

GEORGE GHEVERGHESE JOSEPH, VASU REDDY and  
MARY SEARLE-CHATTERJEE

## Eurocentrism in the social sciences

Ethnocentrism, of which Eurocentrism is a special case, refers to 'the tendency to view one's own ethnic group and its social standards as the basis for evaluative judgements concerning the practices of others – with the implication that one views one's own standards as superior'.<sup>1</sup> On the face of it, no reasonable person would see such an academic approach as justifiable. Yet European ideas and concepts\* have had such an extraordinary effect in the last hundred years that Eurocentrism has, in varying degrees, permeated all social science disciplines. This should not be seen as a phenomenon in isolation. It grew out of the historical process of western colonial and economic dominance and has, in turn, provided an ideological justification for that dominance. The categories and approaches used in European academia help to maintain the political and intellectual superiority of Europe. The continuing presence of such academic constructs is a by-product of a widespread Eurocentric bias in the production, dissemination and evaluation of knowledge. The persistence of Eurocentrism has had the following effects:

(i) It has damaged non-European societies through the 'colonisation' of their intellectuals.

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*George Gheverghese Joseph* is in the Department of Econometrics and Social Studies at the University of Manchester. *Vasu Reddy* is in the Department of Psychology at Portsmouth Polytechnic. *Mary Searle-Chatterjee* is in the Department of Applied Community Studies at Manchester Polytechnic.

\*Although we use the terms Europe and European, our intention is to refer primarily to Britain and North America, and not parts of Europe such as Russia and Central Europe, which have had a very different history and intellectual tradition.

## 2 Race & Class

(ii) It has impoverished the academic disciplines themselves which remain unaware of alternative sources of knowledge outside mainstream development.

(iii) It functions, regardless of intention, to legitimate international systems of inequality.

In earlier works, we investigated the operation of such bias in history, mathematics, psychology and social anthropology.<sup>2</sup> Here we examine its presence in three social science disciplines: psychology, economics and social anthropology.\* These illustrate some important differences in the way Eurocentric biases enter each discipline.

Because the separation of these disciplines has permeated most academic institutions today, this article reluctantly follows the disciplinary divides. However, one of its purposes is to argue against a rigid compartmentalisation of academic disciplines. At both a cognitive level (through creating a more integrated approach) and at a practical level (where a little knowledge of social anthropology, for instance, can avoid the absurdities of development economics), we believe that breaking down the barriers between disciplines can lead to breaking down Eurocentrism.

The powerful influence of 'discipline-centrism' is well illustrated by the three distinctly different initial concerns which led to this study. We did not realise at the beginning of our collaboration that what we interpreted as Eurocentrism in each of the three disciplines, meant different things to each one of us. In economics, more than the other two disciplines, it was the European biases, ignorance, insensitivity and unconcern about social and cultural differences that were matters of primary concern. In psychology, a rather more subtle level of bias persists through the continued maintenance of certain metaphysical assumptions embedded in the European philosophical tradition of abstract individualism and universalism. Social anthropology could hardly be attacked for ignoring cultural differences. The discipline may be guilty of the opposite type of bias: the maintenance of superiority through a reluctance to universalise. At the risk of oversimplification, we identify three key concepts – inappropriate

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\*The biases present in sociology, particularly in concepts such as modernisation and traditionalism, or in political science, in the analysis of institutional adaptations to different social environments, have been well documented.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, a curious reluctance to acknowledge contributions from outside the European traditions is widespread in western academia. Little acknowledgement is made, for example, to the pioneering sociological contribution of the fourteenth-century scholar Ibn Khaldun of North Africa, or the remarkable similarities between Kautiliya's *Arthashastra* (an Indian manual on state craft composed around 300 BC) and Machiavelli's *Prince* or of the work of Chinese political theorists from the seventh century BC onwards, especially the contribution of the legalist school which paid a lot of attention to *Shu*, which can be translated as statecraft.

universalism, individualism and excessive particularism – in the analysis of Eurocentrism in the social sciences. The first two, mixed in different proportions, characterise economics and psychology and the third belongs to social anthropology.

### **Eurocentrism in economics**

#### *The imperial legacy*

All ideologies that emanate from the powerful have no difficulty recruiting scholars to provide the gloss. During the heyday of imperialism, the scholar was useful not only in constructing a conceptual framework within which colonial ideology could be defended and extended, but in helping to select problems for investigation which highlighted the beneficial effects of colonial rule. In some cases, economists working for the government were perhaps unaware of the ideological functions of their work; in many others, the political implications and exploitative intentions were clearly obvious. For example, the Kikuyu of Kenya were being encouraged to grow coffee rather than maize around the same time as the Malays were being discouraged from planting rubber and encouraged to concentrate on cultivating rice. In the two cases, the reason given was similar: the farmers would be better off if they followed the prescriptions. But the motivation was different in each case. In the Malayan case, the volume of rubber production had to be controlled to safeguard the profit margins of European plantation owners and/or avoid rice imports that would be needed if there was a significant shift from rice to rubber cultivation. In the case of the Kikuyu, who had to share their land with the white settlers, the need to bring them into the money economy, as either labourers or small producers of cash crops, was felt to be paramount.

Colonial education contributed to the creation of a false consciousness among the colonised. An important part of the strategy of domination was to convince the colonised that knowledge, whether in the sphere of culture, science or technology, could be acquired only through the mediation of the colonial rulers. This belief still remains strong in post-colonial societies faced every day with the demonstration of the marvels of western science and technology. A consequence of this uncritical perception is the emergence of the phenomenon of 'intellectual captivity' among the educated elite in the former colonial cultures. These 'captive' minds, often products of higher educational institutions in the West, exhibit certain characteristics that seem to cut across national boundaries. A tendency to uncritical imitation pervades almost the whole of the scientific activity in a number of poor countries. All major constituents of such activity, including problem setting, analysis, abstraction, generalisation, conceptualisation,

description, explanation and interpretation, are affected by this process. Consider an actual example from a South Asian country. An economist returns with a PhD qualification in public finance from a western university. He is set the task of improving the system of collecting and administering taxes from a widely dispersed community of rural inhabitants. Faced by the lack of even a basic administrative infrastructure such as is taken for granted in the country in which he was trained, he becomes painfully aware of the wide gap between the theoretical knowledge that he acquired overseas and the world of experience in his own country. The stage is set for imaginative adaptation of theory to practice. But often such a critical awareness is not a prelude to any creative thought. Even what would appear as a fairly obvious need to adapt a western-style tax system to take account of the cultural norms of his people may escape him. He plans a system of tax allowances appropriate for a conjugal family unit rather than a joint family system. Instead of married person and child allowances, what is required in a society where aged parents stay with their children, who are their social security in their old age, is a 'grand-parents' tax allowance. Thus, intellectual captivity in this instance is marked by unthinking imitation of the West, an incapacity to raise and solve original problems and a failure to generate concepts which are relevant and productive in the local context. These problems are further accentuated in many countries by the lack of attention or interest in the creation of an intellectual peer group and other vehicles to scrutinise and evaluate indigenous scholarship. Instead, legitimisation of research and publication of original findings remain very much a western monopoly.

