

THE CHALLENGE OF NON-WESTERN DISCOURSE IN EDUCATION: A POLEMIC ON ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES

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This paper theorizes the challenges and possibilities for non-Western discourse to become mainstream in the academia. While current discourses on decolonizing education have focused on essential aspects, a gap remains to exist between education and our narrative of modernity. This paper attempts first to strengthen the temporal and spatial conditions that allowed for colonialism, since it is through which that higher education was brought to the Orient. In the context of the Philippines, a country that has been colonized by Western nations for nearly four centuries, the outlook of higher education is heavily Western-centered, much so that studies on humanities and social science give enormous premium to Western topics, at the expense of studying the development of thought within one's particular region. This paper thus attempts to emphasize this vital link and provides a polemic on why alternative discourses are hindered from becoming mainstream. This paper is divided thus into three sections: (1) a critique of our recounting of modernity; followed by (2) the association between colonialism and capitalism with the Philippines inclusion in the narrative; and (3) a polemic on the difficulties of positing an alternative narrative by highlighting actual practices in the academe.

Keywords: Comparative philosophy, decolonialized education, modernity, non-western Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Current discourses on decolonizing education have gained enormous traction. One aspect is the focus given to Indigenous knowledge to redress centuries of epistemic injustice (Dudgeon and Bray 2023; Rahman and Crochran 2023; and Smith 1999). Another debate centers on efforts to highlight the experience of (Eastern) subjugated nations and how their own epistemologies have been replaced through educative efforts of (Western) imperial forces and the propagation of a specific canon to be studied (Ntloedibe 2025; Shahjahan et al. 2021; Azada-Palacios 2024). Lastly, another notable discourse is the premium given to the role of language and the power

it entails in the pedagogical practice, specifically how the language of colonial powers has inherently marginalized the worldviews of colonized nations (Canagarajah 2023; Lin and Martin 2005; and Thiong'o 1986). However, what I recognize as a gap in these discussions is the lack of focus given to the close relationship between education and our non-Western narrative of modernity or enlightenment. This paper theorizes the challenges and possibilities for non-Western discourse to become mainstream in academia. My argument is that the lack of a discussion that links our experience of education and our own narrative of modernity hinders us from seeing the tremendous effect of the latter over the former. Such a discussion, as I do in this paper, serves as a springboard for pondering on the current state of academia. Particularly, this paper attempts to emphasize this vital link and provides a polemic on why alternative discourses are hindered from becoming mainstream. This paper is divided into three sections: (1) I first provide a critique of our recounting of modernity by revisiting the link between Descartes and Kant. This is followed by (2) ascertaining the association between colonialism and capitalism, arguing that it is this crucial bond that served as the very temporal and spatial environment in the colonized experience. The paper ends (3) with a polemic on the difficulties of positing an alternative narrative by highlighting actual practices in the academe.

MODERNITY'S WESTERN ORIGIN

When referring to "modern/modernity" and "enlightenment/the Enlightenment" either as adjectives or nouns referring to specific epochs in human history, it comes as no surprise that a particular narrative is usually evoked. A timeline of human history is envisioned that looks favorably on forms of self-expression, with the year 1784 as its excellent illustration. This was when James Watt patented his design of the steam engine and the publication of Immanuel Kant's essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?". In an essay, I previously tried to signify a need to shift our discussion of the Enlightenment from simply a specific historical age to an event of enlightenment (Rennesland 2022, 160-188).¹ For this current essay, I use modernity and enlightenment interchangeably to denote less of a specific period but more of a thought's emergence. This paper's first part is devoted to establishing a necessary connection between the emergence of educative practices through colonialism for a better understanding of the difficulty of positing alternative discourses in the humanities.

While arguably the entire history of humanity consists in multiple expressions of the self through art, religion, and even the sciences (Manning 2020), my highlight of 1784 is due to the dual manifestation of humanity's self-expression both in thought and in action: the first is through a movement away from the mind's self-imposed bondage (in Kant's essay), while the second is through a new technological mode of living through our induction to mass transportation (the invention of the steam engine). In hindsight, it is unsurprising that people at the time were not able to fathom the gravity of how monumental that moment was vis-à-vis humanity's progress.

Although one may begin talking about modernity from the outbreak of the industrial revolution, a similar discussion may begin with the current situation—the

Anthropocene. Previously, I (2020, 104-125; 2020, 35-43) tried to argue that the Anthropocene is grounded on power and is driven by our vision of utopia, coinciding with what some argue as the emergence of a Capitalocene. My thrust in framing this in my previous works was to figure these terms, either Anthropocene or Capitalocene, at the tail end of modernity's very self-expression. In other words, what I tried to argue before was that the very direction of modernity was for us to become the masters of nature.² Yet this assertion is already moot in the sense of the absence of its practical significance. What should be better discussed concerning modernity's expression is its very thesis of 'the doubting self cannot be doubted' that formed the people's psychology as a product of their times (Takeuchi 2005, 54). This conclusion, arrived at by Descartes, equates the entire experience of modernity with self-recognition and a liberation movement in history.

