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IN THIS ISSUE

CORRUPTION AND PATRONAGE

The Missing Pieces
to a Marxist Theory of the State

MALAYSIA'S URBAN RENEWAL ACT

& the Expanding
Redevelopment Frontier

CITA BANGSA RUSTAM SANI

Pencarian Makna
Nasionalisme Kiri

REVITALISING DEPENDENCY THEORY

Where is Malaysia?
/ Southeast Asia?

NOTA EDITOR - EDITORS NOTE

Jentayu diikhtiarkan sebagai sumber bagi gerakan sosialis dan progresif untuk memperdalamkan pemahaman mengenai Malaysia, sekaligus membentuk wadah politik kita. Isu pertama dalam format penerbitan baharu kami ini hadir ketika wujudnya persimpangan penting dalam politik Malaysia tatkala kesepakatan “Kerajaan Perpaduan” digugat oleh pergolakan politik kepartian dan perubahan dalam geoekonomi sedunia.

Isu pertama ini menumpukan soal ekonomi politik. Penulisan saya mengenai rasuah dan politik naungan cuba mengaitkan kegiatan ini dengan sistem akumulasi kapital negara. Alia Salleh mendalami politik – dalam erti kata yang lebih luas – di sebalik Akta Pembaharuan Semula Bandar yang dicadangkan dan masa depan pembangunan hartanah. Mengenai nasionalisme, Audi Ali meneroka visi haluan kiri Rustam Sani tentang Nasionalisme Melayu dan Malay(sia) serta potensinya dalam masyarakat kita sekarang. Dari sudut pandang yang lebih luas pula, Christopher Choong melakar agenda baharu bagi menghidupkan semula teori “dependency” yang lebih membumi - bagi konteks masyarakat Asia Tenggara – serta lebih peka dengan soal ras dan gender.

Kami mengalu-alukan penulisan dalam bahasa Melayu atau Inggeris untuk isu-isu akan datang kami yang bertemakan gerakan sosial dan kedudukan Malaysia dalam kapitalisme sedunia. Penulisan dianggarkan sekitar 1,500 dan 3,000 patah perkataan dengan gaya rencana pandangan atau separa akademik.

Penulisan boleh di-emelkan ke
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Jentayu was conceptualised as a resource for socialists and progressives to better understand the Malaysian context to advance our politics. This first issue in our new publication format comes at an important juncture in Malaysian politics as the stability of the “Unity Government” is cracking amid political struggles and shifts in global geoeconomics.

This inaugural issue centres around political economy. My piece on corruption and patronage attempts to situate these illicit acts within the broader system of national capital accumulation. Alia Salleh looks into the politics, broadly construed, of the proposed Urban Renewal Act and the future of real estate development. On nationalism, Audi Ali explores Rustam Sani's left-wing vision of Malay(sian) Nationalism and its potential in our present society. Zooming out, Christopher Choong sketches out a new agenda for reinvigorating dependency theory for a Southeast Asian context which more deeply engages with the realities of race and gender.

We welcome submissions in Malay or English for our upcoming issues on social movements and Malaysia's place within global capitalism. Essays are expected to be between 1,500 and 3,000 words with an op-ed or semi-academic style.

Kindly send submissions or enquiries to
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JEREMY LIM, EDITOR OF JENTAYU

3 JUNE 2026

CORRUPTION AND PATRONAGE

THE MISSING PIECES TO A MARXIST THEORY OF THE STATE

J E R E M Y L I M J I A N G S H E N

Malaysia defies easy characterisations at every turn. Its economy is mixed, with strong property rights and a relatively open economy on one hand, and a state-dominated finance sector that has controlling stakes at the commanding heights of a modern economy – services, commodities and real estate – on the other. Its political parties are hard to place on standard economic and political left-right spectrums, with elements of neoliberalism, social-democratic welfarism and race-based affirmative action all thrown into the mix. Yet, in this messy pile of categories, it would be challenging to claim that the state and political class as a whole primarily serve the interest of capitalists. While it most certainly does not serve the proletariat or peasantry as classes, interest of the masses are maintained up to a point – particularly for political ends. Given these contradictions and differences with Western capitalist democracy, Marxism would have very little to offer a study of the Malaysian state – or any post-colonial – without a serious rethink. A key aspect of which remains a persistent theme through Malaysia's history, corruption and patronage.

