

Seminars, Conferences, Addresses

Conference on Knowledge across Cultures: Universities East and West

9-12 Rabi' al Akhir 1413 / 7-10 October 1992
Toronto, Canada

This conference was organized by the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE), Toronto, Canada. Approximately 166 participants, representing various disciplines and different countries, attended the eight plenary and twenty concurrent sessions. Its purpose was to bring together Eastern and Western knowledge through culture via an exchange of ideas and deliberations, an exposition of theories, and an examination of the contributions of various cultures—mainly China's—to human civilization.

The papers presented and the discussions that ensued were extremely enlightening and concentrated on the following issues: a) the contributions made to knowledge by specific cultures (mainly Chinese, Indian, and Muslim); b) knowledge transferred from the West to the East does not consider the attributes of the East; c) the East is responsible for finding ways to adapting its cultures to imported knowledge; and d) social science knowledge is better generated when social science researchers abandon natural science methodologies (i.e., realism and positivism) and recognize that the social sciences should be based on qualitative research.

There were a few papers on the above-mentioned themes that were outstanding. Abdul Rahman, in his "Spheres of Life: Inheritance, Creativity, and Society," emphasized the holistic nature of knowledge. This knowledge does not underestimate or neglect the contributions of different countries (races) in developing the present (current) civilization. Abdul Rahman indicated that the lack of a holistic view of knowledge at present has also led knowledge to be fragmented.

Al-A'ali, in her "The Impact of Knowledge Transfer with Respect to Modern Bureaucratic Organizations and Human Relationships," posited an analysis of the fragmentation of knowledge by examining assumptions of human existence and human societies. Al-A'ali argued that knowledge is fragmented because it has been based on partial views of human existence and human societies. The first partial view assumes that individuals have their own real existence while societies do not, and the second view assumes that societies have their own real existence while individuals do not. Knowledge based on these views is partial and thus does not conceive of human knowledge as based on complementary underpinnings.

—Mazrui, in his "The Post-Colonial University and the Challenge of Cultural Dependency: Some African and Arab Perspectives," elaborated on the issue of university dependence on multinational support. This support, through its own special institutions, creates a new form of colonialism: "cultural dependency." He also explained that a given culture cannot be viewed in isolation from other cultures. Thus the need to view cultures from a holistic and complementary perspective should be pursued.

The conference was very successful. Its friendly atmosphere, along with the diversity of its participants' cultures, promoted a good beginning for informal contracts. But certain issues were neglected:

1. There was no common ground for a definition of culture. This omission emphasized partiality of thinking and was a result of grouping cultures into "East" and "West." While the conference sought to bring different cultures together, this grouping aggravated the impact of that categorization. It led participants to view cultures on a noncomplementary basis, with the exception of the above-mentioned papers.
2. No attempt was made to relate different ideas, theories, and contributions of different countries (races). Though Abdul Rahman explained the need to view human knowledge on a holistic and complementary

basis, the conference concluded without illustrating an attempt to put the papers into one stream of knowledge: human knowledge.

3. Criticism of natural science methodologies, which advocate qualitative research, reflected the attribute of being confined to "either-or" thinking. This is not a suitable style of thinking for a conference concerned with evaluating and examining "Knowledge across Culture."

The conference also overlooked a simple fact: knowledge transferred from the East to the West has not been questioned by the West. This implies and reflects the view that no country owns a complete set of viable ideas, theories, and contributions—they are not the property of one nation. Thus, it is not just the responsibility of the East to question imported ideas, theories, practices, and contributions. Both the East and the West must ask relevant questions to promote a better understanding of human affairs and to further human knowledge.

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