Perhaps a few more words ought to be devoted to Descartes, considering his designation as the father of modern philosophy. He situates the *cogito* between absolute extremes of negativity found in doubt and positivity found in God.³ This corresponds even to a social or political reading of his philosophy that maintains the dichotomy between extremes – from a metaphysical gap to a class-based division – that leads to the emergence of the bourgeoisie (Negri 2006, 255). Yet in reading Descartes, one identifies this preponderance on *method* that prioritized a perspective of the world with new foundations of certainty and mathematics—with the *sine qua non* of God's very existence and benevolence (Descartes 1996, 24-25, 44f., 55-56). What is identifiable in Descartes is a movement from recognizing the perils brought about by the metaphysical dyad of existence and essence to the emergence of the historical subject, with God serving as humanity's perfection.⁴ Although this might, upon the initial reading, be a nod toward the championing of a single extreme of either absolute negativity or positivity, what is emphasized in the radical figure of Descartes is the actualization of a political ontology, established not out of a dialectical movement (as in the case of either Hegel or Marx and their subsequent followers) but out of a temporal ontology of mediation (Negri 2006, 255).

Situating rational thought this way, it is not far-fetched to consider Cartesian philosophy, and by extension the whole spirit of modernity, "characteristically suspended between theology and machine theory" (Sloterdijk 2013, 31). The true dyad in Descartes' philosophy should not be the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa* as usually portrayed, but it is instead the tension between the thinking substance and the God that assures it of its existence.⁵ What remains clear at the end of one of the most acclaimed texts of Descartes, the *Meditations*, is ironically not a convincing bridge between the two *res* in his philosophy, but that between the Divine and the thinking substance.⁶ Though an unconventional reading, this sets the stage up for the entire narrative of modernity as a movement beyond the self and into the world that has not fully been justified in Descartes' reading. Thus, this tension between Peter Sloterdijk's consideration of theology and machine theory is aligned with how Antonio Negri considers Descartes' philosophy between or against both poles of "the theological-political continuity of medieval philosophy" and "the mechanistic and Absolutist theories *à la* Hobbes" (Negri 2006, 317). The thinking substance in Descartes, detached from that extended, differentiates itself from the synchronicity of the medieval period and from the mechanistic and autocratic tendencies of the individual

and the state. With this, Descartes' philosophy creates a fissure in the synchronicity between temporal and spatial, with his philosophy emphasizing the former.

Negri frames Descartes' radical philosophy as a temporal and progressive ontology of mediation. While Negri frames this type of philosophy as somewhat of a forerunner of cultural hegemony and even the bourgeoisie's domination over society, his reading serves as an obvious conduit between the more accustomed readings of Descartes and Kant. This becomes more obvious when we consider Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* as one that provides completion to the initial ponderances raised by Descartes' universal doubt.⁷ Instead of the usual reading of these two philosophers that highlights how Descartes' doubt is provided completion through Kant's critique, I would like to instead consider how Kant's philosophy allows the inclusion of the spatial in Descartes' temporal assertion. Whereas in Descartes's texts, we are left with the dyad of God and the soul, Kant seems to go a step further and probes the spatial that which is external to the individual. We see this in the *Critique's* transcendental dialectics, where Kant raises the world (and freedom therein) to the same transcendental level as the soul's immortality and God.⁸ Putting the philosophies of Descartes and Kant alongside each other, we may notice a progression from the temporal (Descartes) to the inclusion of the spatial (Kant) that ultimately recount to us the narrative of modernity as the ever expanding concern of an individual: from the initial security provided by a theological sphere, comprising one's relationship with God, to a desire to dominate over the world. The narrative of modernity, signified by these two philosophers, narrates the progression of our concern from temporality to spatiality.

To put this in more concrete terms, the historical embeddedness of Descartes' cogito eventually paves the way not for a dialectical engagement with the world but for the opening of the spatial desiring of it. In spatial terms, the timeframe referred to here is the age of European expansion that Peter Sloterdijk (2013, 9) frames as the world's rationalization in the Western context from the discovery of the New World by Columbus in 1492 to the end of the Second World War in 1945.⁹ This spatial attention to the world highlighted the European desire for the *plus ultra*, that which is beyond, that equated European expansion with colonization (Sloterdijk 2018, 45-54).

The importance of this current narrative that binds the enlightenment project with an image of modernity is due to the close link, obvious even today and profoundly historical, between three particular words: enlightenment (*Aufklärung*), culture (*Kultur*), and education (*Bildung*). The choice of these three is not arbitrary but comes from the very context of Kant's essay, answering the question of what enlightenment is. As a review, Kant's 1784 publication in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* was in response to a footnote query raised by the Berlin pastor, Johann Friedrich Zöllner, from a stimulating conversation among members of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft*, a somewhat clandestine intellectual group that was closely associated with the monthly publication (Schmidt 1992, 77-101). There is an obvious link between the task of enlightening and the formative experience of being educated. However, Peter Sloterdijk is consistent in his position on what the Enlightenment should be for us. For him (2020a, 206), what has come to an end with the Enlightenment's passing is a rationalist type of skepticism that functions as a dogmatic force. What I have done so far in this paper is to situate the historical context and the progression of thought's development, yet such an

exposition seems to set the stage of rationality's state today without the clear impression of how it is a necessary hurdle to clear. This paper, though, intends to argue how Enlightenment or modernity is not simply the victor in our historical progression but has been rendered as a blinding archetype of thought's stagnation – ultimately requiring to be overcome. Rather cheekily, Sloterdijk (2020a, 206) mentions that "universities" are part of this cynical ambit of the reification of this rationalist skepticism "together with their philosophy departments."

