RESEARCHING SOCIETY AND SOCIAL RELATIONS IN SARAWAK

EDITORS
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SHARIFAH S. AHMAD
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Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
Kota Samarahan
The edited volume on recent studies on Sarawak was part of an Adjunct Professor Series organised by the Department of Anthropology and Sociology in the Faculty of Social Sciences, University Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). After few discussions it was decided that a title *Researching Society and Social Relations* is general enough to capture the multiplicities of research issues and challenges raised in the chapters. All the chapters here have been presented at a two-day colloquium held from 26 to 27 February 2014 in the Faculty. The editors would like to express their appreciation to Professor Abdul Halim Ali and Associate Professor Dr Ling How Kee who were present at the colloquium and were supportive enough to listen and dispense helpful advice to the presenters, all in the spirit of learning and exchange. Finally, we wish to extend our gratitude to the contributors who responded to our requests with good grace and efficiency.

Kamsiah Ali  
Sharifah S. Ahmad  
2016
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<td>Colonial Social Science Research Council</td>
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<td>CU</td>
<td>Cultural Unit</td>
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<td>DFID</td>
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<td>JARING</td>
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INTRODUCTION

Social research constitutes the most visible value of practicality of social science. Since social science was conceived in the middle half of the 18th century, the discipline has been in all intent and purposes practical that seeks to raise problems in society and offer solutions to the problems. The problems identified at the outset of the Industrial Revolution such as labour, housing, health, unemployment, security, environment and social illness continue to be the topics for researchers in the current times.

While the problems remained true today, their concepts differ as one may perceived at the level of epistemology and method, namely the nature of the problem and the ways of investigating them. At the level of episteme, social research has witnessed varying degree of adaptation and competition, between positive approach of explanation (eklaren) and the interpretive approach of understanding (verstehen) or the combination of both. The philosophy underlines the different approaches pertaining to the limit of knowledge, in other words, the extent that knowledge can be accepted as true and objective. While Durkheimian school argued that society can only be studied as observable facts,
Weberian proponents would be more sympathetic to the role of motivation, desires and value-system as driving forces in society. What these differences amounted to points to the existence of different paradigm in thinking and seeing problem in society. To illustrate, in *Suicide*, Emile Durkheim found that not one action however personal that might be, can be completely free from social relations. What he saw as a problem was not the suicide *per se*, but the misrecognition of suicide as private matter that detached individual from its society. From Durkheim's study, one can send a message to the policy-makers to investigate the factors and conditions that may lead to the problem, thereby eliminating the root-causes *in lieu* of the problem. From his analysis, one detects a causality principle underpinned his observation. The causal relations between external factors and individual actions provide powerful explanatory tools that appeal to the logic and observation of the investigator. Such thinking and method continue to dominate social research today.

While Durkheim study had sent ripple effects to the social science in the continent, there was a critical reception on the value of observation as the only reliable source of knowledge. What about individual intention, needs, spirits? Aren't they too creating actions that have social significance? Here, Max Weber tried to demonstrate the role of religious spirit in creating a condition for successful entrepreneurship. Religious spirit fostered by Protestantism in the minds and hearts of its subscribers proved important to the flourishing of industry and merchants in certain parts of the Continent and the United States. By guaranteeing its members that industriousness would bring one closer to spiritual fulfilment became a motivation for a Protestant to strive for successful worldly activities as tokens for their journey to the hereafter. His study shows the value of depth to enrich analysis of
society, and not simply relying on the sophistication of patterns, trends and statistics as explanatory tools. Nevertheless, both Durkheim and Weber are committed to the vision of social science as practical science of society, with applied research as the bedrock for achieving such aim.

While the positivist and interpretivist orientation continue to dominate the orientation of social research, a recent paradigm has garnered considerable attention, followers and critiques too. The paradigm can be traced to the social and political upheavals in the 1960s that has witnessed new form of oppositional and anti-hegemonic cherished on the ideals of difference, indeterminacy and subjectivity. The politics and the intellectual tendency in the new paradigm is encapsulated in a term deconstructivism.

