Syed Farid Alatas (June 1961-) is a contemporary Malaysian sociologist and associate professor of sociology at the National University of Singapore. He is the son of Syed Hussein Alatas (1928-2007), famous Malaysian politician and social scientist, and nephew of Syed Muhammad Al-Attas* (born in 1931), prominent Muslim philosopher.

Evaluation and engagement with his father and his uncle’s point of views is one of the recurrent themes in Farid Alatas’ works. This ongoing intergenerational debate is mostly informative for those who are interested in the intellectual atmosphere of either South East Asia or generally the contemporary Islamic world. Muhammad Al-Attas (Farid’s uncle), along with the Iranian philosopher Hossein Nasr, represents a generation of Muslim traditionalists who are seeking a philosophical and theological revival of the Islamic knowledge in the modern time. Hussein Alatas (Farid’s father), though, was intellectually more engaged in the critique of both Western imperialism and domestic post-colonialism. In one of his renowned books, Hussein Alatas, revealed the recreation and reproduction of the colonial myth of Malaysian ‘laziness’ by the very post-colonial intellectuals.

Farid Alatas’ contributions in the current social sciences, until now, can be put into four categories: (1) his early works on the post-colonial states of South East Asia. The most
important book in this category is *Democracy and Authoritarianism in Indonesia and Malaysia* which was published in English by Macmillan in 1997. (2) The second cluster of his works is also about the post-colonialist condition but mainly targeted at the latent eurocentrism of social sciences. The interesting book on this topic is *Alternative Discourses in Asian Social Science*, with the subtitle of *Responses to Eurocentrism* which has been published by Sage in 2006. (3) Inter-religious dialogue, particularly, in the South East Asian societies is another recurrent theme of his works all along from the beginning until now. *An Islamic Perspective on the Commitment to Inter-Religious Dialogue* is the most recent in that series which has been published in Malaysia. (4) Finally some of the well-received and intellectually acclaimed works of Alatas are his recent two books and a few papers on rereading *The Muqaddimah* by Ibn Khaldun (a Muslim and medieval precursor of a discipline that Aguste Comte four hundred years later called sociology).

In his first book on Ibn Khaldun, Farid Alatas tries to show the relevance and importance of the Muslim social theorist which can be read as a comprehensive introduction to Ibn Khaldun. The second book on Ibn Khaldun, however, has an innovative thesis. In *Applying Ibn Khaldun* (2014), Alatas suggests that we can reconstruct a neo-Khaldunian sociology. The book chooses a strategy of exposing the barriers to such a reconstruction and also suggesting the outlines of such a Khaldunian approach to contemporary social and political phenomena. Answering the question of the exclusion of Ibn Khaldun even after his rediscovery in the nineteenth century Europe, Alatas suggests that eurocentrism in the social sciences stands in the way of acknowledging the relevance of the non-Western theories and concepts. So, in the second half of the book he tries to use Khaldunian approach for explaining contemporary phenomena such as the state formation in the Arab
The double-edged criticism of Western ethnocentrism and also the latent (as well as ironic) eurocentrism of Eastern intellectuals gave rise to a project of searching for the third way. That is a quest for an alternative for the dominant sociological approaches. Rereading Ibn Khaldun’s ideas in this context seems to be the logical result of the two other projects. It seems that Alatas suggests, while the mainstream European sociology tends to treat Ibn Khaldun as an object of study not a subject, reviving his theory would help the social theory of the global South to find an endogenous and still functioning framework to build upon.

One can see an ongoing dialogue on this issue between him and his traditionalist uncle, Muhammad Al-Attas, which embodies a crucial debate in the Islamic world. While Muhammad Al-Attas supports Islamization of knowledge through using *tafsir* and *ta’wil*, as two traditional methods of interpreting Quran, Farid Alatas asks: “how can these methods be applied to the study of social phenomena?” (Alatas, 2014: 61) and his answer is that they evidently cannot. What we can do, alternatively, is to update Ibn Khaldun’s scheme which “gave prominence to the role of economic, political and social factors” in interpreting the state (Alatas, 2014: p. 61). Alatas tries to revive that overlooked Khaldunian sociological insights. The point about Khaldunian method is that it is a ‘materialist’ way of contemplation on the social phenomenon. This simply means using social, economic and political factors (rather than the divine interference) to explain the social. Therefore, Ibn
Khaldun could be seen as a middle ground between the modern ‘secular’ social sciences and the Eastern form of social theory which fantastically appeared in the Medieval North Africa.

Bibliography

* Muhammad Naguib’s family name appears with different dictation on the cover of his books: Al-Attas.

**Essential Readings:**

**Further Readings:**
Questions:
What are the manifestations of eurocentrism in social sciences?
Given that sociology is a modern discipline, is referring to Ibn Khaldun as a ‘sociologist’ a kind of anachronism?
Can we use Ibn Khaldun to explain some social phenomenon in the non-Eastern societies such as the Western Europe?

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