To close this section, I review the main points I raised. This first section was devoted to establishing modernity's origin, crucial for what I will argue toward the end of this paper as the theoretical conditions that affect non-Western discourses in the postcolonial academia. When referring to modernity – and all its appurtenances of social and technological development – what is specifically referred to is a Western and Eurocentric model. By extension, because of the eventual experience of colonialism, itself a product of the enlightened experience of rationality's prowess, this very model of life has been transported to colonized lands, serving as the specific context of the promotion of education. Against the backdrop of modernity's Eurocentric and Western narrative, a question seems to be of specific relevance to our current non-Western context: In what way is it possible to posit an alternative narrative to modernity? This is a very pertinent question considering how the entire notion of *modernization* seems to be equated with the reality of Westernization.¹⁰ With education and the entire pedagogical system as fruits of colonialism, the question can be framed as the desire to realize how modernity may be qualified beyond the European and within the postcolonial context.

EDUCATION'S STILLBIRTH IN THE COLONIAL-CAPITAL

This paper, once more, intends to present the challenge of positing non-Western discourses concerning modernity with a particular emphasis on education in our postcolonial character. In the previous section, I tried to establish a theoretical understanding of how modernity's temporal and spatial bases are profoundly European-centric. This is an initial step in identifying the theoretical conditions that hinder non-Western discourses in postcolonial academia. For this current section, I gloss over the close link between colonialism and capitalism to ultimately localize the discussion on the Philippine experience. This is vital as a theoretical prerequisite for the next section, which is devoted to the specific issues hindering non-Western discourse from becoming mainstream.

Where the narrative ended in the previous section was modernity's temporal and spatial link within the Western context, while for the rest of the world, it meant the ever-expanding scope of European domination, not simply in the political sense of colonial ventures but also in the economic sense of modern entrepreneurship (Sloterdijk 2013, 51). While the Western world propelled itself through numerous industrial and technological breakthroughs, the colonized world found itself *in media res* of modernity, albeit not taking part in it. The significance of the inclusion of the temporal subject as discussed above is amplified by a specific understanding of history. For Takeuchi Yoshimi (2005, 53), there is a close identity between Europe and history,

and that the experience of modernity in the Orient (which he specifically designates as Oriental Modernity) is "the result of European coercion." His reading of history portrays the clear identity between Europe and history as a whole, quite similar to the language used by Western philosophy, and that for him the introduction of Asia on the world stage was brought about by European unfolding. Specifically, Asian modernity for him is the product of Europe bringing with it the modes of production that characterized the times, along with their corresponding social institutions and consequent ways of thinking.

Coming from Takeuchi, the emergence of Oriental modernity is deeply grounded in the formation of an Asian identity as a reaction to European identity. Though this may not necessarily be historically encompassing across Asia, what Takeuchi provides us is an insight of how the Orient is able to contextualize modernity parallel to the West—something explicit following experiences of colonialism. Once more, the narrative in the preceding section sought to affirm the emergence of a self-consciousness within the European intellectual and even historical landscape, which eventually necessitated European expansion. Takeuchi (2005, 54) highlights the role of distinctions within traditions, and modernity is the product of Europe's liberation from its former feudal character. Although modernity was built upon feudalism's foundations, correctly understanding the modern character requires a fundamental understanding of the previous social organization. What these two periods are for us are profoundly different. One would be correct in saying that modernity emerged as a reaction to feudalism, while Asian identity is the resistance to European colonial identity. Quite striking is Takeuchi's (2005, 63) reading of history on this point: "Resistance in the Orient is the historical moment at which Europe becomes Europe. Without Oriental resistance, Europe would be unable to realize itself." He argues that as the Orient resisted its colonial masters, the identity formed here is not just pertinent to Asia but also to Europe. As Asia realized more of its own, the boundaries between colonizer and colonized became even more apparent.

Where this discussion is leading to is the basic reality of the twin disposition of colonialism and capitalism. To illustrate this reality, for more than 300 years, the term *labor power* referred both to the working class as wage labor and to plantation workers as hard laborers (Sloterdijk, 2024, 37). The irony of this elusive reality to many is the very coexistence of these two differing ideas of labor, and how the former all the more became successful because of the latter. However, vital in this equation is the role of education therein. Although institutes of higher learning were established in colonies (such as universities in the Philippines), this reality was not a shared one among all of the colonies in Asia. A striking example is evident in the propositions of the Whig politician, Lord Thomas Macaulay's "Minute on Indian Education," in which he sought to provide reforms to what was then British India. While providing some words of affirmation to those colonized individuals fluent in the regional classics, he bemoaned the lack of educational products that were at par with those educated in Europe. Yet what is indeed striking is the need he sees in creating a specific class that can serve as an intermediary between the imperial authority and the numerous natives, the creation of "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" who will be tasked "to refine the vernacular dialects of the country, to enrich those dialects with terms of science borrowed from the Western

nomenclature, and to render them by degrees fit vehicles for conveying knowledge to the great mass of the population." ¹¹ Such an intention in reforming the educational system in India resulted in the institutionalization of English as the medium of instruction and the further marginalization of Indigenous knowledge, reinforcing Western intellectual superiority throughout the colonized land.

