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Books and Boundaries

By Dr Claude Alvares
Editor, Other India Press

Abstract

The number of books printed is today often seen by publishers, government and intellectuals as an uncontested and automatic indicator of a society's movement upward in the civilisational scale. A critical view, however, might ask whether the thousands of books produced and sold in Korea or India today provide knowledge or actually distract from it. If books do little more than reinforce intellectual dependence, and if the international trade in books is largely the sale of borrowed knowledge, it is time to ask whether knowledge itself is not in need of a theory of liberation. What would be the possible range of tools available for rescuing knowledge from the present tyrannies that lord it over the printed word and for ensuring that it is truly global in terms of its origins and inspiration?

More than thirty years ago, in 1974 to be precise, I found myself transplanted from Bombay to the Netherlands almost by accident. For reasons of subsistence, I accepted an academic appointment at a Dutch University where my professors asked me to work on the politics of knowledge. At the time, the academic world was already aware that the Francis Bacon dictum, 'knowledge is power' could also be stood on its head. In fact, there were by the time in the literature any number of learned papers probing the idea that 'power is knowledge', that power decides knowledge or what is knowledge, and that the notion of 'objective knowledge' was little more than a piece of deceptive fiction.

This development of the critique of established knowledge was restricted in its scope to the influence of class on the construction of knowledge within individual societies – especially the extremely stratified societies of Europe. In my dissertation – which was published later under the title, *Decolonising History* – I set out to apply the 'power is knowledge' proposal to the status of

knowledge generated by civilizations who now found themselves transported as suddenly into another hierarchy of power: the colonizers and the colonized; rich nations and poor; advanced and backward.

Those were the years of development and development theories galore, and one of the major convictions of the Western countries was that we in the rest of the world – with the exception perhaps of Japan – were really bereft of the capacity for knowledge. Some of the theories being circulated even proposed that we were incapable of knowledge or technology due to some genetic causes. Others hinted at features of our cultures that actually impeded the growth of secular or material knowledge. Still others claimed we were too deeply into spiritual knowledge which they felt is really of little practical use in the matter-of-fact world of modern, consumer-oriented societies whose sole encounter with the spirit is limited to the bottles of liquor they purchase from duty free shops at airports.

At a conference that I helped organize in 2005 in Malaysia, (recently demised) Prof. Seyyed Hussein Alatas who inaugurated the meeting, made a sarcastic reference to the media-created notion of the 'K-economy'. He said:

'Suddenly, a couple of years ago, overnight, the term 'K-economy' began to be used. Why? Because the Prime Minister used it. The media, ever ready to beat the drums, started using the term. Within a day, the term K-economy was everywhere, on the TV, in the newspapers, everywhere. What is the meaning of this term, K-economy? K stands for 'Knowledge'. Why suddenly Knowledge Economy? Can there be any economy without knowledge? Everything has to be planned with knowledge. What then is the distinctive nature of K-economy? Nothing.

'If you want to periodise in terms of economic history, for heaven's sake use a term that is really a term of periodisation. For instance, if you want to use the term 'computer economy' as a term for an economy based on the use of computers, that is appropriate. But K-economy means nothing. Just because it was invented in the West, it was taken over lock-stock-and-barrel without any critical enquiry. The purpose of introducing such terms from abroad is probably in the interest of domination. Because the moment you introduce the term K-economy, it is a tool of domination. You are made to feel you do not have enough 'K'. You must depend on them for more 'K' and so it becomes a mode of domination.'

The origins of this conviction of dramatic differences in the capacity for knowledge between the West and the Rest burst forth, as both Ivan Illich and Gustavo Esteva have pointed out, with the 1949 inaugural speech of President Harry Truman which introduced – for the first time in the history of the human race – the notion of ‘developed’ and ‘underdeveloped’ societies.