Intellectual captivity can take another form: the neglect of sources outside European tradition and scholarship. Consider the work of Ibn Khaldun as an illustration. Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in 1337 and died in Cairo in 1406. His fame rests on a three-volume text entitled *Muqaddimah* (or 'Introduction to history')<sup>4</sup> in which he 'conceived and formulated a philosophy of history which is undoubtedly the greatest work of its kind that has ever yet been produced by any mind in any time or place'.<sup>5</sup>

The most original feature of his work, from the point of view of an economist, is his study of the underlying causes of underdevelopment. The Maghreb of Ibn Khaldun's time was not an underdeveloped area. On the contrary, it occupied an important position in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern trade, controlling the gold routes to the western Sudan. For most of the Middle Ages, Sudanese gold was the main source of precious metal for the merchants of the Middle East and much of Europe. In order to obtain it, they imported all kinds of commodities into the Maghreb and, as a result, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries towns grew up whose wealth was out of all

proportion to the wealth of the surrounding countryside. In spite of these favourable conditions, Ibn Khaldun noted signs of social, political and economic stagnation in the region.

It was in his search for the reasons for this that Ibn Khaldun made his original contribution. He identified two main factors which, with historical hindsight and marxian terminology, we would describe as: (i) the lack of a bourgeoisie and (ii) the enduring nature of what Marx labelled the 'Asiatic mode of production' in the Maghreb. It is now generally recognised that the emerging European bourgeoisie was a significant agent for initiating economic development in Europe, being a social class capable of coordinating the means of production and of bringing about fundamental structural transformations by making innovations and investments. A Eurocentric marxist may well argue that historically what are now called underdeveloped countries are those without a bourgeoisie powerful enough to carry out these tasks.

Marx characterised the 'Asiatic mode of production' by the existence of a class capable of appropriating a surplus and exploiting the population without necessarily owning the means of production, which, for the most part, remained in the hands of the village communities. It is a reflection of the quality of Ibn Khaldun's analysis of social structures that he recognised, without seeing the problem in either marxist or global terms, that behind the historical circumstances of the Maghreb, with its sophisticated and extravagant urban life style based on trade and the harsh and poverty stricken rural communities, lay the seeds of its stagnation and decline. And the applicability of Ibn Khaldun's analysis of underdevelopment, 400 years before Marx, for other states in Asia and Africa is now clear. An acquaintance with Ibn Khaldun's work on the historical development of the Maghreb serves as a useful corrective in trying to understand the evolution of all countries in terms of what are sometimes offered as universal marxian categories but are, in fact, based only on European experience: primitive communism, slavery, feudalism and capitalism

#### *Inappropriate universalism and individualism in economics*

With the significant exception of social anthropology, the social sciences in the West attempt to develop general knowledge and universal concepts, which in differing degrees are embedded in European experience and in a philosophical tradition of individualism and universalism. The two traditions of universalism and individualism are, in practice, linked to the same central tendency in the social sciences – that of excluding the 'social' from the domain of, say, the 'purely psychological' or 'purely economic'. In the case of economics, the limits of the domain change with time and fashion. However, we are concerned here with those universalist assumptions, characteristic

of western thought, which affect perceptions of 'other' societies.

An early consequence of inappropriate universalism is seen in the emergence of stereotypes such as the 'backward and lazy native' or, more generally, of static or stagnant non-European cultures devoid of vitality and creativity.\* Such stereotypes characterised western scholarship in the early decades of this century. To illustrate, a German scientist, commenting in 1916 on the primitive nature of technology in the Philippines, suggested that the reason why the Filipino fishermen used oars constructed from brittle bamboo poles was to ensure frequent periods of rest while they were being mended! Technical considerations, such as the lightness and pliability of the bamboo for this purpose, were not given serious consideration. The image of the indolent, unacquisitive and backward native is present in many reports of scholars, travellers and administrators of that period. It even gave birth to a new theory, referred to in economic literature as the theory of the 'backward sloping curve of effort'. In its simplest version, it states: pay a worker or peasant farmer more and he would react by reducing his work effort. Less effort would produce the same remuneration, so why bother? The lesson for the colonial capitalist or plantation owner is clear. Keep prices and wages low to ensure an acceptable level of productive efficiency.

Inappropriate universalism applies today particularly in development economics – a peripheral area, in any case, if one examines the contents of most of the basic economics texts. Where these texts refer to the 'Third World', they exhibit a crass ethnocentrism, betraying ignorance of the effects of political and social structures on economic behaviour. Probably as a result, most courses on offer in this field in Anglo-American universities, and taken by large number of students from underdeveloped countries, do not emphasise the need for theoretical reconstruction in responding to marked socioeconomic differences between these countries.

There is a tendency in this area of economics, more than in any other, to discourse in universalist and abstract propositions which are either misleading or of little analytical potential. Take an example from a well-known book, by the Nobel Laureate Kuznets,<sup>6</sup> where comparisons are made between the growth patterns of the developed

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\*A similar image of the British working class as feckless and lazy existed among the Social Darwinists of the nineteenth century. When taken in conjunction with the Malthusian nightmare of overpopulation, it was only a matter of time before the principle of 'eugenics' or selective breeding became the recommended option for survival. There are close but insufficiently examined links between the growth of racism in the British Empire and the increasing popularity of the eugenics movement which attracted a significant following among the founding fathers of psychology and mathematical statistics, notably Francis Galton (1822-1911) and Karl Pearson (1857-1936).

and underdeveloped worlds. The following propositions appear:

(i) the average per capita product of the underdeveloped countries is significantly lower than that of the developed countries in their pre-industrial phase;

(ii) the per capita agricultural land available is much lower in most underdeveloped countries than in developed countries in their pre-industrial phase; and

(iii) therefore, the lower per capita product in underdeveloped countries – relative to that in the pre-industrial phase of the developed countries – is probably due to the lower productivity of the agricultural sector.

