
Development Thinking as Cultural Neo-Colonialism— the Case of Sri Lanka¹

(or why visiting economists are successful²)

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When Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948 power was transferred from the British to the most Westernized strata of Sri Lanka society. It was only with the coming in 1956 of a strongly nationalist government with a socialist orientation that power seemed to be transferred to a strata more representative of the people.

The background of ideas and the ideology that existed in the ruling circles before the nationalist government of 1956 were of colonial origin, with their underlying assumption of a low view of the local population who had to be civilized by anglicization. The post 1956 view in political circles was that the Ceylonese had something intrinsic to offer. But although in the political sphere, the counter view was accepted, in officialdom where the decisions pertaining to the country's development were to take place, a new imposed view, derived from socio-economic models based on some aspects of Western social science, was accepted implicitly as an aspect of modernity and the scientific ethos. There was no questioning as to whether these models and the assumption on which they rested were at all relevant to the country.

In the discussion below I will attempt to describe how this imposed view has become established in seats of consultancy and advice in the country and how as a result the promise of a counter view in 1956 was neatly subverted and proved ephemeral. I hope also to describe the social mechanisms by which the new imposed view is maintained and also the relevancy—or irrelevancy—of these views to the pressing problems of the country.

The introduction of social science-based thinking into approaches to the problems of the Sri Lanka economy and Sri Lankan society arose at a time (late 1950s and early 1960s) when American writings on the subject were at their apogee and when the American political hegemony in the world was still unchallenged.

In the case of Sri Lanka this introduction of social science-based thinking and comment on the nature of the economy and society carried an air of artificiality. The social science-based comment often had little bearing on the socio-political discussion occurring in the society at large—social comment thus became in a very narrow sense 'specialized' and 'scientific' and took place within the confines of specialized institutes devoted to these subjects. In discussing problems of the society and economy (that is, 'development') specialists in these institutes brought in as analytical tools the store of what Western social sciences said about development. These institutions, especially those pertaining to planning, the Central Bank and the like, viewed social problems as professional, very much as a doctor or an engineer would view his problems; the real socio-political problems in the country were not covered by the professional literature.

The period from the early 1960s saw an increase in institutions set up in the country to study and/or advise about the socio-economic problems of the country. Many of these institutes were either directly sponsored by foreign agencies or drew heavily on foreign expertise and knowledge or finance or both, a phenomenon common to many neo-colonial countries.³ Even key institutes like the Planning Ministry were organized on the recommendations of visiting foreign experts (Waterson 1966). A watershed in this movement away from local thinking on national problems (some may even consider it an attempt to transfer some aspects of sovereignty) was the decision in the late 1960s to invite an ILO mission to study the employment problems of the country and to recommend new strategies.

Some of the institutes and missions that have been established in this manner have had a very debilitating effect on the country. We can separate the effects into three, namely an epistemological, a political, and a social aspect. At the epistemological level we can raise the question of relevancy to local conditions of these studies. Often their reference groups are academic or financial insti-

¹ The opinions expressed in this paper arose out of two earlier papers on a similar theme read in July 1974 at the University of Sri Lanka and at the IDS, University of Sussex. I am thankful to the participants of the two seminars for their useful comments. An extended version is available as IDS discussion paper no. 63.

² As opposed to why they fail à la Seers (1962) as economists.

³ The Management Development and Productivity Centre, the Sri Lanka Foundation, the Marga Institute, the Rural Development Training and Research Institute, the Agrarian Research and Training Institute are examples of institutes with direct foreign contacts, whilst institutions like the Academy for Administrative Studies attempt a direct transfer of externally derived knowledge.

tutions in the metropolitan countries and Sri Lanka problems are by necessity seen from the perspective of such reference groups. (I shall come back to this theme of reference groups in discussing how the system as a whole is maintained). When local peculiarities and conditions enter such discussions they are consciously and unconsciously filtered through the preconceptions and theoretical biases of these reference groups.

Because the reference groups for these studies on development are foreign, very little internal political and social discussion (and action) enters policy or academic output in any integrated sense. When internal social and political factors are taken into account, they are seen as aspects that have to be forced into a pre-conceived theoretical framework drawn up in metropolitan countries. And because of the subservient roles of the local institutes (as well as the local personnel), no theoretical framework to fit local conditions develops and the conceptual output is often empiricism of the worst sort. It should be emphasized that this 'empiricism' does not exist in a vacuum and is not neutral in its attitude to data, but leads to the collection of a body of facts in response to questions asked from a certain specific viewpoint.