The paradigm urged for a rethinking of grand theories and designs in social sciences such as that of positivism and interpretivism. The problem with these grand designs was their unwavering faith in the rationality and individuality of subject. Individual is not an abstraction, and possess neither self-knowledge nor independent will. Rationality is imposed, so does our knowledge about it. They are part of the Enlightenment values created by European philosophes that announced a break from the theological-mystical orientation in politics, knowledge and society of the ancien régime. The values were explicit objection to the previous way of knowing and authority, making them far from being objective or value-free. By masquerading these values as scientific, the Enlightenment tradition found themselves in relentless contradiction, for example between their value for emancipation and the reality of exploitation and the value of progress and the reality of underdevelopment. This puts social science in an awkward position, being inextricably bound up with the history and visionary of the Enlightenment promoters.
The tradition of rationalism in social science was put under scrutiny, while grand theories that promote evolutionary progress such as modernisation thesis was dissected to lay bare its Eurocentric values.

As a result to the deconstructivist juggernaut, social research takes a form of revisionism. The early studies, especially done with the confidence of positive knowledge, are re-examined and recast in the light of the new episteme of difference while hybrids of tools from various fields and disciplines are appropriated to enrich understanding and appreciation of society in multi-faceted characters. Research becomes multi-disciplinary, with neo-, post- and critical-, become appendage to the existing paradigms used to reflect the revisionist orientation.

The new development has its positive outcomes. It opens up the exploration of new identities, new histories, new agencies and new voices that are unrecognised, unfitted or un-admissible under the previous episteme. A prime example of a study that reveals a new form of subjectivity is by Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. In this work, Foucault explored the system of punishment in the modern nation-state that predicated on the belief that individuals with criminal behaviour can be regulated and reformed. Therefore, prison system was designed with the most comprehensive surveillance technology that aimed for inmates to self-regulate their behaviour under the 'all-seeing eyes'. The system regulated the behaviour to the precision of time, activity and movement as expected in all inmates. What his analysis tries to show is with the increasing knowledge of technology and human behaviour resulted in the more successful ways of prescribing, monitoring and controlling individual and social action. In this sense, knowledge becomes less about solving problem than about enforcing more and more control in the most effective manners.
Foucault's study offers a compelling critique to the liberal tradition in social science and has influenced certain chapters in the current volume.

Social Science Research in Malaysia

Of late, social science research in Malaysia is typically informed by policy-making imperative. This is not surprising, as most of the available and attainable research grants are offered by the government agencies. This does not mean that social researches are not fundamental in terms of generating theory and original contribution to the corpus of knowledge. However, most of social researchers of fundamental nature are typically a product of PhD studies that are done in a period between 3 – 5 years, while a funded project takes a maximum of two years followed by a possible publication. Given the difference in time-frame has imposed foreseeable limit to researchers to allow adequate attention to reflect on epistemological discussion that characterised fundamental research. As a result, social research becomes result-oriented, more generative than substantive in nature.

There are researches done in the early 1970s and 1980s that were remained classics to this day, as they continue to illuminate crucial and persistent issue in society. Syed Husin Ali (1975) Malay Peasant Society and Leadership introduced the concept of class to the understanding of Malaysian society in the village and urban areas. The triple-structures of leadership consisted of landlord, party official and government machinery have further widen the income inequality in the village and until the web of leadership pattern is disentangle, the situation is most likely to remain. Another study further reinforced some of the observation earlier. Shamsul Amri's
From British to Bumiputera Rule (1986) showed the continuing role of party-government machineries in a Malay village. Through the New Economic Policy (NEP), the role became elaborated and systematic. The party-government machineries are playing roles in dispensing subsidies and contracts in exchange for political support. Thus, they foster a network of patronage that brings an ever-increasing dependency for government supports and rewards.

In Sarawak, according to most cited version, social science research began in 1950 Colonial Social Science Research Council (CSSR) published a report about the prospect for social science research in Sarawak. The report was based on a reconnaissance survey carried out for a period of four months from early June to the end of October 1948. The survey aimed at exploring the potential areas and topics for future socio-economic research in Sarawak. The Council appointed Edmund R. Leach, a social anthropologist, a student and an associate of Raymond Firth (the first secretary of CSSR), to carry out a field survey in Sarawak. The objectives of the survey were twofold. First, was to provide instruction for planners and administrators about the functioning of economy, education, agriculture, health and local government. Leach presented the planners with a complex picture of society under the rule of foreign power, stating with urgency the need to explore the changes involved in the imposition of modern economic and political domination to the multi-racial native/traditional communities. The current contexts must therefore be studied in conjunction with the traditional values and practices, some of which were yet to be radically affected by the western contacts and encounters.