These three propositions are highly speculative in that they have not been empirically verified in any systematic fashion. More important, they belong to a level of generality quite useless for policy analysis. But they do have an impact on the popular perception of traditional agriculture in the poorer world as 'backward' and 'inefficient'.

Economic judgements about other societies are often made without the necessary local knowledge. A good example of this is Hagen's discussion of the problems of introducing modern technology into developing countries. To illustrate a perfectly valid point that certain cultural elements cannot be assimilated in isolation, he gives the following example:

In Burma and India, and no doubt elsewhere in South East Asia and probably in most of Africa, the digging spade is unknown. Digging is done with a broad-bladed hoe. Though it is done with dexterity, it remains an awkward process in many circumstances. Surely, it would seem, the simple substitution of the spade would greatly increase productivity. But an ordinary digging spade cannot be used with sandals or bare feet, and it turns out that if the spade is constructed with a broad strip across the top, upon which the bare feet can press, then dirt sticks to this strip and the spade will not release its load. . . . Barring some further act of creativity, even so simple a tool as a spade cannot be imported into a low-income country with full efficiency until the level of living has risen sufficiently that it includes the wearing of shoes.<sup>7</sup>

Leaving aside the excessive generality of the statement, there is a fundamental anthropological principle that Hagen has ignored here. It is the principle that the function of a tool can only be judged by reference to its context. The hoe can be a more efficient tool than a spade. Its manipulative potential is much greater. It can be used to dig a hole and, at the same time, scrape the side with much greater ease. It is efficient for digging as well as trimming. It is suitable for the delicate construction involved in cultivating rice. It can dig much faster

than a spade. In terrace cultivation along mountain slopes, which involves scraping the descending banks of a terrace downwards, the hoe and not the spade is the efficient tool.

Such instances of misguided judgements may be multiplied. But the worrying aspect is that the uncritical acceptance of such opinions as Hagen's by the decision-makers of developing countries may have unfortunate consequences, including an undervaluation or dismissal of the traditional skills possessed by peasants and craftsmen in these countries.

Inappropriate methodology, duplicating techniques applied to economic analysis in the developed world, is often used in underdeveloped countries. One of the notable breakthroughs in economic analysis during the past few decades has been the use of quantitative techniques in model building. For example, the development of Harrod-Domar growth models in the 1950s led to the widespread application of the capital-output ratio criterion in planning economic development. A bias in favour of industrialisation and the corresponding neglect of the agricultural sector, which was an unfortunate feature of the early Indian five-year plans, may in part be due to the highly mechanistic view of growth which the acceptance of the criterion implied. It is a case of a social science mimicking the methodology of natural sciences. While the mechanistic view of economic development has been to some extent modified by the earlier failures, an uncritical faith in quantitative techniques still remains, bolstered by the growing use of econometric techniques in empirical studies in development economics.\* While such techniques have their value, their use in circumstances where statistical data are incomplete or inaccurate, where there is significant cultural heterogeneity, difficulty in quantifying complex social phenomena and/or rapid structural change, needs to be carefully scrutinised.

There may also be neglect of the cultural assumptions 'hidden' in the use of certain statistical modelling techniques. To illustrate, one of the authors, while working in Tanzania, was asked to supervise a research project which involved an econometric study of fertility in Tanzania based on a theoretical model developed for the United States. The model views fertility decisions as involving essentially rational decisions about time and resource allocation made by a couple living within a conjugal framework. So that whether the couple decides to have a child next year or not depends, among other things,

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\*Morgenstern has argued that viewing the economy as a mechanical analogue is consistent with the widespread tendency for economists to think first of the mathematical tools available and only then of the problems to which they could apply.<sup>8</sup> The 'adoption' of catastrophe theory and now the mathematics of chaos in economic modelling are recent illustrations of this tendency.



on a delicate balance between the 'disutility' incurred by the wife not going out to work and the utility gained by having a child. In terms of resource allocation, the child is essentially seen as a consumer durable good – so having a child means doing without a second car. The utter inappropriateness of such a model in the Tanzanian case needs no further comment.

A final example of inappropriate universalism is the frequent neglect in economics of the social and cultural dimensions of time. Time is a vital concept in economic analysis. Whether one is examining the effect of a tax on consumer demand or the impact of a price increase on the quantity supplied of a commodity or of a change in interest rates on consumer spending, the analysis distinguishes between the short- and long-term effects of the economic agent concerned. The implicit assumption is that the time effects are universal and free of cultural constraints. But this ignores the fact that time itself is a social construct. Each culture works out a concept of time acceptable to the vast majority of its people as a regulator of their day-to-day activities. Even allowing for noticeable variations by class, age or origins in the perception of time within the same culture, there is a uniformity in the concept which can only be explained by the inculcation into all members of the society from infancy of the following features of 'time'.

There is the way in which activities are arranged in relating to one another which constitutes the timing of these activities. There is the manner in which individuals or groups space and synchronise their activities which relates to the organisation of time. There is the innate human capacity to envisage occurrences in the future and plan accordingly, which involves forecasting over time. There is the historical vision of time, which may vary from a pessimistic version of retrogression from a lost golden age to a middling version of cyclical peaks and troughs of human achievement to an optimistic version of a steady progress to an ultimate utopia. Finally, there is the value imputed to time, which raises questions regarding evaluation, compartmentalisation and utilisation of time – all of which are culture specific. Thus, the view that time is money reflects an attitude where the economic value of time, its scarcity and the desirability of saving it is of importance. This is different from a world view which ranks time used in contemplation or relaxation as the highest priority. It is interesting that the rigid compartmentalisation of time found in many western societies (i.e., the time allocated to work and to leisure or social intercourse are kept strictly separate) is also culture specific – and from personal experience, it is one dichotomy that is difficult to take on board by those who have different cultural assumptions.