Why Rethink Marxist Theories of the State?

Standard Marxist accounts of the state either have the state as the “executive of the bourgeoisie” or in some cases, a neutral arbiter between contending social classes. Many of these accounts also centre on Western societies that are industrialised and deeply influenced by proletarian struggles. European social democracy and its accompanying institutions of accountability were born out of workers’ struggles alongside socialists, communists and anarchists.

Analyses of post-colonial societies take for granted that nation-states that embark on the capitalist road eventually end up at something approximating Western-style capitalist democracies. Where many Western societies had workers and peasant unions play a crucial role in pressuring elites into developing (social) democratic institutions, many newly independent nations in the global south had their states born under conditions of revolution – where the political power of unions would be absorbed and diffused into the independence struggles, or colonial midwifing that would often see unions and popular movements crushed in the name of anti-communism.

These deviations are not insignificant given such demobilisations change the relationship between the state and popular movements and institutions – even if these formations were nurtured by the political party that would come to power.

Conventional Marxist accounts of the state also do not take into account the subsequent form of state construction under which corruption and patronage become a crucial means of both party reproduction and state reproduction. These accounts have little to no interface between capitalist accumulation and the reproduction of the political class, in which corruption plays an integral role. I have also not found an account of capitalism that considers political financing as a factor in capitalism accumulation. Many discussions of state capitalism generally veer towards state facilitation of capital accumulation. This lack of theorisation of political corruption or patronage under capitalism makes Marxism an insufficient tool for explaining the Malaysia state, class composition and economic structures, not to mention other societies like it.

The Malaysian State under Capitalism

Malaysia's state apparatus was born and shaped during its colonial period. The earlier Malayan state was one built for British extraction with minimal industrial development, allowing for a small ethnic Chinese bourgeoisie confined to import substitution and trading sectors.

After independence, Malaya and then later Malaysia would inherit this state but make important modifications to consolidate its political rule as the British helped complete its anti-communist counter insurgency campaign. The leading Malay political party, UMNO would replicate welfare and service provision tactics employed by the Malayan left to consolidate their support base. The funds for this strategic redistribution came from both their wealthier ally, the MCA – dominated by the wealthy ethnic Chinese merchant class – and the state. A combination of state-distributed and party-distributed aid and mediated access to utilities and state services would entrench the rule of the Alliance (later expanded to becoming Barisan Nasional or National Front).

The political acculturation² of the Malaysian masses to this form of patronage would define its society up till today. The racial riots of 1969 would give way to the affirmative action agenda of the state and the ruling political class that entrenched further this acculturation. More importantly, it allowed UMNO to cast off MCA as a key source of political funds and have the state as the prime site of extraction. The subsequent rapid expansion of the state allowed for it to take on this role of political ‘redistribution’ to the ethnic Malays and engage in primitive accumulation on their behalf.

¹ Many thanks to Charles Brophy for his insightful comments and questions on this piece before publication.

² Weiss, M. L. (2020) The Roots of Resilience

³ Fiscal Outlook 2025 Ministry of Finance Malaysia

⁴ The Heritage Foundation (2023) What Funds the Federal Budget?