What is identifiable in the Indian experience is not simply the link between education and colonialism but also the effects this causes to the question of a nation's identity. India's independence from British rule came with an assertion of its very identity as *distinct* from their previous colonial masters. An exemplary fact of this is the debate that ensued between Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar and the father of Indian independence, Mahatma Gandhi. The Ambedkar-Gandhi debate centered around the plight of existence in the lower strata of the Caste system. Ambedkar, a Dalit-born graduate of Columbia University, recognized in the Hindu religion and not the colonizing British rule, the ostracization of the Dalits and sought its abolishment due to the local (and not foreign) religion as the source of oppression. In response to this, Gandhi advocated for a reformation of the practices within Hinduism, arguing that the practice of untouchability is separate from the religion itself and highlighting moral and ethical individual self-improvement. ¹² What is noticeable in the arguments of both intellectuals is the pressing need to recognize one's own identity as both a product of Indigenous and foreign knowledge. Parenthetically, through such a debate, it is evident too how colonialism, initially a political and economic movement, eventually became also an avenue for the exchange of ideas between the worlds of the colonizers and the colonized. ¹³

The disparity between the Indian and the Philippine experiences is arguably the level of tradition that already served a unifying function even prior to colonialism. A postcolonial perspective allows us to reflect on the Philippines' very unifying experience, not brought about due to simply a realization of nationhood, but for another reason. For Anderson (2006, 7), it is print-capitalism, which I consider as a signifier for development as a whole, that took the place of three seeming cosmological or metaphysical sources of nationalism since "Enlightenment and Revolution were destroying the legitimacy of the divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm." Notably, these are (1) the script-language of religions that revealed an ontological truth, (2) a central figure such as a monarch, and (3) history's linear narrative that presupposes an eventual eschatological vision (Anderson 2006, 36). Thus, Asia and Africa's initial encounter with modernity was because of their very colonial experience, and the acceptance of development is arguably easier in the absence of spirit or a metaphysical unifying principle (Takeuchi 2005, 62). In the Philippines, this is obvious with how, already in 1593, in less than a century since the start of Spanish presence on the islands and older than the establishment of any institute of higher learning in the country, the Dominicans established a printing press to aid their missionary activities. The same is true for other vestiges of modernity—rail transport and higher education from the Spaniards, while democracy, public health and sanitation, and even the automobile, with the Americans.

With the Philippines' introduction to these vestiges of modernity through the colonizers, it is unsurprising to agree with Anderson's argument. In lieu of the arduous unifying experience that Western nations went through in forging nationhood, a

colonized nation is baptized into the modern grammar of experience through the products of this milieu and not necessarily through the three mentioned metaphysical causes stated above. The novelty of this type of experience is how print-capitalism "made it possible for rapidly growing numbers of people to think about themselves, and to relate themselves to others, in profoundly new ways" (Anderson 2006, 36). This explains how vital the Philippine experience truly is in being a bulwark of democracy in Asia.¹⁴ The same piece of technology established by the Spaniards to promote the religious-military rule over the land ushered in the Philippine revolution with the publication of Rizal's novels. Anderson (1998, 230) provides a crucial insight into this:

The Spain from which so many of the characters have at one time or another arrived is always off stage. This restriction made it clear to Rizal's first readers that "The Philippines" was a society in itself, even though those who lived in it had as yet no common name. That he was the first to imagine this social whole explains why he is remembered today as the First Filipino.

This remark shows how the Philippines, despite its absence from the world stage due to its being a product of the colonial imagination of the Spaniards, suddenly became a place in itself, with all the social and political nuances, in the novels of Rizal. The national hero chose Manila as the setting for his works, not some other country, such as the mighty Spain or even perhaps the foreign Albania, as is the case with Balagtas' *Florante at Laura*.¹⁵ Yet, with such a tremendous celebration of Philippine literature on the world stage – Rizal's eloquence is quite attested to even in Europe – and even in spite of the marvelous efforts of the Filipinos toward independence and liberation, a serious question remains concerning the possibility indeed of an alternative narration of modernity outside of the European model.

To close this section, I seek to make clear how what I tried to argue was the close link between (print) capitalism and colonialism and how this settled within Asia. Conversely, through the very activities and products of modernity utilized in the colonized land, the question of identity eventually emerged. This is a development in the possibility of positing an alternative narrative of modernity in the postcolonial context, which I seek to further in the following section.

POLEMIC: ALTERNATIVE DISCOURSES IN THE PHILIPPINE ACADEMIA

The previous two sections allowed me to contextualize the European temporal and spatial imagination that brought them to colonize foreign lands (in the first section), which fueled the emergence of capitalism and how such became a basis for nation-building (in the second). For this last section, I provide the four issues that Syed Farid Alatas raises that hinder non-Western discourse from becoming mainstream in order to contextualize the challenge of such discourses on education and within the academe. Alatas makes it clear that the issue at hand is the baggage that postcolonial nations, particularly in Asia, bring with them concerning the development of the social

sciences (broadly construed). This weight is the specter of the colonial scholar and administrator who established the institutions responsible for the development of these disciplines (Alatas 2006, 21). Alatas (2006, 13) particularly notes four issues that prevent alternative discourses from becoming part of mainstream discourse in the non-Western academic context:

- (a) the opposition between nativist and autonomous social science,
- (b) the need for a proper conceptualization of relevance, (c) the impact of the relationship between discourse and power on alternative discourses,
- (d) and teaching the social sciences along the lines of the requirements of alternative discourses.