To what extent has economics taken on board the culture specific nature of these different dimensions of time? Our impression is that the level of awareness remains at the surface. A distinction is made

between the 'natural' time of pre-industrial societies and the 'clock' time of industrial societies. Punctuality is seen as an integral part of the technological dimension of modern life. There is a degree of awareness that the historical vision of time has some influence on whether people would strive for better living standards. But the level of discourse on the organisation of time and the value imputed to time remains superficial. To dismiss the inhabitants of developing societies as uninterested in accurate time-keeping, as some development economists are prone to do, is a travesty of fact. One only has to observe the scrupulous punctuality of the Muslim all over the world, whether in attending the mosque or breaking the fast at sunset during Ramadhan. What is at issue is the value imputed to time spent in different activities. An exposure to insights from other disciplines – notably social anthropology – would be particularly beneficial in rethinking this fundamental aspect of the subject.

### **Eurocentrism in psychology**

#### *Universalism in psychology*

The asocial character of western psychology has shown itself in two failures: (i) the failure to admit the 'social' into the process of human development and functioning and (ii) the failure to acknowledge the role of the 'social' in its own development and functioning. Challenges to this exclusion are not new and an increasing number of psychologists today see a resolution of this problem as a major task. LeVine points to this manner of marginalising the influence of society as significant in psychology's adoption of universalism.

Many psychologists – and many psychoanalysts as well – seem to have a deep-seated metaphysical conviction that humans everywhere are the same in all respects that count, that cultural variations are mere externals or details or reflections of extreme (and easily specifiable) conditions like malnutrition or social isolation. They reject the message of cultural relativism as it applies to psychological process.<sup>9</sup>

Examples where a universal is assumed range from visions of 'mind' as an intellectual phenomenon to the depiction of emotional dramas such as the battle for power in toilet training. In the study of mind and intellect, such depictions have usually borne remarkable similarity to the world of the visualiser. As Crook notes, European thought has been characterised by a tendency to reify the subjective: 'Models of mind tend to be couched in terms of the most complex machinery of control known to the modellers.'<sup>10</sup>

For Descartes (the founder of Cartesian philosophy which forms the basis of most modern psychology), who found pipes, machinery

and clockwork fascinating, 'mind' was a kind of spectral machine, governed by rigid and deterministic (albeit non-mechanical) laws. Similarly, 'modern man', fascinated by computers, employs 'computational metaphors' to describe the structure and functions of mind. Whatever the metaphoric machine, western psychology sees mind primarily in terms of what it does, and either ignores or devalues attempts to describe how it feels. The interest of non-European traditions in, on the other hand, the experiential aspects of mind has been well documented, ranging from the cultivation of 'open awareness', of subjective experience in Buddhist approaches to meditation, to the extreme states of *samadhi* and *mokhsa* within Hindu approaches, where the object is a desire for a 'a direct experience of the fundamental unity of a human being with the infinite'.<sup>11</sup> Applied universally, western models of mind contain, therefore, a built-in bias in their concentration on performance and their machine metaphors.

Within modern psychology, the dominant model of the development of 'mind' has been Piaget's largely asocial theory of the development of cognitive structures, which closely parallels the development of western science. Both the child and scientific thinking develop from irrationality and bondage to subjective experience towards objectivity and logic. In the arena of moral development, a related theory was put forward by Kohlberg.<sup>12</sup> While for Piaget, the child is best described as a little scientist playing all alone with objects and working out for him or herself the laws of physics, Kohlberg pictures the child as a budding moral philosopher developing refinements in moral reasoning.

In not recognising the social origins of these theories and models, psychology is guilty of assuming an objectivity and a universality for its products. And in this failure lies the possibility for bias against social groups with different histories and value systems.

Cross-cultural comparisons of intellectual performance, for example, which are frequently made by psychologists, are revealing of bias in many different ways. Glick reports an amusing case of misunderstanding which illustrates the dangers of quick comparisons across cultures.<sup>13</sup> In a study of the skills of Kpelle subjects in classifying twenty objects, it was found that they would consistently sort the objects into functional groups such as an orange with a knife, and a hoe with a potato, instead of into more 'appropriate' categorical groups such as fruits and vegetables, tools, etc. The Kpelles' comments were illuminating: they reported that that was the way a wise man would do things. When finally asked by the exasperated researcher how a fool would do things, the sorting was rapidly done in the expected manner!

Other factors which make comparisons invalid relate to the testing situation itself: an artificial situation which is, in fact, trained for in

middle-class western homes and schooling systems. These include non-functional games which train for 'proper' methods of problem solving; independent action, speed, and mental vs physical manoeuvres, etc.<sup>14</sup> However, although such 'social' factors are now well recognised in psychological theory, they are far from being accepted within psychological practice.

A further source of bias obtains from the adoption of particular theoretical 'yardsticks' for cross-cultural comparison. The most widely researched of these has been Piaget's theory, which posits a universal developmental sequence which goes through invariant stages. This theory allows clear interpretations of better or worse for performances along the sequence, and allows conclusions of general lag in mental functioning based on specific failures. Many cross-cultural psychologists in recent years have recognised the particular suitability of Piagetian tasks to western technological societies, and have concluded that many of the Piagetian mental operations, and especially those in the final stage of formal reasoning, may be achieved through specific teaching and practice, rather than through the fulfilment of some universal epigenetic sequence.

However, in a major review of cross-cultural studies of Piagetian theory, Dasen and Heron raise an interesting point about this way of explaining cross-cultural differences in cognitive performance.<sup>15</sup> In trying to explain the poorer performance in many non-western cultures on tests of abstract imagery, abstract reasoning and scientific thinking, many authors have described these tests and the skills they tap as peculiarly western, and therefore building in a Eurocentric bias in cross-cultural comparisons. Dasen and Heron argue that, paradoxically, such authors are implicitly appealing for a revival of Levy-Bruhl's concept of 'primitive' mentality. The description of rationalism, scientific thinking, abstract conceptual or theoretical reasoning as typically western, and of magical thinking and concrete reasoning as typically non-western, they argue, is simply another form of ethnocentrism. Instead of pre-empting the search by describing it as a western skill, psychologists should ask: 'How well can they do their (own) tricks?', thus keeping open the possibility that in these yet unexplored areas of knowledge, 'formal' reasoning does occur in these cultures.

Well, *their* tricks have still not been discovered, and members of non-western cultures, continue to perform less competently at 'tests' of formal reasoning tasks than members of western cultures. But the contradiction that this poses is an unnecessary one, and is itself implicitly based upon an asocial theory of cognitive development. If one assumes, as Piagetians do for example, that there is a 'natural' sequence of development which is universal, with a 'natural' fixed end-point (the attainment of formal reasoning) and that these stages

are 'naturally' attained (not through social tutoring) and that this is the path development will take unless there is something lacking in the environment, then the interpretation that some non-western cultures may not be competent at formal reasoning may indeed be seen as ethnocentric.

