

## 'Reading' the book of signs

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Such are regimes of truth we have created out of our political-economic conditions. We must learn to read the meaning of how our learning institutions have produced us, as well as the power structures that produce such regimes of truth.

A REPUBLIC OF VIRTUEAzly Rahman<http://azlyrahman-illuminations.blogspot.com/2009/10/essays-on-malays.html>

We are a book of signs. We are also living in a book of signs. We must learn how to read it. "Read, in the name of Thy Lord who Create Thee, from a clot (of Blood)." This foundational and genealogic Quranic verse suggests the importance of reading. We can interpret this as reading being more than an act of understanding; that reading is an act of knowing, naming, de-constructing, and reconstructing the world. What are we to read in our lifetime? How are we to live a life that has been pre-determined by the ideological framework that awaits us at the point of departure from that clot of blood? "Man, in a word, has no nature . . . what he has is history," said the Spanish thinker Ortega y Gasset. "Cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I exist)," said the French mathematician Rene Descartes. The Western tradition suggests that circumstances and historical-materialism create the conditions of human existence. This seems to suggest to the idea that we must use our mental capacities to master our environment and the possibilities that await us, provided that we recognise the structures of oppression we are in. This seems to further suggest that to exist, as a "free human being" one must first be aware of the visible and invisible systems created by other human beings. One must be aware in order for his/her existence to be one of "being and becoming" and in order for the human self to live with its own "global positioning system". All of these sayings suggest the idea of "reading" the signs and symbols of the world we inhabit. They ask us to understand the significance of language we use, the culture we inhabit, the ideologies our consciousness are shaped by, and the way we as human beings are "produced and reproduced" by those in control of the historical march of "progress". But how are we to read, what is the history of our existence, and how is the human self degenerating? Many have laboured on with this issue - philosophers of the Eastern and Western worlds, from ancient times to the frontier thinkers of the post-modern tradition. Socrates, the great teacher, taught people to ask questions so that they may be free from the state and from the gods created by the Athenians, Plato suggested the principles of ethics, metaphysics, poetics, and through 'The Republic', wrote what utopia is. Modern philosophers and thinkers of the Western tradition - Nietzsche, Locke, Hobbes, Mann, Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, Heidegger, Santayana, Habermas, Sartre, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida - continued the legacy of defining what free human beings ought to be. The texts of the Judeo-Christian traditions, of Chinese and Hindu philosophies, and of other grand and subaltern voices have spoken on the need for the human self to be recognised as the highest form of existence. These texts have also explained the relationship between the human being and the universe it inhabits. How might human beings be totally free in the entire scheme of human control? Foundations of a dialogical self I think we now ought to understand what the foundations of civilisation are and understand the complexities of the structures of human control. If we understand what the creative, critical, and ethical foundations are, we might be able to read the society we live in better. We might even have to labour less on the question of for example, "how to reduce corruption in society" or "how to make politics more ethical" or "how to educate citizens to become more obedient to the dictates of the state". These questions have their own unique history. We must learn to ask the right questions. From our understanding of the foundations of civilisation, we can then comfortably explore what it means to be free and to be liberated from the prison of structures that have been erected by those who own the means of economic and intellectual production. We can then understand how language can free or shackle us by the very nature of language as part of the system of signs and symbols. We can then understand how "language is power" and whoever owns the language owns the knowledge to control others, or that whoever is in power can further produce systems of control through the use of specialised knowledge. From our understanding of the foundations of knowledge and the tools to explore issues of power/knowledge/control, we may begin to examine the structures that oppress us and others and learn to be critically aware of unique spaces of power and knowledge we inhabit or to understand the "cartography of our existence", so that we can then fully appreciate the thoughts we possess as a human being who is born free.

