

Ideology and Utopia: A study in relation to Malay Muslim in Singapore

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Abstract

This article seeks to discuss the main thesis of ideology and utopia and its traits. It also examines the applicability and its impacts of these main thesis in relation to the issues concerning the Malay Muslim community in Singapore in the current post-colonial context. This is mainly a theoretical article based on the contemporary literature in relation to the topic. The article shows the dichotomy of ideology and utopia, in that an ideology is a set of ideas that conceal the present by attempting to comprehend it in terms of the past, while a utopia is a set of ideas that transcend the present and is oriented towards the future. The study also reveals that instead of bringing a positive consequence to the Malay Muslim community, this mode of thinking brings mostly negative consequences to the growth of community in Singapore. In conclusion, it can be said that these theories are more relevant to the present Sri Lankan context where the Muslims are a minority.

Introduction

Karl Mannheim is an important figure in social sciences since he invented the field of sociology of knowledge. This is an area that has not been focused by many before Karl Mannheim. The key aspect of this area deals with how knowledge is constructed and how people frame, perceive and interpret their thinking based on culture, position, interest and ideologies. Knowledge is socially constructed by individuals, interacting with one another within a social structure. To Mannheim, sociology of knowledge is empirical because he was interested in studying how social relationships and society influence on thought. Despite Mannheim praised Marx for laying the foundation to begin this field through his theory of ideology, he was critical of Marx's premise that thinking or

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ideology could be confined to only social class. Alternatively, Mannheim proposes that all social groups are capable of developing ideologies.

Thinking is never a privileged activity free from the effects of group life; man cannot think alone without being shaped by group interest. Therefore, Mannheim puts it in this way:

“It is not men in general who think, but men in certain groups who have developed a particular style of thinking in an endless series of responses to certain typical situations characterizing their common position. Men do not confront the objects of the world from the abstract levels of a contemplating mind as such, nor do they do so exclusively as solitary beings. On the contrary, they act with and against one another in diversely organized groups, and while doing so they think with and against each other” (Mannheim 1946: 03)

He also noted *“knowledge is from the beginning a co-operative process of group life, in which everyone unfolds his knowledge within the framework of a common fate, a common activity, and the overcoming of common difficulties”* (ibid: 26)

So, thinking (knowledge) is an activity that must be related to the context of group life or experience as man does not think alone.

Conceptualization of Ideology

Mannheim is also of the view that people are tempted to subscribe to the idea or thinking of dominant group (group thought). Unlike Marx, Mannheim points out that this group thought transcends the class structure. On the basis of this presumption, Mannheim defines his dominant theory on Ideology and utopia. According to Mannheim, ideology refers to:

“Ruling groups in their thinking become so intensively interest-bound to situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination.in certain situations the collective unconscious of certain groups obscures the real condition of society both itself and to others and thereby stabilizes it.” (Mannheim 1946: 36)

The above definition of Mannheim implies that the ideology of dominant or ruling group is based on self-interest and does not necessarily focus on the real condition of the society. As their perspectives are limited, they distort reality and thereby it breeds unconsciousness. The most important point is that they (dominant groups) perpetuate their status quo and obscures the real condition (distort reality) as they are overwhelmed with self-interest. In this light, the following can be itemized as the traits of ideology.

- Self- interest of the dominant group
- Their perspectives are limited
- Obscures the real conditions(distort reality)
- Perpetuate the status quo

Mannheim identified two types of ideologies, that is, particular and total. The first of these refers to the common conception of ideology as distortion. He defines

“More or less conscious disguises of the real nature of a situation, the true recognition of which would not be in accord with his interest. These distortions range all the way from conscious lies to the half conscious and unwitting disguises; from calculated attempts to dupe others to self-deception.”(Mannheim 1946: 49)

Those who employ it analytically seek to uncover *only a part* of an opponent's assertions” (ibid: 50). The particular conception also focuses on a purely *psychological* level, perhaps accusing the opponent of deception, but always assuming that *both parties share common criteria of validity*(ibid:50). Total conception of ideology is defined as