The resultant state is then quite a different creature to those of Western monopoly capitalism where class conflict between capitalists and workers produce state institutions of a relatively more mediating character. To call the Malaysia state the “executive of the [Malaysian] bourgeoisie” would be somewhere between a mischaracterisation and an oversimplification depending on your perspective. At the height of its dominance between 1970 and 2018, the UMNO party-state nurtured competing clichés of crony capitalists linked to various individual warlords and factions within the party. This stands in stark contrast to countries like the United States where capitalist fractions traditionally line up behind one of the two parties – tech and finance with the Democrats, oil and big agriculture with the Republicans. However, it is also a state that is not particularly reliant on workers for its direct economic nor political reproduction unlike a Western state like that of maybe the USA. Malaysia’s state apparatus collects approximately 12% of its revenue³ from income taxes while the USA collects 48.5% in individual income taxes.⁴

The history of Malaysia’s development – constricted by the culture of patronage and the racial politics which reinforces it – has resulted in an underdeveloped and weak industrial bourgeoisie, a largely repressed and informal mass of proletariat and petty bourgeoisie, and a capitalism in which the state and political class lead industrial and financial development. Complicating matters further is the revolving door of a Malaysian variety where business people are in politics⁵ and politicians are in business.⁶ The political nature of Malaysia’s economic structures at the micro and macro level seem inescapable.

Rent, Rent Seeking and Corruption

Corruption and rent seeking are certainly not unique to capitalism – bribery and abuse of power were commonplace in colonial, feudal, and slave societies. What gives these acts of misappropriation a new dimension is its relationship to surplus value production and the economic surplus⁷ under capitalism. Marx’s theory of rent was confined to the realm of surplus extraction of agricultural labour by the landowning class. There have been new attempts⁸ at incorporating monopoly rent of intellectual property into the Marxist labour theory of value but nothing of a political nature like corruption and abuse of office. Furthermore, there is a dearth of theorisation about the nature of the state bureaucracy or state bourgeoisie as an economic class – putting aside the underdeveloped idea of socialist societies that have their party state as a state bourgeoisie in the Soviet Union or China.

The best account of such theory making comes from Mushtaq Khan and Jomo Kwame Sundaram in their book, Rent, Rent-Seeking and Economic Development.⁹ They lay out in concrete terms, the variations in flows of funds or rent between politicians, state bureaucrats and capitalists to analyse the political economies of a number of Asian societies. Yet, they do not look at its effects on politics and the state itself, rather just focuses on economic and social outcomes. This is a crucial gap¹⁰ given that in many of our societies, the prevalence of corruption has already transformed – in the words of Engels – from “quantity to quality”¹¹.

Why A New Theory of Capitalist States

The primary reason for a re-theorisation of states through a Marxist lens is needed is that there has been no satisfactory explanation for many individual events or long-term structural

shifts aside from the hunger for power and monetary greed of individual actors in the system. Furthermore, no thorough materialist description of how these discrete acts of corruption – grand or petty – contribute towards a systemic shift in capitalist reproduction. One preliminary attempt I have made at this in another publication¹² links the gravitation of conglomerate capital towards ‘safe’ and less advanced industries due to the political access of these select capitalists to politicians and state bureaucrats, resulting in a draining of capital away from sectors that would develop more national productive capacities. But this is hardly the whole picture to explain the composition of Malaysia’s economy and its state structures.

While on the surface, the giving out of social aid by a state agency versus it being given by a party’s constituency service office have no difference in material outcomes, they serve a similar but likely differentiated legitimisation function. The changing nature of Malaysian society since independence – namely industrialisation and urbanisation – would have a dialectical effect on the way political funds are accumulated and how patronage systems are run. With a growing middle class, many constituencies saw the shift from outright vote buying to a greater emphasis on providing municipal services and resolving local issues. Different eras of UMNO rule have also been defined by various degrees of centralisation of accumulation by corruption, allowing for the emergence of factions and regional warlords that eventually create infighting during times of crisis.