These I probe and provide illustrations within the Philippine context of how these are identifiable in current academic discussions, using Philosophy as my example.¹⁶

Between nativist and autonomous social science

The first point highlights the divide between a local and a universal view of the social sciences. The nativist view provides emphasis to one's very locality and topology, whereas the autonomous reaches out to the universal and distinguishes with precision and clarity. As is already obvious with the divide between the natural and social sciences, the latter is awarded less consistency and universality due to the object of the study, i.e., the fickle human individual as opposed to the perceived consistent surrounding nature (Feldbacher-Eschamilla et al. 2017, 317-326). Yet, this degree of certitude, which grants a particular discipline a certain level of autonomy and even authority, is further removed when considering the particulars of a postcolonial experience.

Takeuchi provides a good illustration that is akin to this point when he puts together the paradoxical opposition between repetition and development. In his work, he (2005, 62) ultimately arrives at the idea that "[a]dvance is easily accepted in those places where there was originally no spirit. This unproductive and fixed concept is there seen as something substantial." Takeuchi is here characterizing the experience of Oriental modernity in which Asia confronted the very banner of progress that categorized modernity in the West. For him, the Asian context seems to be left with either the choice for advancement or repetition. He argues that the desire was for the former, to undergo the same pattern of development idealized in the Occident, but he poignantly describes such a possibility only in the absence of the spirit. Spirit here refers to culture and tradition, and it is quite straightforward that the triumph of mainstream discourses would come at the price of the dwelling of the Oriental spirit within the same discourses. Instead of progress, what is likely experienced is what Takeuchi frames as the opposite, ironically neither the absence of movement nor its reversal. Opposed to movement is movement's very replication, its own intensification. Repetition here may be likened to the condition of infinite mobilization, a result of self-intensification: of moving in a world in motion in a time in which all movements are sped up (Sloterdijk 2020b, 5).

I would like to surmise though that retreat is an appropriate response to advancement when operating under the Oriental framework.¹⁷ However, repetition is the mimicking of advancement, the generation of movement without movement per se. Contextualizing this to the social sciences, our attempts to formulate alternative discourses at times are stuck at the level of repetition, and the academic-cum-pedagogical challenge is to recognize the pendulum swing from essentialism to indigenization, either a purist approach to the local or an attempt to shun off the labors of any colonial enterprise (Alatas 2006, 109-111). Recognizing these perspectives in how we formulate arguments for the social sciences would hopefully allow us to see how at times our arguments for either extreme merely parrots Western discourses. Should not our postcolonial context provide the very conditions for our own take of the social sciences? An illustration of this point is found in the already exhaustive debate concerning Filipino philosophy. Our postcolonial experience indeed leads many thinkers to two specific directions: a move toward essentialism or toward indigenization, either equating philosophy simply to the very descendants of the Western tradition or to only focusing on precolonial thought. An example of the former is when a scholar would scoff at the idea of the importance of non-Western philosophy and their inclusion in the curriculum, or perhaps even worse – and this just happened last term among students of mine – when a graduating philosophy major would say that only Western philosophy is serious philosophizing. An example of the latter, at times relegated to mere ethnography, are the pure attempts at disregarding colonialism's influences, only extolling precolonial thought, be it by pondering on the Indigenous script used or perhaps analyzing sayings and, to an even greater degree, trying to extract a philosophy from a precolonial religious system. Although "mirroring" is indeed a possible activity to eventually generate a truly Indigenous or organic way of philosophizing out of our context – as usually is the argument of scholars who pursue this research direction (Ferriols 1974, 339) – it still remains to be seen if indeed something as such has taken place. At either of the extremes, the scholar exhibits repetition in the respective type of philosophizing instead of any sense of advancement (in the Western context). We seem to repeat the same arguments without paying heed to the everchanging social conditions from which our ideas ought to arise.

A proper conceptualization of relevance

The question of what is and is not relevant allows us to reframe the rift between the nativist and universal scope of the social sciences. The question of relevance cuts through society in probing who indeed has a say into the importance of a particular idea, and rather than a concentrated discussion on epistemology or perspectives that would ensue in the previous issue, the question of relevance includes the need to consider the conditions created by one's social, economic, religious, and political contexts.