“The ideology of an age or of a concrete historic-social group (class), when we are concerned with the characteristics and composition of the total structure of the mind of this or of this group”.(ibid:49-50)

It becomes clear that it focuses on the "total structure of the mind" as it occurs for a group. Hence, it is not the mind of an individual or association of individuals but the group of ideas and their processing that reflects a period or group. The total conception of ideology will call into question the opponent's "total *Weltanschauung*(ibid:50)," including the mode of thought. Thus, the

opponent is not seen as an individual or concrete group as much as a perspective that reflects a collective life. Finally, the total conception is not concerned with "motivations" or "interests" at a psychological level but rather seeks the relationship between social forces and worldview.

Conceptualization of Utopia

On the other hand, utopian thinking signifies just the opposite. According to Mannheim,

“Certain oppressed groups are intellectually so strongly interested in the destruction and transformation of a given condition of society that they unwittingly see only those elements in the situation , which tend to negate it.... the collective unconscious guided by wishful representation and the will to action, hides certain aspects of reality. It turns its back on everything which would shake its belief or paralyze its desire to change things.”(Mannheim 1946: 36)

The above definition of Mannheim on utopian thinking implies that it involves with an attempt of transforming the status quo of the society while perpetuating a false consciousness. From the utopian side, the purpose of social thought is not to diagnose the present reality but to provide an idea for direct change. Therefore, the traits of utopian can be listed as the followings.

- Completely undermining status quo as they long for transformations
- Unable to see anything good that exists
- Perpetuate false consciousness
- Reject everything that challenges their belief
- Views are emotional
- No objective analysis of the issue/Does not diagnose the present reality

It becomes clear from the above dichotomy of ideology and utopia of Mannheim that an ideology is a set of ideas that "conceal the present by attempting to comprehend it in terms of the past," while a utopia is a set of ideas that "transcend the present and is oriented towards the future."

In addition, Mannheim also discusses on democratic planning and education in his account on *ideology and utopia*. However, this paper is mainly confined to his main theory on *ideology and*

utopian to examine the applicability of these theories into the issues concerning Malay Muslim community in Singapore.

Application of ideology and utopia on the Singapore Malay minority Muslims

The above discussion is focused on main theory or thesis of ideology and utopia. The following section seeks to examine the applicability of these theories in relation to the issues concerning Malay Muslim community in Singapore in the current context.

One of the significant studies undertaken by Lily Zubaidah Rahim(1998) on ‘Singapore Dilemma’ illustrates that the Malay Muslim inferiority is rooted in ‘cultural deficit thesis’ contradicting the theory and practice of equal opportunity, meritocracy and multiracialism in Singapore. She narrates that cultural deficit thesis was attributed to the persisting socio-economic and educational marginality of Malay Muslim community in Singapore, while them being projected as lazy, dull and undeserving of assistance(Rahim 1998: 51,61). This is an essentialist approach to continuously stereotype the Malay Muslims as lazy and dull since this is a dominant view of colonialists during the colonial period that has later been subsumed by the rulers of Singapore. Clearly speaking, this can also be described as a dominant political ideology as it serves the interest of the rulers and is a mere distortion of the reality to stereotype or marginalize Malay minority Muslims.

Furthermore, the notion of Malay Muslim laziness has explicitly been refuted by some Malay scholars, especially by Alatas. In the study undertaken by Alatas (1977) on the “Myth of the Lazy Natives” he narrates the image of Malay lazy native is a production of colonialists and is, in fact, reproduced in the post- colonial period as well (Alatas 1977:76). So, it becomes clear that this issue of lazy Malay is ideological, for it serves the interest of the rulers and portrays the distortion of reality to marginalize the Malay Muslims.