We are all familiar with the phenomenon of extremely normal, healthy people who go to visit a doctor for a physical examination and who are overnight transformed into patients for the rest of their life when the doctor tells them they have a problem with their heart or some other organ.

In the same manner, Truman’s introduction of the terminology of ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’ altered fundamentally the politics of knowledge and by one fell stroke devalued the traditions of knowledge in every part of the world in favour of those operating in the developed, mostly American, world. Truman indicated America’s superiority was in the domain of scientific and technical knowledge – accumulated ironically because of World War II – which he felt the rest of mankind lacked and therefore needed. By the time he left the American presidency, his perception had been expanded to claim that the rest of humankind were in some real sense inferior human beings or societies as well.

As a result, our self-perceptions were fatally damaged: we would see ourselves – civilizations of forty centuries – as deficient, incomplete and inferior. Our political leaders even welcomed this notion of ‘backwardness’: it brought foreign funding and loans. Even now, five decades later, we find ourselves unable to get out of the ring of power, influence and domination created by the terminology and definition of development and its most significant constituent, knowledge.

So for the first time in human history we have come to have a new attitude towards knowledge, by accepting that it could be placed in a sort of hierarchy. While the secular, modern knowledge manufactured by Western societies is viewed by many as universally valid and to be considered the only knowledge worth studying, the rest is in some way, even if valid, now out-of-date valid, in

the realm of archaic or past science. Perhaps, the word 'hierarchy' itself is not quite appropriate, because what we are talking about here is one system of knowledge overwriting and overriding other valid knowledge systems (including cultural ideas) that people have been persuaded need to be discarded or restricted to old people who flatly reject the benefits of modern consciousness.

It was as a sort of revolt against this ridiculous but widespread perception, that I set out, while writing my doctoral dissertation, to argue the conviction that the ability to live by knowledge, to be directed by a universe of symbols, was a fundamental characteristic of human societies everywhere and that no culture or society was available at any time or place that showed it could function – or could have functioned – without knowledge. This is because human beings, though still driven by instinct in some ways, are mostly controlled by a system of coded symbols called culture which in most cases has proven to be as effective in controlling human behaviour as instinct is in the animal world.

It was fortunate that I did my dissertation on this controversial subject within the portals of a Western university because it was not too difficult to prove with examples from its own vast library that the Western academic tradition of reporting on other civilisations itself was seriously bankrupt and based on perceptions of other societies that had little or no empirical basis.

I remember that it was while doing this thesis that I was able to study the work of the Korean scholar Jeon Sang-woon who had written on the history of science and technology of Korea and whose book with that title in fact appeared in 1974. Before the book appeared, Koreans themselves believed that the ability to do science and technology was a foreign import to their country. In fact, most did not even know that already in 1400, Korea had probably the most advanced astronomical observatories in the world.

For those who may not know or have forgotten, some quite atrocious books were written at the time by Westerners that reflected this appalling state of Western knowledge about the rest of the world. Volumes of writings on

Africans showed them as savages and sex maniacs or sub-human, sub-intelligent human beings. A discussion of this is available in detail in *The Blinded Eye*. No one in his or her right mind would republish those texts now, not even in fun. Scholarship has shown that the Western heroes of the past centuries – including Hegel, Thomas Jefferson and others – were fundamentally racists whose literature should be locked up rather than taught to the bright young people who enter university for wisdom and knowledge.

I am part of a civil society project called Multiversity which is at the present moment engaged in drafting courses that are non-Eurocentric for the purpose of undergraduate studies in non-Western universities. I have found a good deal of discussion on the issue of Eurocentric bias in university studies particularly among African scholars, some of whom have raised a serious challenge to the teaching of Eurocentric social sciences in their university.

But that is not the point of this paper on ‘books and boundaries.’ Many European scholars do critique Eurocentrism themselves and try to overcome it in their own domains, even if they are a very small group and without much serious influence.