We need to recognize that the issue of relevance does not simply pertain to the actual scope of what is relevant and irrelevant for alternative discourses but a lack of a systematic conceptualization of these demarcations of significance (Alatas 2006, 125). However, rather than the need to understand what is relevant, what is more important is the need to identify what is *irrelevant* for such eventually becomes the basis for

demarcating one's very discussion. Alatas (2006, 135) proceeds to list types of irrelevance prevalent in discourses: "lack of originality, disaccord between assumptions and reality, inapplicability, alienation, redundance, mystification, and mediocrity[.]" The first point is very similar to the issue previously explained. Our insights into alternative discourses are at times repetitions of those which we have learned. One, however, should not purely be at fault on this point since there is a tendency to repeat what has been given to us, yet this serves as a stumbling block concerning our originality in that we might fail to realize the very repetitive patterns found in our own research and the ensuing discourses. The following issues on irrelevance create the very conditions of our discourses. The second point on the rift between our assumptions and our very reality is not farfetched from the Philippine intellectual landscape. Whereas the starting point of our theorization is within the very four walls of the classroom, there is an obvious difference between the intellectual environment that the academy can offer from how this environment may be translated into our very social climate. The degree of disparity becomes even more amplified when we consider the dissimilarity between the metropolis and the provinces. With this reality, it is unsurprising that the ideas that we are able to generate are ironically unsuitable for our own context, leading to the experience of alienation both on the part of those influenced by our discourses and of ourselves. From such irrelevance, our discourse then seems to be redundant since the problems with which we have begun have merely been reformulated due to our discourses' unsuitability, especially due to the degree of sophistry involved in formulating our discourses, far removed from everyday life. Ultimately, the type of discourse that we create because of the foregoing experience is mediocre and shallow.

The importance of noting the distinction between relevance and irrelevance resounds greatly Partha Chatterjee's critique of Anderson: *whose imagined community?* In a strong way, Chatterjee (1993, 5) says that "Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized." Here, he tries to draw the distinction between the product of creative imagining that is life-serving to the community from something imposed upon it. Are even our imagined communities truly relevant to our own context? As I have mentioned earlier, this question cuts through the very fiber of society

A significant insight here that Alatas (2006, 124) uses as an example is the adaptation of research agendas from the West that results in dehumanized research and disciplines that are far removed from the contemporary realities of these Asian nations. To contextualize this better, we may ponder on the research agendas of our universities' research centers and academic departments to evaluate our own attempts to generate alternative discourse. Glossing over the data, we might be surprised to discover that despite our acclaim of our centers and departments being the bulwarks of our perspectives on critical humanities, we are irrelevant to the world and our own country. What we have been doing is mere empty theorization and is far removed from the plight of everyday life.¹⁸ Within the context of philosophy, we may note this how numerous seminars and conferences are organized from department level activities in the different universities that the country has to even national philosophical

associations on the state of philosophy in the country today. But we are left in fact to see how these events affected the way we think and the way our departments, research centers, universities, and organizations have planned ahead.

The relationship between discourse and power

The close relationship between discourse and power is something that is closely associated with the French philosopher, Michel Foucault. Alatas (2006) cites him for what he did was to move beyond the mere (physical) representation of power but located its emergence within the systematized use of language (151). Foucault (1990b, 98) argues the inseparability of discourse and power for every regime of discourse is comprised of power relations and is also a means of exercising such power. Foucault (1990a, 176-177, 193) explains that power's display was previously only from above, i.e., from the monarch, this form of disciplinary was internalized and became discreet, not overtly excluding, repressive, or condemning. This transference of power's representation evoked then a new method of power, one evident not through law but normalization, not punishment but control (Foucault 1990b, 89-100).

Foucault's genealogical work throughout his books uncovers the peculiar emergence of power within our societies, specifically in our institutions. Throughout his books, he develops this insight into the formation of knowledge and the power that we wield when this knowledge is spoken, especially since there is no fixed model for power-relations (Foucault 1990, 99-100). The multiplicity of discourses generates multiple sources of power within the language of disciplinarity, sex, and knowledge, among others. He provides us with the progression of our relationship with power from something external to internal, from physical to verbal. Therefore, power and knowledge exist in a loop—power produces particular knowledges, and those knowledges, once institutionalized, reinforce the power that birthed them. Our contemporary understanding of power then is linked to its relation to knowledge and discourse instead of production and having the means thereof (Alatas 2006, 158).

This is a reality amplified further by highly systematized and bureaucratized institutions, and we need not look any further from the university as an institution composed of various systems. The plethora of memoranda circulating within the university manages the system and makes it more efficient (Yates 1989, 485-510). The commercial university today therefore stands as a testament to this prestigious academic institution's progression from the written word of rhetorical theory to the written word of managerial techniques.¹⁹ With the ways memos are drafted with their corresponding circulars, it is interesting to think if there exists the possibility for authentic dialogue within such academic institutions. However, this criticism may easily be levied against administrative boards or faculty unions, especially when the topic is on collective bargaining agreements or faculty benefits. It would therefore be amiss to focus on the university's level since the priority at the level will be, besides student welfare and education delivery, also the economic benefits of those working therein. Challenging our pedagogy and raising the possibility for alternative discourses requires us to focus instead on the smaller units from where a more organic approach to the formation of knowledge and the appreciation of power may hopefully take place and where it ideally does. At the level of the dean's office and even of the department,

we need to be critical about the possibility of actual discourse and whether the discourses we have at such levels allow for the participation of a plurality of voices.