The intellectual dependence relationship unconsciously imparts, under the cloak of 'science', strong ideological overtones into treatment of what are basically political problems. Thus the Management Development and Productivity Centre (MDPC) which was set up under ILO aegis (initially with ILO personnel) to advise government industrial corporations as well as the private sector, projects as objective management science an entire array of ideological concepts derived largely from management practice in the socio-economic environment of the USA. The social philosophy underlying such consultancies (for instance the implied Social Darwinism in the recommendations on work incentives by a foreign expert of the MDPC which are now being accepted by many government corporations) often goes against the declared social aims of the government.

The irrelevance which results from the intellectual and financial dependency relationships is clear from the following remarks of a Western observer who has been able to observe the dependence relationship from a relative vantage point. He notes that the relationship of Sri Lanka planners with external aid-giving agencies has led to "isolating the planners by enmeshing them in a network of external relationships with the repre-

sentatives of foreign aid agencies". Further, because of this relationship one of the main functions of economists in the planning ministry was "to receive any foreign visitor who was sufficiently curious to pursue his inquiries beyond the planning ministry, thus giving the outside world the impression that economic rationality was more pervasive than was really the case". Further, there occurred "an isolation of the planning ministry in a separate world of external advisors, (and) a measure of unreality in the planning process and retreat into technical exercises". (White 1974 pp 271-72).

To take another example, the Academy of Administrative Studies was constituted a few years ago to train administrators at a time when a continuing political debate was occurring in the country on the role of colonial attitudes and objectives in the bureaucracy. The programme of the Academy is now basically that of teaching the new subject of 'development administration', a subject which in the way and manner it developed has incorporated an ideology and an administrative technology more suited to the needs of those countries most under American colonial and neo-colonial domination. Thus the main work of the virtual *guru* in the development administration field, namely Fred Riggs, is based on material from Thailand, South Korea, Taiwan and Pakistan collected in the 1950s and 1960s.

Similarly the recently founded Sri Lanka Foundation Institute, which is West German sponsored, has an 'educational' programme for labour department officials and trade unionists. Two topics typical of the few seminars this institute has had so far (July 1974) are 'Contribution of Trade Unions to Socio-economic Development' and 'Workers' Participation in Management', both issues with obvious ideological overtones, and which carry assumptions about the role of workers organizations in capitalist countries: whether they should be collaborative or whether they should aim at class solidarity.

The ideological content of these neo-colonial institutes has a direct bearing on the perception of political reality within the country. There is the possibility of a more sinister impact in that some of these recently established institutes seem to be financed by organisations strongly connected with Western political organizations. Although American sponsored institutes like the Asia Foundation have been sent out of the country, other affluent Western institutions are coming in to take their place. Thus West Germany is represented by

organizations financed by the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (The Sri Lanka Foundation), the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (The Marga Institute) and the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung (The Rural Development Training and Research Institute).

These German Stiftungen have strong connections with the three main political parties of West Germany, respectively the SDP, the FDP and CDU, and are sponsored by them. (White 1965 p. 202). The three Sri Lanka foundations they are sponsoring are in the three vital areas of development studies (Marga), industrial relations (Sri Lanka Foundation) and local government (the Rural Development Training and Research Institute).

It is easy to identify some of the striking social features associated with the externally based 'knowledge' obtained in these institutes. The purveyors of this knowledge exist in what are virtual foreign enclaves. They are often paid salaries more consonant with those of foreign experts and sometimes work in offices more reminiscent of affluent foreign surroundings.⁴ The interaction with the local community consists principally of giving advice and instruction. If there is feedback it is only of a very empirical nature, and does not alter fundamentally the basic form and content of the knowledge that is imparted. The generation of this knowledge as well as any corrective feedback occurs mainly in the metropolitan centres and their universities and journals. The local appendage does not generate fundamental academic discussion in the country and academic discussions that do occur are often incidental to the institutions. Thus creation of such institutes prevents an internal dialogue; by being projected as purveyors of vital and true knowledge they thwart independent discussion.