But the very idea of horizontally consistent, unvarying stages in cognitive development is now being challenged, as is, by implication, the 'naturalness' of the sequence of stages in development and the supposed 'naturalness' of the endpoint of development. The argument is put forward by some modern theorists that formal reasoning is an 'artificial' skill, in as much as it has to be specifically taught.<sup>16</sup> And this specific teaching lies in demanding a concentration on the internal aspects of a reasoning problem, to the exclusion of the context. One might almost say, it requires a focus upon the normally meaningless, to the exclusion of the normally meaningful. If one accepts from this point of view that formal reasoning is part of a situation (involving relations between people) and not a possession of the individual, and that the idea of specific cognitive structures which develop from the concrete to the abstract is itself the product of a particular social context, then the interpretation in question by no means diminishes the competence of non-western cultures. It is only with the acceptance of asocial universal stages and asocial development that this might be seen as a form of ethnocentrism. But this is a paradox or contradiction to be resolved within western psychology itself, not by cross-cultural comparisons based upon existing asocial theories of psychological development. Without perceiving its own constructs as contextually developing ones, psychology has no alternative but to assume false universals.

Although it is harder to adopt an asocial perspective when dealing with the 'meaning' and development of social behaviour, it has, nonetheless, frequently happened at various levels. Assumptions are often made that particular inter-personal behaviours carry the same meaning in different contexts, that the same causal processes are at work in different environments and, indeed, that the theoretical concepts developed in western psychology, and of importance to western societies, are also applicable in simple cross-cultural comparisons.

### *Individualism in psychology*

The philosophical tradition of abstract individualism is also a factor producing inappropriate generalisation in psychology. An important source of this tradition is the work of Descartes. In his search for certainty and truth in a world in which even his senses could not be trusted, Descartes arrived at his now famous conclusion that the only certainty was his own consciousness. The metaphysical implications of

this conclusion are clear:

(i) Since another person's consciousness is completely opaque to anyone else, a clear separation exists between individual and society.

(ii) A distinction between consciousness and senses implies a split between mind and body.

(iii) In the pursuit of truth and certainty, the emphasis should be on the mind rather than the body, on the individual rather than on groupings of individuals or on relations between individuals.

This multiple dualism and its consequent biases have deeply permeated western psychology. Its effects have been reflected in the theoretical constructs developed and isolated as significant, in the values attached to particular human attributes, actions and developmental outcomes, and in the clear locating of psychological resources within the individual as opposed to within relationships.<sup>17</sup>

If one wishes to measure emotional strength, for instance, one measures it in the individual's ability to withstand various problems; if one wishes to measure morality, one measures it in the individual's ability to withstand temptation, make moral judgements, or behave in a 'moral' manner. One does not look at the behaviour of a group – unless to treat the group as an individual. Indeed, so entrenched are we in this perspective that the alternative suggestion, that psychological resources may be located in relationships and between people rather than within individuals, is extremely difficult to conceptualise or implement. And yet, it is precisely this choice of locating resources that causes a serious misfit between the constructs of societies where the individual does need to be very much an isolated individual, and societies which emphasise the collective nature of individuals within groups.

One interesting example of such a misfit can be seen in the area of morality. All theories in western psychology focus on the individual as the agent of moral actions, as the possessor and/or constructor of moral rules and principles, and as the actor whose decisions are untouched by the presence of external watchmen – i.e., the individual who makes moral decisions on the strength of conviction, not on the strength of support. This definition of morality as an individual resource is, in fact, compatible with the needs and the 'folk' psychology of most western cultures today. But this is precisely where the incompatibility with non-individualist cultures arises.

The dominant theory of moral development today defines morality primarily as justice.<sup>18</sup> And justice implies a further objective prerequisite: impartiality. That is, the application of the individual's rules and principles to all other individuals, free of particular relationships. There is a growing rebellion within western psychology today, especially by feminists who argue that many psychological constructs are masculine in their orientation and their bias. In the area of

morality, the very definition of morality as justice precludes what Gilligan calls an 'alternative moral voice' – that of caring.<sup>19</sup> The latter allows interpersonal acts of empathy and love to be described as moral in addition to acts of moral reason and impartial justice. As Blum puts it, it allows the particular as well as the impartial to possess moral quality.<sup>20</sup>

Studies of morality in India have had the unenviable task of trying to 'explain away' uncomfortable behaviour. Individuals in India appear to act guided by external gratification rather than internal norms alone. The psychoanalytic literature describes this as a failure in the development of internal controls, somewhat akin to the weaker superegos attributed to women generally, and a consequent development of a 'communal conscience' instead of individual conscience. Kakar describes succinctly the Indian's private touchstone for moral codes:

Thus, although Indians publicly express a staunch commitment to traditional moral codes, privately, in relation to himself, an individual tends to consider the violation of these codes reprehensible only when it displeases or saddens those elders who are the intimate, personal representatives of his communal conscience.<sup>21</sup>

The embarrassment for such an Indian lies in having to defend him or herself against the image of being an adult human being who yet does not possess moral norms entirely his or her own, or is unable to pledge and live up to context-free allegiance to any norms.

The embarrassment, however, is unnecessary. The dichotomy between individuals and their interpersonal relationships, which western psychology has for so long accepted, is the product of a particular tradition which is being challenged even within the discipline. Rather than accept definitions of deficiencies imposed from without, psychologists from cultures of a more collectivist persuasion need to define their own conceptions of morality and maturity and to recognise the extent to which western developmental psychology has focused on the growth of individual resources in the child or the adult, rather than on interpersonal or social resources. In the development of morality, the early demarcation of rules and principles allows the individual to acquire them. Their absence handicaps individual growth in individualist societies. In non-individualist cultures, morality might, on the other hand, be developed as an interpersonal resource, tied to particular interpersonal contexts, and exist as responsiveness as well as justice. The value of morality which exists within an individual as opposed to within a situation or within the context of a relationship must depend on the function it serves on the ground, rather than whether it meets the criteria of a theory of morality.

Within western psychology, too, the attempt to reject individualist assumptions of human functioning and development and replace them with more contextual explanations is progressing rapidly.<sup>22</sup> Whether psychology can ever achieve complete harmony between its search for generalisations and its growing recognition of the context dependence of itself as well as of its subject matter – only time will tell.

