

Academic Musings on Globalisation and 'Local' Relevancy: A Step in the Right Direction?

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ABSTRAK

Dalam era pasca Perang Dingin isu globalisasi telah menarik banyak perhatian golongan akademik di negara Dunia Ketiga, khususnya mengenai kesan globalisasi terhadap gunatenaga dan peluang pekerjaan. Dalm hal ini, kadar pengangguran yang tinggi di kalangan graduan sains sosial daripada institusi pengajian tinggi awam (IPTA) di Malaysia telah menonjolkan soalan kesesuaian kursus-kursus yang diajar di institusi tersebut. Namun, pandangan bahawa globalisasi dan persaingan di peringkat antarabangsa akan menyebabkan konteks sains sosial mungkin dikompromikan adalah tidak berasas. Makalah ini membincang isu yang menjadi kebimbangan dan bertanyakan sama ada sains sosial itu sendiri atau ahil-ahli sains sosial yang merasa terancam?

ABSTRACT

In the post Cold War epoch the issue of globalisation has attracted much attention from academics in the Third World. Of particular concern is the impact of globalisation on labour and job opportunities. In this respect high unemployment among social science graduates from public institutes of higher education in Malaysia has brought to the forefront the question of relevancy of courses taught there. Yet the view that globalisation and international competitiveness may compromise the context of the social sciences may be misplaced. This paper discusses the issues of concern and asks whether it is social science or social scientists who are at stake.

I

The world braces itself for the possible fallout of the pre-emptive strike against Sadaam Hussein particularly when a consensus on the matter hardly exists among the Arab nations and the Islamic world as a whole. Sections of academics in Southeast Asia, particularly those in the social and human sciences, are musing over a different issue. Concern over high graduate unemployment has led to a questioning of the relevancy of social science courses taught at universities.

Does unemployment among social science graduates indicate that courses presently taught in social science faculties at public institutions of higher education are inappropriate? Are the courses out of sync with the market? Should the courses taught reflect the 'local' situation – providing students with insights into their societies – or should they obey the dictates of the market? These were among the main concerns of participants at the workshop on 'International Competitiveness and Local Relevance' organised by the School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia on August 24, 2002.

This is not the first time that the question of relevancy in education has been raised. In post-imperial states in Asia and Africa education plays a pivotal role in the modernisation process, transforming the former colony into a nation-state. Thus issues such as curriculum, the medium of instruction, the pragmatic needs of the state, and the balance to be struck between science and the humanities, have always been critical. As policy instruments of the state, education serves to establish the necessary cultural basis of political legitimacy.

The Cold War period had made it possible for client states in the region to go about their business of governance quite unperturbed for 30 years. Following the end of the Cold War, globalization has brought forth new challenges in almost the entire gamut of state affairs. The outcome of political choice by the major industrial powers – in particular the United States of America – globalisation now knocks on the door of post-imperial states in the name of economic liberalization and 'good governance'. The modernisation goals that formed national plans and policies now face new challenges. In this regard the close relation that prevailed between politics and development in most of the postcolonial states finds itself coming under new strains. A legacy of colonial rule, this link between politics and economics were not severed following independence.

Globalisation is seeking to sever the relationship between politics and development and through it push politics into the background. The mantra 'the market knows best' by working to determine the matrix for the allocation of scarce resources is hegemonic; as in seeking to consolidate the capitalist world market, it also secures the pecking order of states in the international political economy.

In such a scenario the ability of a state to respond to the challenges of the 21st century is not unrelated to the manner in which it positions itself with regards to economic globalisation and the neo-liberal onslaught. Apart from policy and decision makers, academics too have voiced concern over the implications of globalisation as the participants at this workshop/conference attest. In this sense the workshop/conference too, located unemployment among social science graduates from public institutes of higher education as one more manifestation of globalisation. In short, globalisation, the market, and pressure to be internationally competitive, is deciding the agenda for education in developing countries.