Further, in a country such as Sri Lanka with dwindling foreign resources and growing upper middle class, such institutions provide avenues for much desired foreign travel. Thus, many members of the Central Bank and the Planning Ministry privately express aspirations to join well paying agencies such as the World Bank, and in fact many have done so. In such cases conflicts of interest in bargaining on behalf of Sri Lanka against the World Bank whilst at the same time aspiring to become one of its members are bound to occur. Academic output in the case of such aspirants will by necessity have to be governed by what is perceived as fashionable by these external agencies.

⁴ The offices of the Sri Lanka Foundation resemble the luxurious lounge of a foreign airport.

When such aspirants do join Western academic and consultancy centres they are in a similar position to expatriate doctors in Britain; it will be only the lower rung of academic and consultancy institutes in the West which will be manned by them. Thus Third World members will inevitably be in the position of an 'academic proletariat' in the sense of receivers of wisdom generated by others. (The manning of only lower echelons by Third World members does not, of course, apply to political as opposed to academic posts. A good example of political posts manned by Third World members is UNCTAD).

The 'proletariatization' of the academics of the Third World under this scenario has many similarities to the criticisms of American social science of the Parsonian type made in the 1950s and 1960s. The academic proletariat in America in the 1950s as described by Wright C. Mills was made up of those who had to force fit often very trivial data into the grand-theorizing of the reigning *gurus* of the time.

But a more important function than that of proletariatization arising from this relationship is that it helps create a breed of comprador intelligentsia. The comprador academic and intellectual who diagnoses his country's ills and prescribes on the basis of a version of social reality purveyed by the metropolitan centres as context-free science, helps to consolidate the process of getting the colonized to colonize themselves. With the breaking of overt colonial ties in the Third World such indirect domination through ideological and cultural means (that is, through super-structural means) becomes increasingly significant. In occupying a crucial slot in the international structure of dependence the neo-colonial academic is a key element in the propagation and maintenance of a neo-colonial orientation in these countries.

'Patron-client' relationships develop between academics in the Western World and the Third World, especially in the context of scarce foreign exchange resources and given that normal ambitious bright young men would wish to see the world outside their country (especially when they see their country at the receiving end of hordes of Western tourists, including some from the working class). Thus in the case of the ILO mission to Sri Lanka at least five of the local economists mentioned in the preface have had strong contacts with IDS, from which the leading members of the mission were drawn. Some of these contacts pre-date the mission to a time when the entire top echelon of the Sri Lanka Planning

Ministry came to the Institute in 1969 for a joint working conference on 'Development planning in Sri Lanka'—but at least four of the five names mentioned have had continuing spin-off from the relationship, mostly in the form of study and research possibilities with the 'patron', in this case IDS.

There is an ironical situation here. The ILO mission came to alleviate unemployment and also indirectly to help economic independence. But because of the economic dependence relationship in the country, and because of the large numbers of educated personnel wishing to see the world, there is a strong push towards entering into a dependency relationship with Western academic centres, which in turn clouds the independent and correct perception of problems by these local academics, which in turn leads to false prescription, which leads to further economic deterioration in the country, which leads to further economic dependency, to further academic dependency and so on. A vicious spiral with very disturbing consequences tends to result if this scenario is carried to its logical conclusion.

Another indicator of this situation in the economics of academic dependence is the role of embassy cultural attachés as cultural heroes. Thus in Sri Lanka the American, British, German and French embassies often take a lead in promoting cultural-educational activities, largely for the middle classes. They promote art exhibitions, musical recitals, etc., and there is often spin-off for participants in the form of scholarships abroad (which allow most scholars to return home with a new car, a much prized upper middle class status symbol in a country that has seen virtually no imports or local assembly of cars for the last twelve years).⁵

Visiting experts, especially consultancy missions of purportedly wide ranging importance like the ILO mission, enjoy access to the power structure literally from the prime minister and cabinet downwards. The social interaction with the highest level often also applies to local scientists who come into contact with visiting experts as a relative equal, as they are also often part of the international academic set.

⁵ The leverage allowed for channelling the aspirations of professionals by embassy officials is best cited by the almost ludicrous fact that the chief guest at this year's sessions of the Ceylon Medical Association (which consists of a large number of doctors with post-graduate qualifications from the UK) was the local British Council representative who had no medical pretensions. The fact that the British Council controls award of scholarships is the only rational explanation.

