

There is never text without context

I REFER to "Be critical and choose what is best" (Letters, Aug 29), which responded to my earlier comment "East, West, What's Best?"

This quote forms the context setting of my comment: "My only sincere fear is that we (the mainstream media) are rather immaturely 'building a straw man and then beating the same one to death!' From what has appeared in the press, most if not all, our problems are with the western-initiated and we in the east are unfortunate victims; but given another chance, we can do much better."

"Therefore, may I conclude that we are being communal and emotional rather than logical. Without doubt we are going to see Oriental

thinking and being evolve and progress to almost allow the 21st Century to be called the century of the east. But that can only be achieved if we remain rational and not always succumb to being both emotional and communal."

In responding, the visiting professor was rather emotional and wrote that my comment "Tarred a whole group of scholars as emotional and communal, by giving a totally distorted account of deliberations at the decolonisation conference. The consensus at the conference was that, unlike the uncritical rejection of the non-west by the west, through similar misrepresentations, our rejection of the west must be a critical one."

Let me therefore recast my previous text and set it back within its original context. I argue always that there is never text without context. First, allow me to define my context of the article. I was not at the USM conference, was not invited, and was responding only to comments by those who wrote about it because they were assuming the role of communicators of these "new truths" that they now believe in. I was in fact especially motivated to respond because of Zainon Ahmad's regular column in *theSun*. Secondly, I explicitly called my reading group or community "the mainstream media collective", and my critique was of us, and not "scholars" as implied by the professor.

The professor in his response, other than that quoted above, did not use the rational methodology of science to critique, and was therefore no critique of my comment at all. His response was exactly what I referred to as "building a straw man and beating that same one to death!"

Let me therefore redevelop my argument. At UCSI's Faculty of Economics and Policy Science, we are trying to teach our students to follow the DEEP Method of Problem Analysis. Through this method, any problem can be described, explained with theories or plausible hypotheses, evaluated through primary research and data collection, and then a resolution prescribed and sought after vide dialogue and engagement with a relevant community of stakeholders. All policies can therefore have a science and evidence-based problem definition and issue resolution approach without being emotional about the specifics of the problem context.

From my doctoral thesis, I found that there was however one categorical problem in this modern scientific approach for all easterners (i.e. those from East of Istanbul). In the east, usually, the primary unit of analysis in social discourse is the group and not the individual. Therefore, in the east the concept of "we" is usually stronger than the concept of the individual. Only now, in much of modern

science, the scientist is the centre of his universe of analysis and observation. This "capital I" of analysis using the individual researcher's worldview and perspectives was originally birthed with the Cartesian "*Cogito ergo sum*" or "I think, therefore I am".

My professor and teacher S.H. Nasr would argue that Descartes should have concluded only that: "I think, therefore I was only thinking. Descartes should not have moved from thinking to being!" Nasr concludes his thesis that this Cartesian jump in logic from "thinking to being" was a paradigm shift from logic to existentialism! In the same process also, however, Descartes had moved from his evidence-based heliocentric of the world; but away from a God-centric view of the world towards a man-centric view. For a more thorough examination of his thesis, read *Knowledge and the Sacred*.

Starting from where Nasr began with the critique of Descartes, and adding on my eastern notion of the "we" as opposed to the "capital I" (or a man-centred view of the world), I proposed an alternative worldview which I called the "Thou-We-I worldview". Amitai Etzioni, professor of sociology and economics at George Washington University, had also in his book *The Moral Dimension: Towards a New Economics* argued that modern man needs an "I-We Paradigm" for a newer economics that seeks to bind and constrain unbounded rationality of unfettered and ugly capitalism. Etzioni therefore proposed that the "we or community" can become the moral dimension for constraints against much of ugly and individualistic capitalism.

My thesis was therefore a combination of first recognising the thou of Etzioni's and his rabbi-teacher, Martin Buber; of the Almighty of Nasr; and finally the God of Glenn Tinder, a political philosopher from the University of Massachusetts. Tinder wrote the *Political Meaning of Christianity*. Using the Tinder

Local contexts define their realities

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argument as my prophetic stance, I borrowed also the argument from the Christian Faith that "fallen and sinful man" cannot stand tall and become the centre of his own universe of logic and non-objective science, but must instead become a humble and cautious hesitant "smaller case I", instead of the capital and cocksure modern I.

Therefore, East, West, What's Best? Well, first we must all get off our pet hobby horses and begin to listen to others. Consequently, even our so-called methods of modern science must remain humbled by the Heisenberg principle to recognise the so-called limitations of modern objective scientific extrapolations. Even more important, when we extrapolate modern scientific methodologies to the fields of social sciences and humanities, let us be

extra careful to recognise that local contexts and sociologies define their realities before we seek to simply analyse their texts using modern techniques.

Then when we have a healthy interpretive frame which recognises the dual units of analysis that we are concurrently using, the eastern worldview of society and communities also becomes a valid and relevant unit of analysis. Then also the humble modern scientist and his analytical frame can become valid and reliable as a methodology of science, but never otherwise. May the eastern century become a true and valid reality.

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