### **Eurocentrism in social anthropology**

#### *The imperial legacy*

There is considerable literature documenting the complex and contradictory nature of anthropology's involvement with imperialism.<sup>23</sup> The anthropologist depended on the colonial power for permission as well as, often, material support. The structure of power relationships affected the choice and treatment of topics. As Asad put it, 'There is a strange reluctance on the part of most professional anthropologists to consider seriously the power structure within which their discipline has taken shape.'<sup>24</sup> The general drift of anthropology subsequently has not challenged this structure.

Theories of cultural and social diffusion and evolution, the prevailing approaches of nineteenth-century anthropology, were consonant with an expanding and aggressive colonialism. Later, on the dominant 'structural-functional' paradigm, with its notion that all the parts of a social system work together to produce an equilibrium, reinforced the illusion that colonised societies were self-determining, even static and stagnant. Such a model was in harmony with the later colonial concern to consolidate possessions as, paradoxically, was the notion of cultural relativism. The anthropologist became important to the administration with the retreat from direct coercive rule.

It is possible that some of the critiques of 'classical anthropology' have attributed more influence to the discipline than was warranted. Earlier imperial societies managed quite well without anthropology to 'support' their activities, though no doubt they, too, developed 'anthropologies' in the informal sense, sets of collective representations of people in society, of foreigners in relation to themselves.\*

Said has reminded us that various intellectual and emotional as well as political roots lay under post-Renaissance Europe's interest in other societies, particularly in those that became known as the

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\*Such stereotypes change over time. In 1068, Said ibn Ahamad classified the nations known at that time into three categories of people: (i) the literate and scientifically advanced consisting of Indians, Persians, Greeks, 'Rums' (i.e., Byzantines and Eastern Christians), Arabs and Jews; (ii) 'the noblest of the unlearned nations who are worthy of respect for their achievements in other fields' consisting of Turks and Chinese (their technology was specially mentioned); and (iii) the rest mainly consisting of 'Northern and Southern Barbarians of Frankish Europe'.



Orient.<sup>25</sup> Growing secularism and the loss of belief in the sacredness of the world, coupled with a distaste for industrial society, led to romantic notions of the 'other', an extreme form of which was the notion of the spontaneous 'Noble Savage'. Such ideas survive among many people including radicals, both black and white. They express a yearning for an imagined, more integrated and satisfying life. Romanticism became a new religion and forms of it have often been used as a yardstick by which to criticise European society. Said argues that despite its apparent contrast with other European attitudes to the Orient, romanticism shared the same assumptions of different human essences and irresolvable contrasts. In this sense it was what Inden has called the 'loyal opposition'.<sup>26</sup> The romantic approach was and is Eurocentric in that it uses or creates images of other peoples in terms of the cognitive needs and interests of Europeans.

It would, in any case, be surprising if social anthropology were not in any sense Eurocentric, since it was in Europe that anthropology became an organised discipline.\* Even today, most anthropologists come from the West, where most of the subject's audience is concentrated. Europeans cannot be expected to transcend their origins any more than any other people.

### *Focussing on difference*

Whatever its failings in the past and present, social anthropology has been the West's most sustained attempt to understand other societies and cultures. In that sense, it is, at its best and in its ideal form, the least ethnocentric of the social sciences.

Social anthropology also differs from the other social sciences in that it has been less concerned with general processes and, therefore, less inclined to search for universal laws. This has been both its strength and its weakness. It means that it has not lost sight of the particularity of experience. On the other hand, the stress on the particular has tended to highlight the differences between peoples. This might be justified on the grounds that every traveller tends to notice what is different. He or she attempts to make sense of 'otherness' by accommodating it within a familiar or 'normal' framework of mental structures and hierarchies, thus controlling any disturbing effects. The alternative, which involves redefining the self, is more challenging. Anthropology has been an attempt to do the former, to 'make normal' the 'other'. The discipline has often even been defined in terms of the study of the 'other', i.e., of societies different from one's own. Those who have been unable to render the

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\*Although anthropology eventually became an enlightened source of information on society and culture, during the early nineteenth century it was a system for the hierarchical classification of races.

'other' harmless, who have 'gone native' (i.e., succumbed to the demands or pleasures of the 'other'), have usually abandoned the discipline or been unable or unwilling to complete their theses or books. So central is the focus on 'otherness' that anthropologists actively seek out those who are most different – elderly or uneducated villagers, for example, rather than the educated urban middle class. This is part of the endeavour to maintain as differentiated an image of the 'other' as possible. It is likely, moreover, that papers are rewritten to stress the elements that most differ from 'European' patterns. Studies that do not highlight differences tend in practice to be seen as more towards the sociology end of the sociology/anthropology continuum. In the study of India, for example, such topics as agricultural change, health practices, trade unions and gender have often been seen as of less anthropological interest than studies of caste or ritual, unless difference in values is stressed.

The tendency to focus on difference may, unwittingly, give the impression that different groups have different needs and expectations. As such, it is not incompatible with notions of the need for special treatment or even of European superiority and dominance. Most anthropologists make some attempt to imply that differences are an expression of universal processes, but studies vary greatly in the degree to which this is explicit. A recent revival of interest in symbolic systems of meaning in ritual and myth, rather than in social structures, often serves, in effect, again to emphasise the difference between peoples, despite the universalising claims made in this field by Levi-Strauss. Criticism of Eurocentrism in anthropology has surfaced again among the black minorities in Europe. Most anthropologists refuse to engage seriously with these criticisms. Several important issues are highlighted here. The first is that the usual mode of discourse fraudulently implies an impossibly neutral and transcendental knowledge on the part of the researcher, as when the anthropologist speaks for the 'other' without adding the voices of 'insiders' (difficult though it sometimes is to establish who is an 'insider' and who is not). Modification in presentation – laying a wide range of views on the table or using the first person – might meet some of this criticism. But it is hard to envisage a radical alternative that does not imply some form of relativism and hence, perhaps, from a Judaeo-Christian point of view, the spectre of cynicism and inaction, or, in the terms of classical anthropology, a loss of 'collective representation'.

While writers such as Barthes and Derrida have attempted to bring this loss of 'collective representation' to our consciousness, they have not examined the existential problem raised.<sup>27</sup> Such issues have been discussed for over 1,600 years in the classical schools of Indian philosophy. The issues of relativism emerged early in such a heterogeneous society as India.