Invitations to foreign missions often stem from these foreign circuit local economists. It is in their interests to keep the system of intellectual dependence going, as they themselves benefit from it. In the academic dependence relationship not only does the line between the pragmatic needs of consultancy and independent academic weighing of a problem become blurred, but the type of advice given does not vary significantly with the form and composition of particular governments. Thus in the case of the ILO mission it is interesting to note that the mission was first requested during the reign of a right-wing government, but carried out its work during a left-wing coalition government which included Marxist members. The question immediately arises whether the approach of the mission would have been in any fundamental sense different in the old political climate if the initial request had been accepted. Similar questions can be raised when comparing the Ceylon mission with the Kenya mission, the latter being a more strongly capitalist country. No external mission can raise fundamental issues of a political nature beyond the empiricist level, especially when its collection of experts spans a wide ideological spectrum.

A deeper view of the type of thinking on societal issues and development going on within the academic sphere in Sri Lanka can be gained by dividing the work into three categories. These categories have been drawn to indicate a hierarchy of problems according to relative depth. It will be seen that at present only the more trivial type of work pertaining to development, mainly that in category one, is done in Sri Lanka.

The three divisions are (i) basic empirical work; (ii) deeper level empirical work with lower level model building; (iii) higher level issues and models of socio-economic change.

(i) Under empirical work is included the basic data collecting and preliminary analysis at a shallow empirical level of various socio-economic processes and problems. Examples of this type of work already being done in Sri Lanka would be the data collection and publication afforded by the Central Bank and some of the work that is done at the Marga Institute.

(ii) Under the second category one would include the roughly 25 projects under way in the UK on Sri Lanka's development (IDS 1973). This type of higher level analysis of data and problems is still being done at foreign universities and is often restricted to thesis production. Although such work in foreign universities is valuable and adds

to knowledge, it is regrettable that a major part of this work is not done in Sri Lanka itself.⁶

(iii) Under the third category one would include studies of basic questions relating to the direction of socio-economic changes in the country as well as the explanatory models and paradigms used to describe such changes. Clearly it is this third category that is most vital and that underlies both the data collection at the basic empirical level as well as the model building efforts at the next level. It is here that ideology and the assumption of the type of society towards which 'development' will lead encroaches in a direct manner.

Almost all the basic studies of post-war changes on issues of large socio-economic change have been by Westerners (Ames, Wriggins, Woodward, Singer, Shellgrew, etc.). The Ceylonese professional social scientists on the other hand have in the main restricted themselves to writing textbook material of a historical nature, for example, in economics (Karunatilake, Indraratne, Gunasekera, etc.) or to discussing micro-problems, isolated from the mainstream of events in the country, in other fields such as sociology and anthropology (Obeysekera, Tambiah, Pieris,⁷ etc.).

No Ceylonese social scientist to my knowledge has so far attempted a significant analysis of contemporary problems of Sri Lanka, especially as to the direction in which the society should change.

One is reminded of Moore's classification of two orientations in development theory, namely teleology and teleonomy. Teleology, according to Moore, is an orientation which involves the identification and implementation of future goals. Teleonomy, on the other hand, is an assumption about change which involves a concept of an inevitable future and the making of adaptive preparations towards it. Clearly the social science-based thinking now being implemented in Sri Lanka is of the teleonomy variety, purporting to guide towards an inevitable future as defined by Western development theory and the work of Western scholars on Sri Lanka. It therefore fits directly into a supporting role of dependence and neo-colonialism for the Ceylonese intelligentsia who take part in this relationship. That is, in this

⁶ An example of the type of research is a project at the University of Sussex; 'The effect of external assistance on economic development in the case of Sri Lanka'.

⁷ Pieris is one possible exception here. Although his major effort has been in describing the social organization of the Kandyand Kingdom he has in one article attempted to question the entire validity of imposed concepts in the Asian context. But his other work has not reflected this concern in any significant sense.

relationship the Ceylonese role is basically that of a comprador academic who helps directly in the colonization of the mind and indirectly in that of the economy.

The new colonial relationship in academia can best be described in more general terms by quoting and paraphrasing very slightly what Sunkel (1974) has said recently about multinational firms.

"As far as transfer of [intellectual] technology is concerned what we get are strictly end products, not the 'ability to combine lasting knowledge into commercially viable products and processes'. We get new products and processes, but not the capacity to develop new products and processes". And this "tendency of local [ideas-ideology] firms and subsidiaries to the wholesale importation of [intellectual] technology, ready made and fool proof has deleterious effects on such local technological activities as may [already or potentially] exist". Structurally the existing 'international' academic community in development knowledge largely fits a centre-periphery model, or a bureaucratic model, in which serious knowledge is generated only at the top (which is also the centre) and percolates downwards (and sideways to the periphery) in very carefully graded doses.