The second objective, closely related to the first, was to establish the practical link between the sociological knowledge with the actual practice of administration. Leach tried to strike a balance between the purely academic pursuit and the practical
fruits of the serious labour as he noted in several places in the report. He argued that social studies of the natives can provide the planners with a grounded and contextualised perspective which will greatly assist in planning for a suitable form of development. Unlike the previous tendency in replicating development model from colonies elsewhere in the Empire, local studies would be able to generate fundamental data, hence increasing the possibility for a successful planning and targets.

Shortly after the report publication, a slew of anthropological researchers had taken up interest in studying Sarawak, with names like Derek Freeman (1955), William Geddes (1954), Stephen Morris (1991) and Rodney Needham (1954) exploring topics and ethnic groups of Iban, Bidayuh, Melanau and Penan, respectively, as identified in the report. It has successfully carved the agenda and direction for future academic study grounded along the ethnic lines. This is what seems to be its main contribution both in terms of scientific progress and practicality for state administrators.

From the discussion on social science research in national and Sarawak contexts, one can identified the recurring imperative for practicality and policy-informed researches. The agenda for development is common for most post-colonial nations, in which economic development is closely intertwined with the question of national independence. It was believed that through economic wealth and development, a post-colonial nation can prove their worth and to be on equal standing along with the rest of the world. Social science is to assist in the vision by clarifying what the policy-makers intended to know so as to ensure development runs on its course without hindrance. Nevertheless, as evident in the chapters of the book, there remain researches committed to the values and visions in line with the conventional and new orientation of social science paradigms.
Organisation of the Chapters

There are eleven chapters in the volume written by academics in the Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS). The volume contained recent empirical research done on the theme of social relation in Sarawak. Some of the chapters are reflective in the sense that they revisiting former studies and raised new set of questions by applying new technique and conceptual constructs. The diverse orientation of the chapters points to the ongoing exploration of society from multidimensional perspectives in social science. They too remind us of the continuation of practical research that resonates with contemporary methodology and social concerns.

As indicated earlier, social science research since the early 1980s have consistently strive towards reviving the forgotten voices at the margin. While the tradition of social science has been one that was critical and anti-hegemonic, the assumption implicit in the researches done by colonial scholars and apologists was vexing and inclined towards power interest. The task now for scholars in the post-colonial nations is to rewrite those histories. To that end, the chapters here are responses to the invitation for emphatic and critical readings of the stories and perspectives of the (to borrow post-colonial term) muted subjects. This is the common theme that unites all the chapters in the volume.

The first chapter deals with the trainees in the rehabilitation school in Kuching. In the eyes of the society, the trainees who were sent to the institution were problematic and troublesome. Against this background of public perception, the authors have applied method that encouraged the trainees to “speak out” in order to obtain their version of story. It was no guessing that most of them talked about their pain and frustration that the institution
failed to understand their need and respond to them. From the carefully conducted interview, the authors offered suggestions about ways to improve the system in order for rehabilitation to succeed. The second chapter deals with the training of hearing disability. The authors have conducted a test study to see the feasibility of music therapy as a support for the disabled youth. The research on disability has been on the rise globally, partly as an effort to provide wider and equal access to disadvantaged groups and partly as a result of the revisionist tendency in social science.

Chapter three provides a unique view of the lesser known subject in society: the HIV/AIDS caregivers. The author explores the life of the caregivers (mostly males with no blood relation as compared to traditional caregivers who are mostly female relatives) who offered voluntary care for their friends and partners with HIV/AIDS. What was thought to be a helping hand assistance turned out to be a life-time sacrifice coupled with their daily battles with public ignorance and moral willy-nilly that tells us more to be done to deal with the common ignorance relating to HIV/AIDS. Next chapter talks about the problem of skipping schools among students in Kuching. The author had interviewed the students, their parents and teachers to gain an overall picture of the situation. His study reveals that the cause of the problem was not the psychology or the attitude of the pupil per se. Rather it was a manifestation of structural breakdown in the state, schools and family structure. The author is correct to argue that the inability to recognise the root cause led to the “blaming the victim” scenario, thereby fails to deal with the issue head-on.

The subsequent chapters deal with the aspect of power play that affected the lifeworld of certain groups. Abdul Halim Ali wrote about the sentiment of the rural-urban migrant in Kuching. Their sentiment was marked with cynicism about the way life will