The particularism of social anthropology has produced its own variant of the problem of the fraudulently authoritative, even 'masculine' voice.<sup>28</sup> If the subject is defined as the 'particularistic' study of 'others', it becomes unnecessary to incorporate the self into the analysis or recognise how the ethnography itself is socially grounded. However, it is unlikely that an account can be sociologically accurate, or at least adequate, if it is conceived in 'bad faith'. By this is meant deceiving oneself into thinking that other views are socially located, but one's own are not. In practice, any approach must emerge from a particular institutional or subgroup location in society, whether based on class, occupational origin, regional identity, gender or religious ancestry.

Marxism avoids some of these problems in that it does, to some extent, include European society within its analysis. However, marxist anthropology, a new and untypical strand in the discipline, can be accused of Eurocentrism on other counts. Some of its exponents go so far as to argue that the 'collective representations' of the people being studied should be ignored.<sup>29</sup> Marxist anthropologists can also be criticised on the grounds that they assume that certain European categories, such as 'society', 'religion', 'economy' and 'nature', are of universal application. Such criticisms have been made of anthropologists in general.<sup>30</sup> No one has yet been able to offer an alternative conceptual vocabulary that satisfactorily transcends all cultures. Even at a lower and less difficult level of analysis, it is not uncommon to use Eurocentric terms such as 'extended' and 'nuclear' in describing family structure. From an Indocentric perspective, for example, it may be more appropriate to distinguish 'joint' from 'fragmented' families.

### *Effects versus intentions*

Other issues of concern are also linked to the question of mode of presentation. These emerge out of anthropologists' reluctance to follow one of their own precepts, i.e., that the 'meaning' of a particular custom, pattern of behaviour, piece of writing or visual imagery must go beyond the intention or stated aim of the act or actor. We have to consider not simply what anthropologists say or intend in communication with one another, but how they and their work are interpreted by people outside their discipline.

The mode of presentation may serve to exclude from readership a large range of people, including a disproportionate number of non-Europeans. An abundant use of jargon or terms familiar only to those who specialise in the particular area, may be due to the nature of socialisation within the discipline. It may also indicate a concern to mark off disciplinary boundaries or to establish academic credentials and elite status. Regardless of causes or intentions, such a practice

results in excluding 'others' and is, therefore, indirectly ethnocentric. The medium speaks louder than the message.

Anthropologists are sometimes consulted by people who have a limited understanding of the subject. They may be asked for 'cultural' information. By accepting the given framework of questioning, even if it is not the one they would use in their academic writing, they allow such perceptions as the following to go unchallenged:

(i) A knowledge of cultural difference (rather than, say, economic inequality or political relationships) is all that is needed.

(ii) The art and literature of some societies is akin to folk lore. It was only recently that an advertisement appeared in British newspapers for a university lecturer in 'non-western art' with the proviso that applications were especially welcome from anthropologists. Would a similar specification have been made if there was a vacancy for a lectureship in 'western art'?

These problems appear most starkly in the popularised anthropology of films and exhibitions, which are addressed to a larger and unknown audience whose interest in such exhibits has never been seriously examined. Anthropologists often lack not only the skills of communication with such audiences but also the desire to acquire them. It is interesting to speculate on why anthropologists are more interested in the common people of other societies than of their own. Unawareness of their role and lack of participant observation of the consumers of such works has meant that anthropologists often do not include sufficient comparative or contextual material. The matri-focal or single parent family may appear as a 'problem' if presented in an ethnographic rather than comparative framework which includes details about, say, white lower working-class family patterns. There may be no information relating to the political situation or to the effects of international trade relations and tourism, for example. Or the material may be accurate at one level but misleading at another. It is inadequate to present witchcraft among the Azande without including discussion of such topics as McCarthyism in the USA and the Nazi persecution of Jews. The presentation often ignores the fact that many viewers are racially and culturally prejudiced. Exhibitions may be viewed in giggling wonder by schoolchildren who point from displays to children of Afro-Caribbean or Asian origin in their group. Racial minorities know only too well the way in which popular anthropology is often 'received' by the general public. And it is this that, in part, explains their hostility to anthropology. Anthropologists often forget that all 'knowledge' is in practice received and assimilated as though it is general. If the anthropologist does not provide the generalisation in his or her material, the readers or viewers will create their own by making use of their pre-existing stereotypes and prejudices.

### **Drawing the strands together**

In our examination of the foundations of Eurocentrism in the social sciences, the key concepts that have repeatedly emerged have been inappropriate universalism and individualism in the case of economics and psychology and excessive particularism in the case of social anthropology. A common malaise affecting all three subjects has been the persistence of a form of 'discipline-centrism' which has contributed to their Eurocentrism. On the question of human universals, we found economics to be least aware of the implicit biases in its assumptions of human nature and society. Discipline-centrism in economics provides a convenient escape route from thorny issues of culture, power, human nature and values. Similarly, psychology for a long time failed to recognise the relevance of culture as anything but an external process. By its insistence on being concerned with 'purely' psychological subject matter, it has persistently distanced itself from the social and historical. It is only social anthropology, with its focus on the particular that has the potential for making unbiased cross-cultural comparisons. However, in its anxiety to make out a distinct subject area for itself, it has tended to stress the particularity and differences of cultures. In effect, it has functioned to support Eurocentrism.

What is the solution? Is it a question of degree? Is it that we should follow the middle path on a continuum of emphases between particularism and universalism? This answer is too vague and uninformative to be helpful. Alternatively, is the answer that psychology and economics should change fundamentally in such a direction that the particular and 'cultural' are integral rather than peripheral to their explanations? What, then, of social anthropology? The answer must be, of course, that if the other social sciences become genuinely 'social', there may be no need for a social anthropology separate from sociology! We would then have one psychology and one economics rather than several, i.e., approach a kind of universalism which could be valuable.

It is to the effects of persistent Eurocentrism, briefly itemised in the introduction to this paper, that we next turn.

*(i) It has damaged non-European societies through the 'colonisation' of their intellectuals.*

The question that immediately arises is what precisely is being 'colonised'. It is clearly not any recognisable non-European social science discipline which has been taken over and then modified beyond all recognition. The institutionalisation of separate disciplines is a characteristic of western academic development. Not to question the idea of drawing disciplinary boundaries is, perhaps to make false

assumptions about their pre-existent form. Nor is it meaningful to talk about 'colonisation' if an indigenous tradition did not exist in the first place. Could we talk, for example, about Chad psychology being 'colonised' if such an entity did not already exist? All one can claim is that something has been replaced or overrun as a result of the imposition of ideas and values emanating from outside. And the persistence of a virtual western monopoly in the creation of new institutions and networks to legitimise research and publication helps to perpetuate this form of intellectual dependence. But the question remains: have non-European societies been damaged more than enriched by the adoption of such 'knowledge' from European sources?