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The social sciences grew in the West out of an active interaction with social developments in these countries. What became subsequently the 'social sciences' and what is learned as such in intellectually dependent countries like Sri Lanka, represents a few of the answers that arose out of discussions about the far reaching changes that occurred during the last two centuries or so in the West. The social sciences interpreted the meaning and purpose behind the changes as well as its future direction. This interpretation sometimes fed itself back into the consciousness of those making the changes and so was able to affect the social reality that these writers were describing. And as the social reality itself was constantly changing the interpretations themselves changed over time.

This has not happened with us. In the case of academic social science in Sri Lanka, we have bought the social sciences in a ready-made pre-packaged ready-to-consume form. The only hitch here is that the Western social package has been ready made for a different wearer and does not fit properly the local context. A glaring gap

appears between real live discussion on the social and political realities of the country and the feeble, half-hearted and almost trivial types of study which the parochial Western oriented tradition has produced in Sri Lanka.

There has been a critical and bold questioning of the social reality in Sri Lanka from about the time of Anagarika Dharmapala to the island-wide insurrection of 1971. But this questioning and comment has not achieved the respectability of academia. This has been granted only to the problematics raised in the conceptual frameworks set in the Western world. Where the questions that have been raised by these groups have entered academia it has been as isolated subjects of study. Thus Dharmapala, as well as the 1971 situation, have been studied as disembodied 'social movements'. This is basically the colonial method of study of subject peoples, to give no credence to what they say but to explain it away as adults explain away questions raised by children.

Clearly there is a strong case for decolonizing academia in Sri Lanka, as has been recently suggested in some other ex-colonial contexts. This would require a re-examination of the conceptual apparatus used, the reference groups towards which the social sciences are addressed, and the examination of the intellectual dependency relationship itself. Ultimately the reference group towards which the social sciences in Sri Lanka have to address themselves is the public of this country and the social and political processes occurring within it. And to fit this purpose the conceptual apparatus of the social sciences will have to be purely that which can stand the test of explaining local social reality.

There is today only one course on development studies in the five campuses of the Sri Lanka University, but this does not teach development problems as such. It is meant to produce graduates who will hopefully be found jobs in development, and is to be taken merely as an administrative move away from teaching of humanities. None of the fundamental questions of development are discussed.

But within the last year or so there seems to have emerged the beginnings of a possible declaration of some academic independence. Small groups of dissident academics have been informally discussing the problems of outside sponsored studies and paradigms. (Some of these persons have been

co-opted into the government since 1970.⁸) Hopefully out of these beginnings a fruitful relevant literature will develop.

There have been some interesting writings in student journals, also within the last year or so, analysing internal socio-economic changes in a bold, imaginative way. Although some of this output tends to verge on caricature, the fact that fresh insights are being attempted outside the stultifying limits of multinational academia is heartening. Further, on the political level, discussion of the live issues in the country continues, and recent political journals seem to reflect a new kind of analysis.⁹

The dependency relationship has also a beneficial element in providing an external Western reference group for these basically conservative (in the academic sense) social scientists in Sri Lanka. The metropolitan centres of development theory are exploring areas which to the conventional academics in Sri Lanka brought up within the academic tradition of 20 years ago is almost revolutionary. The questioning of the market mechanism, the development of the concept of dependency relationships are virtually heretical ideas to this group.

Yet the subservient role into which academic dependence has thrust Sri Lanka academia outweighs any beneficial effects arising from the relationship. The need for decolonization is specially important now that the entire field of social science in the Western world is in a state of flux.¹⁰

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⁸ This incipient tendency has some parallels with the case of Latin America in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Those academics returning from government jobs brought in a counter view to the conventional views peddled by foreign foundations. This counter view was the beginning of the healthy Latin American contribution to development literature. (I am indebted to Professor Osvaldo Sunkel for this information.)

⁹ The gap between political reality and the imaginary world of development studies is clear when one observes that the 1971 island-wide insurrection with its apparent aims of breaking these dependent relationships erupted at just the time when the ILO mission, an extreme example of dependency, was in Sri Lanka.

¹⁰ In the development field see, for example, the work of Finnegan (1971), Frank (1971), etc., Gusfield (1967), Huizer (1970), Rhodes (1968), Bodenheimer (1970).

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