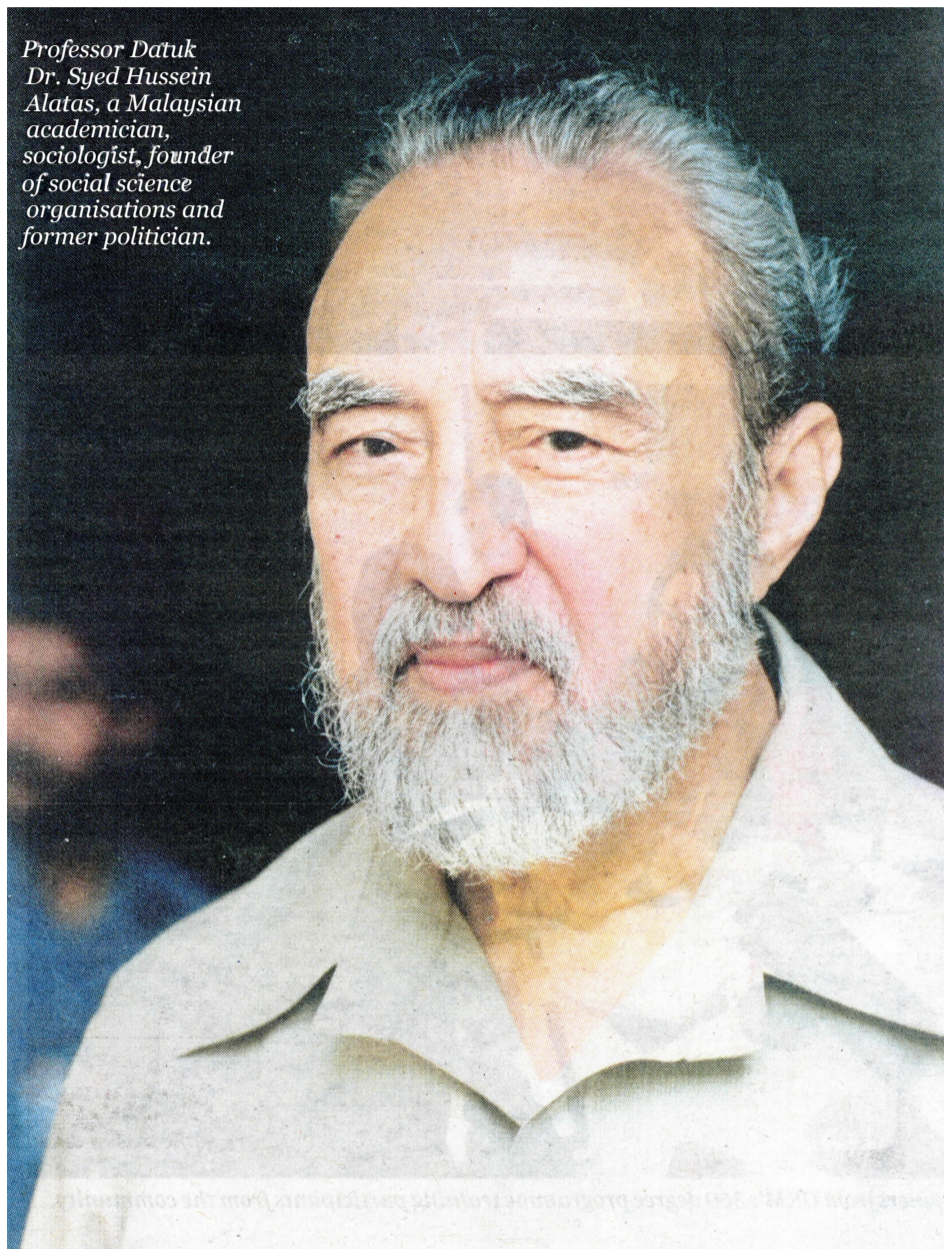
One instance refers to Southeast Asian history. It is generally viewed that Western colonialism in Southeast Asia has been a factor that introduced the region to the age of modernisation.

Western colonialism, according to Syed Hussein, had also introduced science and technology to the



**A MURAD  
MERICAN**

*Professor Datuk  
Dr. Syed Hussein  
Alatas, a Malaysian  
academician,  
sociologist, founder  
of social science  
organisations and  
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To many of us in the universities, and the intelligent laity at large, we take the above as a fact.

A Malaysian social scientist or historian may be critical of the little details of the history of colonialism in the region.

But to quote Syed Hussein "... as far as the wider issues of history are concerned, he is unaware of them. His mind operates with the stock of historical knowledge acquired from the Western tradition to which he has been exposed. He does not raise new problems while the opportunity for doing it is there."

On the other hand, his study of the history and sociology of colonialism in Southeast Asia revealed that Western colonialism was a retarding factor in the assimilation of modern science and technology from the West.

In an interview with him in early 2000, he gave the examples of Thailand and Japan (in East Asia).

Syed Hussein spoke of constructive imitation. Imitation saves times and energy and desirable to be adopted and assimilated by the society concerned, both in the realm of artefacts and mentifacts.

Constructive imitation, he stressed, is a law of social life. The essence of his argument is consciousness. And this is utterly critical for academics and scholars who lead taught and thought.

A constructive imitation, therefore, is

characterised, among others, by a conscious and rational choice; considers the problems, if any, around the adoption of the new item; increases the understanding around the object for which the new item is meant; and it enters into the collective value system.

The Malaysian academic who is vehemently opposed to colonialism may yet be captive minded.

The captive mind is a phenomenological concept, which can be associated with any political, ideological or social system.

What defines the phenomenon is the state of intellectual bondage and dependence on an external group through popular, intellectual and organisational production and orientation.

Again we have to be reminded of the notion of value free or value neutral social science. We must make a distinction between legitimate value judgment and disguised partiality.

Our ways may not be the best ways. Revisiting the problems in Malaysian history and Merdeka in its 62nd year, have we identified our problems independently and asked the right questions?

The writer is a professor at ISTAC-IUM, and the first recipient of the Honorary President Resident Fellowship at the Perdana Leadership Foundation. Email him at [muradmerican@gmail.com](mailto:muradmerican@gmail.com)