The other issue concerning the loyalty of Malays in Singapore is also subject of dominant debate among scholars. Suriani Suratnam(2005) notes the controversy of Malay loyalty is often questioned and slammed to be non-integrative with other communities in Singapore.”(Suratnam 2005: 3, 9) As Malays are part of Malay World(*Nusantara*), their loyalty is continuously questioned and thus they are not conscripted in Singapore air force fearing that they could align with other Muslim neighbor countries if there is an eventuality. This presumption has something to do with an ideological perspective as well, because by questioning the loyalty of Malays, rulers make sure the integrity and sovereignty of their tiny nation located closed to larger Muslim countries are

safeguarded. In other words, this is ideological since this notion of disloyalty of Malay serves the interest of rulers.

Maaruf (2001) identified the utopian type of thinking among Malay Muslims in Singapore. One of which is the idea of Islam as *Ad-Din*. It is the utopian thinking of Malays that drive them to reject all types of ideas or ideology that challenged the completeness or sacred way of life based on religion. In other words, they justify their thinking in terms of totality of Islam to undermine the social thoughts of rival groups (Maaruf 2001:4-7). The reason why they are overwhelmed in this type of thinking is that they are not knowledgeable in Islamic history; they refute other ideas as an inferior and claim of completeness or totality of Islamic civilization (ibid:7-8). Therefore, this is a typical characteristic of utopian thinking, especially among Malay Muslims.

Maaruf (2001) also examines in another area where utopian thinking lies is the hostility towards the west against in the backdrop of totality of Islam as *Ad-Din* (ibid: 12-13). Utopian thinkers are of the view that as West is embedded with corrupted religion, secularism and atheism, it is improper to follow their ideals, consume their goods, and follow the way of their rational thinking. The fact remains is that most of people in Southeast Asians and South Asians are just consumers of the products either manufactured or invented by West. However, the people in these countries are reminded by utopian thinkers to reject the West. In this way, utopian thinking has banished Muslims from the world of action and prevents them from developing existential consciousness of their human conditions in history and the real world they live in (ibid:14). This is a typical representation of utopian thinking among Malay Muslims in Singapore.

In defining the hierarchy of knowledge, utopian thinkers dichotomize knowledge given to man by God and knowledge developed by man (ibid: 20). They are of view that the first category is a highest status and absolute knowledge as it is given by God. The latter is a false knowledge which includes natural and social sciences. So, utopian thinkers inspire Muslims to focus more on the first category of knowledge than the latter. This can be construed as utopianism. It should be noted here that religion does not forbid people empowering themselves in the worldly knowledge irrespective of social science or natural science. Utopians are proposing a radically alternative method to the existing system and vying for action towards a change they desire, not on the basis

of objective diagnosis of the issue. It is the limited, irrational and unintelligible mode of thinking that leads utopians to arrive to this orientation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, having examined the main themes or theories of ideology and utopia in relation the issues concerning Malay Muslim community in Singapore, it can be observed that the ideology and utopia are inter-connected in a particular context. Ideology can also be shaped by Orientalism or vice versa. Similarly, ideology can also be shaped by utopian mentality in certain context. What the most important point from the above examination emerges is that instead of bringing a positive consequence to the Malay Muslim community, this mode of thinking brings mostly negative consequences to the growth of community in Singapore. Thus, it is essential to depart from this mode of thinking to focus on the long term development of the community. Moreover, this study is more relevant to the Sri Lankan context, particularly Sri Lankan Muslims who are a minority in terms of ethnicity and religion. They are presently subjected to harassment and execrably hate campaign, due to the ideology of the rulers and extremist groups in the country who target on the dietary practices, mode of dress, and places of worship and the religious orientation of the Muslims. On the other hand, utopian thinking of Muslims in the country has also relegated them to be an alien or Other in the perspective of moderate thinking people in the country. Therefore, it can be rest assured that the future existence of Muslims in the country is contingent upon them leaving behind the utopian thinking and focusing on the socio-economic and political development of the country in a much forward or broader thinking manner.

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