The more important question coming from Alatas and Foucault is not simply inquiring into whether such discourses take place but rather how are we able to indeed cultivate a culture of critique, a practice of reading each other's works, and a tradition of linking our social conditions to our theocratizations. Quite similar to the comment previously provided above, the sheer number of events organized on Filipino philosophy is evidence of the space provided for discourse to take place. However, is it enough to simply give space for these discourses? Though we may celebrate the development of Filipino philosophy and the possibility for their discourse through the conferences and symposia we organize on a specific trailblazer, we are left to wonder why the discussion always ends with that person. To put it frankly: why have we not produced any great thinker who is truly at par with those of the West whom we celebrate?

Perhaps, the difficulty is not simply positing a thinker but the narrow scope of our inquiry and who we consider stakeholders of the query. Beyond the confines of formal philosophizing of so-called Filipino philosophers, we might be surprised to discover how far philosophizing has come in the disciplines of literature, history, and sociology among other social sciences notwithstanding disciplines such as music, architecture, and even the fine arts. On a practical level, perhaps what is indeed absent in our current curriculum are the vital opportunities for debates and actual discourses in departmental and university activities instead of mere conferences filled with the usual speakers lecturing on the same topic. The seminar classes of a bachelor's degree majoring in Philosophy is a laboratory for these experimental ideas. There seems to be a need to truly rethink these opportunities to learn, to level discourses, and to generate power in identifying alternative discourses.

Teaching the social sciences along the lines of the requirements of alternative discourses

The fourth issue that Alatas raises is quite direct in that the great hurdle to alternative discourses is the Eurocentric curriculum in the social sciences, with the prominence of Occidental thinkers and the dominance of Western categories (Alatas 2006, 176-178). Among the four issues, this is the result of the preceding three. Because of the already present opposition between how we conceptualize alternative discourses, what ought to be considered relevant becomes problematic, leaving us with the inability to properly devote the right conditions for discourses (mindful of the corresponding power-relations) to emerge. With all that, it is unsurprising that both professional scholars and pupils alike are not prepared to engage in this type of discourse. Although we are able to identify possible areas for more inclusion,²⁰ the need for alternative discourses goes beyond this.

To put it frankly, the general temperament in the academe is a resounding unreadiness for alternative discourses. For Sloterdijk (2020b, x), what we tremendously need is a "critical theory of being-in-the-world" that shifts away from harmless theorizations behind confounding neutrality under the banner of the very name. For him, the inability of theory to be critical today is due to the lack of any

differentiation between critique and the very object of this critique, due to the former's inadvertent acquiescence to the latter. What then can characterize a shift is, in fact, a conscious attention to our current conditions. What is required in our training is the attempt at doing a critique, of identifying differences amidst the dangers of identity-thinking. This point is especially important for us in the Orient due to the peculiarity of our identity. We may phrase the question this way, how can we prepare ourselves for alternative discourses if our very identity is based not on identity but is predicated on difference (Chatterjee 1993, 5)?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this essay, I theorized the challenges and possibilities for non-Western discourse to become mainstream in the academia, eventually forming a theoretical framework of a sort to better contextualize the difficulty of the emergence of alternative discourses in the Philippine academia. The first part of this paper dwelt on the very foundations of modernity, and it sought to better establish the temporal and spatial conditions that necessitated an expansion of European identity, taking the form of colonialism in the Orient. The second part then tried to tie the colonial enterprise with capitalist gain, arguing that Oriental identity emerged from this stillbirth in capitalist modernity. Modernity's stillbirth was the reproduction of its own self; colonialism seemed to laid the necessary grounds for the various experiences of revolt, with the example of the press as indicated in this paper. Capitalism's assistance to what initially served as a means for colonialism to further its tight grip on society eventually became a means for its own demise. This part also introduced the peculiarity of the Philippine experience. The third part formed a polemic tackling the four issues that Syed Faris Alatas raised regarding the difficulty of alternative discourses becoming mainstream discourse.

What I indeed sought to do was a reconsideration of two things. There is, first, a grave necessity to rethink the very foundations of the ideas we closely hold onto. The account that I began my paper with sought to provide a clear insight into this. Often, the ideas passed on to us in formal and informal educative settings are unquestioned, which may unfortunately put them on an esoteric and sublimated level, leaving us no room for critical thought. Conversely, what unfortunately might be the case is that, second, the very structures that ought to instigate critical thought might be conducive to its stifling. My polemic at the end was intended to provide a starting point to possible discussions on this very issue. Only by highlighting certain aspects of our current practices that hinder the potential flourishing of alternative discourses can the latter truly become a reality. Such a level of critique is necessary lest we remain subjects in our own imagining of society.

NOTES

1. In this essay, I tried to conjure a critical form of theory, i.e., a critical form of enlightenment, that veers away from a static reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* to a task that arises from reading this book in conjunction with his essay questioning

what enlightenment is. My assertion in this article was through Sloterdijk's seeming parody of Kant's work through his book, *Critique of Cynical Reason*. The parodic element, though, as I claim, is the very cynical nature of reason today. Although we reap the benefits of a critical insight into rationality, there seems to remain a cynical nature that needs to be given second thought. My use (or rather my introduction) of Peter Sloterdijk allowed me to drive the point of an enlightened false consciousness home, and thus despite my primary intention in this article being a reading of these two books or *Critiques*, my secondary aim was to introduce Peter Sloterdijk as a contemporary thinker of great importance.