Using the present unemployment among social science graduates from public universities as a yardstick the issue of the relevancy of courses currently offered to students in social science faculties accordingly was the major concern. Implicit here is the assumption that if levels of unemployment among social science graduates is anything to go by it would indicate that what they have been taught is not what the market really wants. The participants thus came out in defense of the 'local'. That is, the task of creating graduates attractive to today's global market place must not jeopardise social science's commitment to the local. Thus, it was not surprising that this gave the conference/workshop an air of benevolence.

This notwithstanding, questions on what 'local' or 'indigenous' relevancy stood for was not clearly spelled out. The theatre of operations of the social sciences is particular historical spaces politically embodied in states. The view that globalisation and the pressure for international competitiveness is affecting a shift towards a new cosmopolitanism as Peter Gowan argues in 'Neoliberal Cosmopolitanism' (*New Left Review* 11 Sept/Oct 2001), is obvious enough. However, to infer from that that globalisation will also undermine the context which give social sciences their relevancy is another matter.

This is not the place to go into a discussion on the politics or sociology of globalisation, but suffice to say that the simulacra of the consumer culture attendant on the phenomenon of globalisation has a liberating effect. It privileges the consumer and places the individual at the center of history. To which end it also seeks to challenge all other dominant discourses and ideologies. However, in the wake of September 11, 2001 such promise would be misplaced. What the world is presently witnessing is an assertion of western albeit American ideological hegemony, which many thought had ended with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. (The present war against terror led by the United States is one clear indication of this trend.) Nations and states are already protesting against this development in international relations.

What we are witnessing is a race between globalisation and 'western' political dominance, each seeking to define the world order. The outcome of the race is still unclear, but to be sure the concern that globalisation or the campaign to be internationally competitive would make historical spaces – viz., the context of the social sciences -irrelevant is misplaced for two reasons.

Firstly, the growing dominance of the market can and will work to change the character of post-imperial nation-states. However, this is not the same thing as saying that the continued existence of the state is at stake. The state will almost certainly continue to be a feature of the geopolitical landscape. In so far as this is the case, states will therefore continue to secure their legitimacy. In this respect policies and strategies related to state identity and history must prevail. Hence, social science and social scientists will therefore continue to be relevant. The continued existence of the state as a political form demands or requires it. In this sense the musings about social science relevancy and the importance of the

'local', 'indigenous' – by which it is understood to mean historical spaces – is not only misplaced but also an unnecessary political rear guard action on behalf of the nation-state.

Secondly, it is well known the contradictions inherent to nation-building ensure both the nation and the nation-state are problematic. The nationalist project on which it depends for sustenance is an ongoing project – something that cannot end. Thus giving the nation the character of an ideal, which cannot be realised. (See Balibar, E. 2002. *Politics and the Other Scene*, see also Balibar, E. and Wallerstein, I. 1991. *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*.) Thus, to have social science courses centered on the nation is something that cannot be realized for the simple reason that the nation itself is constantly changing, which means that together it would work to make the social sciences dynamic in character. From this perspective there is really no such thing as the 'local' 'indigenous', only particular historical spaces which are changing in form and character if not quite spatially too, as Arjun Appadurai (1996) would argue in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*.

If this much may be asserted with certainty about the state and the role and place of social science, how then may the present state of unemployment among social science graduates from public universities be explained? It is suggested that attempts to understand this problem must take into consideration the role of employers' choice and those policy choices relating to the allocation of jobs in the economy.

II

The decision to hire is determined by the employer – after all they define the job specifications. Privatisation and the thrust placed on small and medium scale industries ensure that their owners will play a pivotal role in the job creation in the future. In selecting an employee, qualifications are not the only criteria that matter. This gives rise to the question on what restrictions should there be with regard to employer choice. Surely it would be in society's interest that discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, religion, colour, are necessarily eliminated. But what about the question of meritocracy? That is, should the job be given to a person based on the principle of merit?