I am attracted instead by a more pervasive, less overt form of imposition which the American Cherokee Indian, Ward Churchill, dubbed ‘white studies’ and the impact this has had on books within the context of the debate on knowledge in different civilisations which I want to focus on in this conference on civilization and peace.

Ward Churchill – as an American Indian – asked in his seminar paper, ‘White Studies’ why as a student he was being forced to look at the world through the glasses of America’s white culture which, according to him, was not a normal or only way of looking at either human beings or nature in the first place. In any case, he found he could not take Western social sciences seriously since he did not share their assumptions.

Churchill pointed out that any person doing higher education today was doing so from the stand point of ‘white studies’. In other words, the moment we entered academia anywhere in the world, we had no choice but to

research and work the social sciences using the categories provided by 'white studies'. Therefore, you could do black studies or Chinese studies, or ethnic studies, but you could not ask why you could not do 'white studies' because the entire framework of modern academic knowledge assumed the framework of 'white studies' as a universal, within which all other studies had to find their standing.

The result of this rather depressing incorporation of academics globally within the framework of 'white studies' has been the generation of a world view that has facilitated the expansion of 'white studies' at the same time that it has enfeebled those efforts that sought to get out of this historical situation of intellectual dependence.

The international book trade reflects this grim reality in every aspect. What is to be sold and what is to be read are now decided, we are told, globally. However, everyone acknowledges that this is a false statement and that the principal trade originates almost exclusively from the Western publishing industry which actively promotes the preoccupations of the 'white studies' regime. There is actually a war out here, with powerful countries still doing their utmost to ensure intellectual dominance.

The result is there for all to see and I encountered it here during my last visit in Seoul as well when I visited the Kyobo bookstore. The so-called international sections of the bookstore I found were completely filled with imports from Western publishers. The managers of the bookstore were actively displaying the enslavement of their minds. But why blame them when people at university provided the lead in these matters? Western academia had won the war. We never in fact knew there was one.

In part, this is the practical manifestation of the centre/periphery debate, the baseless asymmetry of intellectual production. I have not found in Western bookstores any great space devoted to Korean or Indian books, because these are not considered as being of any value to 'white studies'. In his recent book, *The Argumentative Indian*, Amartya Sen has pointed out that when he

was at Harvard in the 1980s, all the books on India at the famous Harvard coop bookstore were displayed under the section, 'religion'.

To my mind, it is simply absurd to study sociology based on sociological books produced in the UK or the US whose societies have precious little in common with ours. Yet, in country after country including Korea and India, the entire social science industry continues to be dominated by the pre-occupations of 'white studies'. Professors indulge in elaborate manipulation and a great amount of intentional and intellectual gymnastics to ensure that the imported models, both in terms of theory and content, are made applicable to our societies. Any new idea, howsoever demented or simplistic, simply because it originates either the US or France, becomes the subject for research or a Ph.D. The entire academic circus is nothing more than a clever circus in which our intellectuals and academics make a salary by living off the output of other people's brains.

As booksellers, in fact, we have had to face an acute problem of book selection: since the majority of academics from the non-Western world merely regurgitate and vomit concepts and categories wholly imported from the West, what worth is there in selling books produced by such writers? Why go for a carbon copy of a carbon copy of the original? At the Other India Bookstore, we had little interest either in the copy or the original. Faced with this dilemma, we decided to focus on books that reported on fresh or first-hand learning and experience, whether related to health, organic farming, ecology or learning. In ten years of selling books, we found we could safely drop academic literature from our catalogues entirely.

As the social scientist finds that Asian societies cannot be fit into the elegant, homogenous, theoretical models purportedly governing western society, he/she is driven eventually to the conclusion that there is something wrong or chaotic with our own societies and they are deficient in some way, either due to sorry elements in our culture or our genes. Development is the means by which we fill up these deficiencies with categories developed by Western societies which are seen as the norm for universally accepted human behaviour.