This raises a number of other questions: What exactly is the nature of damage inflicted by Eurocentric scholarship? If the argument is that the damage has prevented the older indigenous traditions from developing and being used, then the question arises: is it legitimate to compare cultures (or even countries) to individual organisms as capable of evolving to their full potential if allowed to do so? Such a comparison soon breaks down, since cultures are not spatially and temporally bounded in the same way as animate organisms. If we try to do so, we are guilty of the same narrowness we are accusing European social sciences of adopting.

We are, therefore, left with a particular concept of 'colonisation' which emerges from an undetected mismatch between the perspectives (or, even more obviously, the goals) of the imported theoretical framework from the West being used to analyse the reality of people's lives and values elsewhere. Examples of such mismatches have already appeared in our discussions of psychology and economics, although not so much in social anthropology.

It may be argued that the adoption of imported perspectives and goals leads to a creative tension, one of whose benefits is the very recognition of multiple perspectives which this article is arguing for. But in the historical context of recent colonialism, such adoption has usually meant the undervaluing of the experiences of the colonised and the undermining of their confidence in their actions and perceptions. The 'colonised' people (for want of a better term) frequently have to adopt the position of second-hand receivers of knowledge when dealing with theories derived from alien experiences.

Writers and social scientists from underdeveloped countries are often very clearly aware of their position as 'borrowers' of colonial theories. The lack of indigenous theories is frequently lamented.<sup>31</sup> The question of what indigenous social sciences should look like and, therefore, the search for national identities is a very familiar refrain in recent Asian and African writing. There are as yet no strong alternative conceptual frameworks. A rejection of their position as

intellectual colonies of Europe is perhaps a necessary prelude to building new approaches. One direction which the search for a truly indigenous identity often takes is a return to ancient scriptures and cultural roots (see, for example, the recent three volume tome on *Indian Psychology* by Sinha).<sup>32</sup> Whether such directions prove fruitful, or turn out to be yet other forms of borrowing – i.e., from the past – remains to be seen.

(ii) *Eurocentrism has impoverished the European academic disciplines themselves which remain unaware of alternative sources of knowledge.* The point is more general than the neglect of certain historical sources of knowledge discussed earlier. Where only single perspectives are available, evaluation cannot be anything but limited. A good illustration in psychology, discussed earlier, relates to the European focus on mind as performance to the virtual exclusion of mind as experience. This can actually be seen to have limited all understanding of the nature of consciousness. That is, there has been a loss in terms of content and information which can only remedied by taking mystical experiences more seriously!

Another perspective which the limited vision of Eurocentrism has stunted in both economics and psychology relates to the recognition of non-individualist societies. Even before Descartes, there were two opposing views in Europe of the nature of an individual: the 'human' view versus the 'personality' view. The former, the collectivist vision, saw the individual in terms of a larger network of interpersonal relations, while the latter, stressing isolable mind, came to be the western ideal of individualism. European analysis of psychological and economic behaviour is part of the particular individualist tradition emphasised by Descartes. We have examined the failures in both disciplines resulting from their asocial character.

The perspective of the social anthropologist is limiting in a totally different way from that of an economist or a psychologist. The 'holistic self-containment', implied in studying different groups of human beings, gives the impression that they have different needs and expectations. And because of the common perception that anthropologists actively seek out and, indeed, only study 'exotic' groups from remote parts of the world rather than groups in their own society (which is often left to the sociologist), there is an implicit assumption that the conclusions drawn have little general relevance. Indeed, the concerns of the anthropologist may be seen as highlighting different human essences and irresolvable contrasts.

(iii) *Eurocentrism functions, regardless of intention, to legitimate international systems of inequality.*

Examples abound in economics of support for the status quo. The

economic ideology sustaining the production hierarchies during the colonial era and, subsequently, the globalisation of production and the new international division of production have had no difficulty recruiting scholars to provide the gloss. These developments have been well explored in the works of Harris, Mitter, Rodney and Sivanandan, among others.<sup>33</sup> The contribution of social anthropology to the legitimisation of international systems of inequality is of a more indirect kind. It lies in the perception that a knowledge of cultural differences is possible or valuable without any necessary consideration of questions relating to economic inequality or political power relationships.

However, the more damaging inequality promoted by Eurocentric social science disciplines probably arises from the borrowing of categories and constructs meaningful and valued in western contexts, and transposing them in other contexts where they are less meaningful and less valued. The emerging 'poorer' performance of individuals from the 'other' contexts serves to lend a cloak of scientific objectivity and respectability to the view that underdevelopment is not merely an economic problem but a human and social one as well.

Within psychology, the 'poorer' performance of non-European societies ranges from lower scores on intelligence tests, to lower scores on measures of independence and initiative, to less success on measures of compliance and strategies of control. In standard intelligence testing, the development of local norms serves as a convenient gloss over the basic fact that one population is performing less well than others. Local norms should aid the tester in practical applications of the test. But in no way do they solve the problem of the test's fundamental foreignness and inapplicability. Until both western psychology and non-western psychologists confront the theoretical implications of this problem, there can be no real end to subtle academic colonialism.

There is today one desire that transcends all national boundaries. Every society, irrespective of its cultural assumptions and values, is in search of affluence through economic growth. There is also a universal subscription to the Baconian idea that, through science and technology, growth and affluence are attainable. But in recent years, there has emerged an issue of global significance – a multi-dimensional ecological crisis which is basically a product of three major technological innovations, namely the motor car, nuclear weapons and petrochemical products. Together, they are not only responsible for the depletion of exhaustible resources but also adversely affect the self-renewing capacity of the rest. While these issues are in the forefront of the political agenda in the developed world, in many underdeveloped countries today, the 'Green' concern is viewed with suspicion, as yet another attempt to deprive them of their share of



global resources. The social scientists of these countries, along with their politicians, will have to start thinking about how the growing ecological crisis will affect them, rather than leaving it to others.\* Tackling such a challenge may stimulate a more sustained attack on Eurocentrism in the social sciences.

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