2. See also Quinn 2016, 44.

3. See Daniil Vashkevich 2025, 267. In similar words, one can highlight the peculiarity dynamicity of the link between *cogito* and *sum*. The *ergo* symbolizes "both a conjunction and a disjunction, a consequence and an opposition (Negri 2006, 215)."

4. Cf. Negri 2006, 208 and 228 and Descartes, "Third Meditation," 31. On another dimension, what may be sourced from this reading of Descartes is this individual subject that Negri heightens through the bourgeoisie. In contrast to the surety even of the very existence of the individual, a seeming product of mathematical formulations, "Descartes's reasonable ideology is the definitive response to this precariousness: an imperious demand to exist regardless, to develop itself regardless. And it is a fate – this fate that the reasonable ideology describes – which the bourgeoisie will experience in its entirety." (Negri 2006, 253.) Negri provides a critical and crucial reflection of Descartes' philosophy for our modern condition, a seeming riposte to the apparent confidence that this particular class has or is projected to have in Marxist philosophy.

5. This is even more apparent with the assertion "But from the fact that I cannot think of God except as existing, it follows that existence is inseparable from God, and hence that he really exists (Descartes, "Fifth Meditation," 46)."

6. I emphasize this since Descartes' discussion of the pineal gland and the assumption of its connection between the thinking and extended substances is not found in the *Meditations* but in *The Treatise of Man*. See Descartes 2004, 99-169.

7. See Abulad 2019, 4; Arkush 1994, 69; and Mendelssohn 1929/1984, vol. 3, 2, 34.

8. Cf. Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 7, and Kant 1998, 402.

9. The mention of the world's rationalization here is not to mean that periods prior to this were irrational. Rather, what Sloterdijk intends to highlight in this specific period is how the modern grammar, i.e., the form of rationalization that emerged from the foregoing discussion, became the specific approach that we had for the world.

10. See Calichman, preface to Takeuchi 2005, ix.

11. See Thomas Macaulay's "Minutes on Education In India, Written in the Years 1835, 1836 and 1837," (2 February 1835), [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Minutes_on_Education_In_India,_Written_in_the_Years_1835,_1836_and_1837/Minute_by_Mr._Macaulay_\(2_February,_1835\)](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Minutes_on_Education_In_India,_Written_in_the_Years_1835,_1836_and_1837/Minute_by_Mr._Macaulay_(2_February,_1835)).

12. Cf. B.R. Ambedkar, "Annihilation of Caste. An Undelivered Speech, 1936" and Mahatma Gandhi, "A Vindication of Caste by Mahatma Gandhi" in B.R. Ambedkar, 2014.

13. See Sloterdijk 2020, 23.

14. See Aboitiz 2020.

15. Francisco Balagtas, a revered Filipino literary figure, sets his *Florante at Laura* to be read as a strong piece of Philippine patriotism in a temporally and spatially suspended environment. The reason for this was due to his incarceration at the time of authorship, and also to move beyond the censorship of both the state and the church. See Jurilla 2005, 131–196. A contrast between the works of Rizal and Balagtas may be found in Anderson 2006, 28–29. Balagtas, though, was a celebrated figure in the eyes of Rizal and was part of a speech that Rizal delivered in Berlin. For more critical information about Rizal's piece, see Guillermo 2006, 452–472; and 2010, 557–585.

16. A previous piece of mine on Filipino Philosophy gained traction, yet several times have I heard my ideas misunderstood. It was a paper written in response to a call from the Philosophical Association of the Philippines on new themes in Filipino philosophy. The piece itself was written three years before the paper was published, and honestly, it was written by a then-undergraduate student. My intimation on philosophy for this last section, perhaps, can better shed light on what I mean in that paper. See Rennesland 2021, 76–89.

17. I need to be clear, though, that my proposition here is not for an Oriental type of advancement in the sense of indeed being able to progress in the same way as this is possible in the West. What is elusive, in fact, in our curricula are opportunities to ponder on Asia's very disposition in the face of Occidental progress—retreat. A relevant insight here would be to consider the actual tradition of mindfulness that simply is sourced from Daoism but also through a peculiar tradition of tea-preparation and -drinking, a certain *Cha Dao*. See Okakura 1906; Liu 2011, 114–133; Wu Juenong 2017; and Byung-Chul Han 2020.

18. This is explicitly put into words by Jove Aguas (2023, 173) in saying that “Although philosophy is vibrant in the academic scene, it is barely noticed in the social and political arena.” More on the rift between the academic front of philosophical discussion may be analyzed by contrasting these two works. Cf. Ian Anthony Davatos, “The Public (Ir)Relevance of Philosophy,” *SES Journal of Applied Philosophy*, 10, no. 1 (July 2025): 65–85, https://ses-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/SES_Journal_Volume-10_1_2025_Article-2.pdf and Jeremiah Joven B. Joaquin, “Are Filipino Philosophers Publishing in Top Philosophy Journals?,” *SES Journal of Applied Philosophy*, Special Issue (June 2022): 127–147, https://ses-journal.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/7_Special-Issue-June-2022-1.pdf.

19. For more on this, see Slaughter and Rhoades 2009; and Heller 1945.

20. A good example would be the recognition of the lack of female thinkers within the curriculum and the role of gender therein (Mancenido-Bolaños 2023, 1–16; and Biana 2022, 108–127).

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