The final direction the enterprise takes is to examine those features of Western societies which presumably make the West what it is and then try and introduce those features into our societies without examining at any given moment whether these features are desirable or socially applicable or meaningful. Or whether they are not in fact profound pathologies. In fact, substantial numbers of people in non-Western societies – whose heads are still on their shoulders and who are not mesmerized by the superficial glitter of Western societies – are quite convinced that these societies are in fact mentally and spiritually ill, much less in a position to provide norms for others.

This assumption – that ‘white studies’ is universal social science – in fact is the basis for the continuing international trade in social science literature which is naturally always one-way, from centre to the periphery. To be like the successful West, we presumably need to drink deeply from Western literature. The structure of this international book trade does not reflect any true global or dialogical character. It is merely a continuation of the unsolicited trade established during the colonial period when the countries of Asia continued to be involuntary recipients of European merchandise. A one-way street is not a dialogue. You can have a dialogue only if you have something to say yourself and not if you are abjectly on your knees in front of the other side.

The Other India Bookstore was started in 1986 to see if the ordinary people and activists of India were as intellectually colonized as the intellectuals and academics in their universities. The bookstore started by imposing a ban on the import and sale of books from the US or the UK, traditionally the largest exporters of books in India, particularly those dealing in higher education.

Besides the ban, we also ensured at the same time import of attractive books from Africa and several Asian countries including Malaysia and the Philippines. We were surprised to discover that we could sell all these imported volumes without any problems. As a bookstore we created a unique niche for ourselves for ensuring complete intellectual independence from Western academic centers and publishing houses, importing books from countries that had never been able to sell their books in India and specializing in certain areas like promoting all the literatures generated by the people of

the region of Goa and finally promoting the enormous literature generated by the activist, non-commercial or NGO sectors within the country.

For our successful efforts in this direction we were recognized nationally by the Federation of Indian Publishers and Booksellers as the 'most unique book store' in India. We were academics, not businessmen or traders. We wished to make a point and we made it without intending to be successful or even knowing that by doing so we were actually far ahead in working out the themes that have come to move the Global Forum at which I am speaking today.

I will readily concede that small enterprises like the Other India Bookstore cannot dream of making the dramatic reversals in the present flow of information or subvert the present international system so that it effectively reflects the intellectual imagination and creativity of the people from Asia or Africa. That is an idealist enterprise which must forever continue to attract the energies of organizations like the Global Forum, UNESCO, etc. I am indeed happy to report that my last visit to Korea for a discussion on this subject was in fact supported by the Korean Council for UNESCO.

But the external climate is changing in our favour as well. Today countries like China and Korea are once again reversing the trends in the flow of goods: so called developing countries in fact now generate 39% of world exports compared to two or three percent even 30 years ago. However, this reality is not being reflected in the corresponding transformation of the regime of social sciences. Korea moves up to position 11 from position 12 in 2005 as a leading exporter of merchandise, but for its social science, its thinking on education or child development, uses irrelevant, borrowed, outdated models and books from the US. It cannot be that these countries have become global producers but that their academic and higher education departments continue to work largely with borrowed knowledge or be governed by foreign social science models.

With the added possibilities made available through the Internet today, there is enormous scope for ensuring that all this changes, that bookstores

today in Asia have more diverse titles than they could boast of earlier. When we first commenced our work, the international flow of information from the West was so dominating and asphyxiating that, let alone having access to the books produced in non-Western countries, we had no idea even of authors or titles or publishing houses.

It is only when we physically visited countries like the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Uganda, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, etc., that we came to know for the first time who were the authors and publishers. We got access to catalogues and prices. Thereafter, we were able to import some titles. That is no longer the situation nowadays when most publishers, even from Africa, have their own websites listing their titles and one can negotiate, and what is equally important, ensure payment through the Internet for books ordered.