We therefore must first learn to "read", in order to be free. Dialogical thinking, as the Russian thinker Mikhail Bakhtin might agree, will prepare us with the foundations of building new ideas and breaking new frontiers in the way we conceive what life might possibly be. Dialogical thinking can help us examine the way we think what history can alternatively be, as in the manner many counter-factual historians might think. Many of us have the urge to learn how to demystify age-old dogma, recognise faulty styles of thinking, and analyse flawed systems of perceptions. The urge to de-construct can be turned into a set of principles we can adopt on our road towards becoming a thinking being and on our road towards "illuminations". The phenomena of globalisation, the rapidisation of technology, the control of resources in the hands of the global few, the increasing fragmentation of nations and the rise of "post-modern post-industrial tribes" is making this world an increasingly complex place. Signs and symbols We were born into pre-designed economic conditions and systems. In traditional societies, we were born as agricultural beings. In modern societies we were born into structures defined as "modern". In this age we are born into Homo Cyberneticus (Cybernetic Beings), especially when we declared ourselves inhabitants of a Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor living in the intelligent cities of

Cyberjaya and Putrajaya. In Malaysia for example, the economic design is one of an amalgamation of post-colonialism and Oriental Despotism, a legacy of nationalism and laissez faire economic structure and superstructure. We inherit these structures from the historical march of dominant economic ideologies chosen out of political preferences. The knowledge we acquire is dependent upon/tied to the economic condition. The more sophisticated the ideology, the more hegemonic would be its impact on the way we acquire knowledge. We define our existence from this ideological point of view. Following Rousseau, we were already born in chains; chained by the ideology of the political and the economic condition. The spiritual belief system is also of our own construction; based on packaged knowledge of myth and magic and manifestations of the nature of economic practices transplanted from faraway lands. This manifestation becomes culture. The synthesis and interplay of narratives, myth, and political-economic structures become culture; as we see in the culture of the nomads of the Bedouin desert as well as the "post-industrial" nomads of Silicon Valley, California. The structure of the development of the historical-materialism of things can be read from the nature of the development of culture and its interplay with technology and the development of human consciousness. Culture may become belief systems. Belief systems in turn become enculturated through the installation of ideologies based on dominant inscriptions. We consume whatever that is termed as history; memories based on recollections of human experiences, archived by human beings and written by those "who knows how to write" and "those who owns the pen." We are taught packaged knowledge, through the process of education as social reproduction and the process of schooling as a deliberate attempt to indoctrinate and tame the mind, so that these minds will not rebel against the structures they are born into. Creatures of perception Let us now look at some examples in history of how institutions and ideologies shape the human self. I shall draw examples of how we have become creatures of perception, constructed by signs and symbols of the institutions that reproduced us. During the early days of the Malay College Kuala Kangsar, for example, children were taught packaged knowledge based on what was then the beginning of Eton-styled education system. That was the dominant installation of the British ideology. Later in the 1970s, the Maktab Rendah Sains Mara system installed an educational ideology based, among others, on the model of the Bronx School of Science using an American-styled curriculum. MRSM system evolved into one that groom its children into the followers of the corporatist Malaysian state -- reproducing those who will become hegemonizers of the ruling regime. There were also models of indoctrination using Islamic-based principles of teaching and learning. One can go farther back in history and analyse how Christian missionary schools were build to have the minds reproduced according to the designs of the producers. Another example will be the development of vernacular schools and ideologies based on race and ethnicity dictates the development of the self. In the heyday of the "Islamisation process" in Malaysian politics, then minister of education repackaged an "Islamic" version of knowledge and called it Kurikulum Bersepadu to indoctrinate children into believing what political reality is about and to ensure his truth and the aligned truth of a prevailing doctrine be broadly disseminated. Much later, in the heyday of Malaysia's conversion into an "Information Age" society, educationalist pre-packaged knowledge by introducing other means of disseminating truths and educating by designing Smart Schools (aligned with the demands of the Information Age). In Kelantan and Trengganu and in the Malay economic belts, other forms of schooling and indoctrination rule. Those in power and in their capacity to design systems of control install stronger structures of control; control of the minds of children who possess the ability to become frontier thinkers. Human creativity is curbed to ensure that dogma will reign. Regimented truths are systematically forced into the curious young minds. These truths are borrowed from faraway lands and disseminated through specialised language. Such are regimes of truth we have created out of our political-economic conditions. We must learn to read the meaning of how our learning institutions have produced us, as well as the power structures that produce such regimes of truth. Given the continuing reign of the present regime and its regime of truth, how can one escape this prison-house of language? OUR USUAL REMINDER, FOLKS: While the opinion in the article is mine, the comments are yours; present them rationally and ethically. AND -- ABOLISH THE ISA -- NOW!