As it well known, meritocracy does not take into consideration the role of talent giving the person advantage. There is no mechanism in the meritocracy principle that can take account of this fact in its calculation on who gets the job. The criteria of selection based on meritocracy too runs against the principle of equal opportunity. That is, if it is argued that everyone should have equal opportunity then what role and place is there for merit? If merit should be the basis of decision on who gets hired, then bearing in mind the problem with the meritocracy principle the question which needs to be addressed is whether it is

in society's interest that the task be undertaken by the individual who is most highly qualified? But more important accepting the principle of merit too means that the principle of equal opportunity must be opposed in the manner of Matt Cavanagh (2002) liberal treatise *Against Equality of Opportunity*.

The availability of jobs in the economy is a product of choices made by society through its elected representatives. Decisions on policies related to public education, labour laws, welfare, market regulation, tax structure, public sector employment, the distribution of subsidies and licenses will affect peoples' situation and the overall availability of jobs in the economy.

In most countries in Southeast Asia entry into public institutes of higher education is extremely competitive. In the case of Malaysia this is further compounded by the quota system that in its operation makes allocation of university places based on ethnicity and religion. While this means that most of the students who find their way into public universities tend to be the cream of crop, the limited number of places in the different faculties and the quota system work towards producing a corps of graduates enrolled in programmes merely for the paper chase. This scenario contrasts with the private institutes of higher education where barring only the high fees students can get to study what they desire. The result is two categories of graduates. Those with the necessary paper qualifications, but lacking in dynamism and spirit and those with the qualifications together with the spirit. Graduates from private institutes tend to overwhelm the latter category while those from the public universities are present in both. Faced with such a situation it is perhaps not surprising that employers display preference towards graduates from private institutes.¹ Be that as it may such employer choice is not a reflection of education quality. In terms of academic strength the public universities at present surpass the private institutes having most number of PhDs in the different faculties.

That the workshop/conference did not address both the above issues is a reflection of their musings and preponderant concern with the ramifications of globalisation. To which end they too failed to come to grips with some of the structural factors contributing to the present state of unemployment among social science graduates of public universities.

III

Much of Malaysia's goals like that of most postcolonial states had been to create a nation-state in the character of a developed country by 2020. In this respect the thrust placed on education had led to the proliferation of private institutes of higher education in the country as well as an increase in the number of public centers of higher education. The net effect being that it expanded the available choice of employers. Thus, the present situation of unemployment is therefore not surprising. Similarly, policies taken with regard to market deregula-

tion, tax structure, public education are in the main geared to achieving the goals of Vision 2020. To be sure, in the light of changing international political economy, states in the region would need to strategize themselves anew. In this respect the role of citizens in influencing policy choices come into question.

The present problems in the labour market in post-colonial states must be seen in the context of the politico-economic contradictions of capitalism and developing capitalism in the particular societies. Such contradictions are not local or simply systemic. Rather, they are the product of a conscious policy by the major industrial nations with the participation of national states in the region.

Education either in the form of courses centered on the nation, state bound, or market-oriented is instrumentally valuable. That is, it serves as a means, much like money does, to achieve things, which are intrinsically valuable such as happiness, liberty, and life. Privileging the 'local' or 'indigenous' social science does not make it intrinsically valuable. In like vein to assume that globalisation and international competitiveness will challenge the traditional domain of the social sciences are certainly misplaced.

In this respect the issue of positioning in the international political economy is the major challenge. Rather than musing about the relevancy of social science courses academics need to review policy choices in areas of public education that can be expected to affect the overall availability of jobs in the economy. It is the relevancy of social science academics that is at stake.

NOTES

1. In this respect the argument that low levels of competency in the English language among graduates of public universities is working to their disadvantage may be dismissed. The relationship between English language competency and international competitiveness is at best weak. Countries such as South Korea, Thailand, Japan, remain internationally competitive despite low English use. In addition if English language is the reason for the diminished chances of social science graduates of public universities it is an issue of language and not of the relevancy of social science courses.

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Note:

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