The Other India Bookstore model is today a much easier model of a bookstore to implement than when we first started and if booksellers are not inclined to bring for their customers and clients the true intellectual creations of people from all the countries of the world but insist instead on continuing to be a passive and mindless conduit for the volumes and remainders of powerful Anglo-Saxon publishers, then they should be persuaded to get into some other business. It cannot be the bookseller's response that he does not have the necessary information. That is no longer an adequate defence and platforms like the Global Forum should make it a point to assist booksellers with the best of literature produced from different countries. It is sometimes difficult to locate good books except with the assistance of local people.

Otherwise, it is conceivable that in the near future the printed book trade – as we know it – may rapidly decline. This is because the Internet is a far quicker means of getting books – and literature – that is also sometimes without any cost whatsoever. A number of scholars now directly share their output on the Net. This makes circulation of their ideas more effective. The Internet is generating huge volumes of words and bringing in through the blogs and other Internet formats voices that are scholarly and non-scholarly, creative and pedestrian and so on. This is going to completely transform, if it

has not already, the focus of people's attentions and their approach to words in the near future.

Because of these developments, we now have a major opportunity to delink from the impositions of the 'white studies' regime, if we are serious about this task.

For the book, as we know it, has always appeared in a finite boundary, symbolised by its cover, sometimes even closed with cellophane. What happens when this restricting practice gives way to the new methods of organizing, obtaining and disseminating information that transcend all such physical boundaries. Look at the reactions of publishing houses to the proposals of Google and Amazon dotcoms to scan and put up the literature of the world for everyone to read!

Even the textbook – the mainstay of many bookshops – will shortly undergo changes in order to meet the demands of enhanced speed and continuous obsolescence of data. Utilizing the facilities available including scanner, xerox machine, spiral binding, etc., students and those dealing with higher education can now entertain the idea that the textbook can be tailor-made for every course or generated at the end of every course. One year's students may even be asked to prepare textbooks for the next year's course. So if you are bothered by the fact that imported textbooks are costly, and in addition, inappropriate or irrelevant, create your own temporary textbooks. There is no law of learning or science or religion that requires that textbooks should be the same year after year.

For too many years we have chained ourselves to the idea that knowledge is a one-way street, that its crystallized, printed form is its all-important, defining mark and that the printed textbook should be the basis for study by those who seek that knowledge. In doing so, we have petrified knowledge and rendered it dead and sterile, most often unrelated to reality or circumstances and very often *distracting* from the real purposes for which we are associated with knowledge. Mahatma Gandhi is a good leader to follow here: he wrote an autobiography, but labelled it, *My Experiments with Truth*. The truth is not out

there, in a fixed format, packaged by Western social scientists. It is created anew with every experience. That is the sole reason why civilizations differ from each other. If God or providence had intended all human beings to have one single, homogenous culture, he/she would have certainly ordered the planet in the necessary manner to achieve that goal. What providence did never intend, why should we allow American 'white studies'?

Multiversity is a project of the Other India Bookstore (and Citizens International, Malaysia). So while the bookstore continues to sell and publish books of use to people on the planet, Multiversity concentrates its attention on ensuring that the same books (and others) are also available freely on the Internet. This Multiversity does through www.multiversitylibrary.com, where you can download freely the books as well as articles of major writers, thinkers and academics from Asia, Africa and South America.

But there are other sites as well – including www.gutenberg.com, www.soilandhealth.org and www.arvindguptatoys.com – which allow free downloads of hundreds of useful books. The free sharing of ideas, words, music, film is taking wings, transcending forever the boundaries in which these media were conventionally enclosed. But are we willing to fly? Will the real dialogue between people finally commence? Or will globalisation become the giant web in which we find we are all forever trapped as victims? Only the next generation will tell that story.

(Ends)

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See also my earlier paper, 'Checking Globalisation: Some Tricks from the Book Trade' on this subject of imbalances in the distribution of books worldwide at <http://www.asiacultureforum.org/book/01program.html>

See also:

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