CHAPTER 8

Malcolm X, Alatas and Critical Theory

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The Meaning of Critical Theory

The objective of this chapter is to examine the thought of Malcolm X as critical theory and to draw parallels with the tradition of critical theory in the field of Malay Studies that was begun by the late Syed Hussein Alatas (1928–2007).¹ By presenting the views of these thinkers I hope it will be readily seen that both can be seen as points of departure and resources for Malay Studies to develop critical theories of history and society. This chapter proceeds as follows: in the first section, I provide a brief discussion on the meaning of critical theory. The sections that follow discuss three aspects of critical theory with reference to the thought of Malcolm X and Alatas. These aspects are the critique of history, the diagnosis of the uncritical mind, and the role of the intellectual in dealing with the aforementioned.

Critical theory refers to theory that is critical of domination and inequality in history and contemporary society. It not only theorizes these problems but also advocates for the transformation of society and the emancipation of the dominated. This separates critical theory from traditional theory. As stated by Reiland Rabaka, critical theory is to be distinguished from traditional theory in that the latter merely describes or explains certain phenomena. Critical

¹ Syed Hussein Alatas was a Malaysian but was born in the town of Bogor, in West Java, Indonesia. He completed his primary education in Johor Bahru, then part of British Malaya, and went on to graduate with degrees in the political and social sciences from the University of Amsterdam. His doctoral thesis, defended in 1963, was a sociological study on religion entitled, Reflections on the Theories of Religion. He then returned to Malaysia and took up a position of lecturer in the Department of Malay Studies at the University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur. In 1967 he moved to Singapore to become Professor and Head of the Department of Malay Studies at the National University of Singapore, a post that he held till 1988. In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s Alatas was active in Malaysian politics, despite living in Singapore. He was a founding member of the then opposition party, Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian Peoples’ Movement) and was a Member of Senate, Parliament of Malaysia, elected by the State of Penang. In 1988 he returned to Malaysia to become the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Malaya. He left this post in 1991. His last position was Professor at the Institute of Malay World Civilizations (ATMA – Institut Alam dan Tamadun Melayu), National University of Malaysia. Syed Hussein Alatas passed away on January 23, 2007.
theory, on the other hand, not only does this but goes further by critiquing and correcting conventional constructions of history and society, and calling for a transformation of the established order (Rabaka, 2002: 147–148).

Critical theorists like Alatas and Malcolm X are in the company of post-colonial thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Ali Shariati, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Fidel Castro, Desmond Tutu, A.L. Tibawi, Edward Said, and others. These thinkers were not only critical of oppression and injustice but also provided alternative analyses of the problems as they saw them, and labored hard to raise consciousness in their respective societies about the nature, causes and functions of domination, control and inequality.

Malcolm X is a crucial resource for an African American or even pan-African critical theory while the work of Alatas can be considered as the start of a tradition of critical theory for the field of Malay Studies. The next three sections discuss these aspects, that is, the critique of history, the recognition and conceptualization of the uncritical mind, and the role of the intellectual in the development of a critical approach to the study of history and contemporary society.

The Critique of History

It was in 1948 while in prison at the Norfolk Prison Colony that Malcolm X was introduced to the Nation of Islam and the teachings of Elijah Muhammad. His brother Reginald, who visited him in prison, encouraged Malcolm to avoid consuming pork, alcohol and narcotics (Malcolm X, 1965: 161). These were to be the first steps towards Malcolm’s conversion to the creed of the National of Islam (NOI). It was also in prison that Malcolm received his first lessons about the problem of history, in the form of letters that he received from family members such as his brothers Wilfred, Philbert and Reginald. They were able to persuade Malcolm to accept the controversial teachings of Elijah Muhammad:

‘The true knowledge,’ reconstructed much more briefly than I received it, was that history had been ‘whitened’ in the white man’s history books, and that the black man had been ‘brainwashed for hundreds of years.’ Original Man was black, in the continent called Africa where the human race had emerged on the planet Earth. The black man, original man, built great empires and civilizations and cultures while the white man was still living on all fours in caves. ‘The devil white man,’ down through history, out of his devilish nature, had pillaged, murdered, raped, and exploited every race of man not white.

MALCOLM X, 1965: 162