The analysis of these varied forms of patronage, the evolution of corruption alongside capitalism, and subsequent theorisations would be useful to many postcolonial societies – often ridden with corruption and stuck at varying degrees of development. In particular, I hope to sketch out in further works a framework of understanding political rent or corruption as an augmentation of one’s rate of profit within a national economy. It would take seriously the quote by Brenner and Riley¹³ that “raw political power, rather than productive investment, is the key determinant of the rate of return”. No doubt its opaque and multifaceted nature makes it difficult to integrate into any straightforward M-C-M’ analysis. Yet, I think the attempt is worthwhile simply to give a more materialist account of Malaysian society given much of our discourse centres race and religion as major societal faultlines rather than class or economic factors. Such a theory that centres political rent and corruption as features and not bugs of the capitalist state is needed to also explain the nature of political spending and the policy responses of the political class.

⁵ Gomez, E. T. (2022). Business in Politics: Seeking Control of Malaysia’s Political System

⁶ Gomez, E. T. (1990). Politics in Business: UMNO’s Corporate Investments

⁷ Lambert, T. E. (2020). Paul Baran’s Economic Surplus Concept, the Baran Ratio, and the Decline of Feudalism

⁸ Rotta, T. and Teixeira, R. A. (2016). The autonomisation of abstract wealth: new insights on the labour theory of value

⁹ Khan M. H. and Jomo. K. S. (2012). Rents, Rent-Seeking and Economic Development: Theory and Evidence in Asia

¹⁰ The next best attempt at theorising corruption comes from outside the Marxist tradition. James C. Scott in his 1969 paper titled “The Analysis of Corruption in Developing Nations”, systematically analyzes the various regimes of corruption and patronage under different political structures (1. bureaucratic/military polity [Thailand] 2. party-dominated polity, non-competitive [Guinea] 3. party-dominated polity— competitive [Philippines]).

¹¹ Engels F. (1877). Anti-Dühring

¹² Lim J. (2023) Capital in Malaysia

¹³ Riley D. and Brenner R. (2022). Seven Theses on American Politics

Implications for Socialist Strategy in Malaysia

In present day Malaysia, where union militancy is a thing of the past and communalism remains dominant in political discourse, there are few avenues for rebuilding popular movements. The practice of patronage by political parties in lieu of apolitical provision of aid and public goods leaves no space for left-wing movements to fill that gap. While the politics of anti-corruption has been successful in toppling the once-dominant UMNO party-state in 2018, there has been little to no progress in changing the role of corruption and patronage in the reproduction of the state and political classes.

A serious and pragmatic understanding of the Malaysian state and its links to political parties allow for better identifying weak points in this nexus to exploit. Figuring which localities of class fractions are neglected – and hopefully their potential for socialist consciousness – would pave the way for effective class alliances and strategies for building power. Efforts by the Socialist Party of Malaysia to replicate the capital-heavy model of service politics – local patronage which can only be sustainably funded through illicit funds – have yielded few electoral results.

This assessment of the state would also be needed when any socialist force comes to power in order to clearly navigate the state and its political appendages in order to specifically formulate policies that win it greater support while intensifying class conflict in its favour. More importantly, how can this culture of corruption and patronage be dismantled with popular support and without a revolt from politically-connected capital and the state bureaucracy. Without this dismantling, there will be little social space for a multiethnic class solidarity and very meagre state revenue that one would need to build socialism.

More generally, a nuanced understanding of the role of corruption under capitalism is essential if the socialist Left is going to win power under current conditions in any post-colonial society. History has shown that anti-corruption as politics has the potential to discredit both capitalist and socialist states. But the given dominant discourse is still neoliberal – maintaining the corruption is purely the realm of the state, anti-corruption politics remains a tougher sell for socialists as opposed to liberal or conservatives. If socialists are going to use the state to achieve greater social good, the question of corruption must be answered directly to advance and preserve its project.

MALAYSIA'S URBAN RENEWAL ACT

AND THE EXPANDING REDEVELOPMENT FRONTIER

A L I A S A L L E H

Discussions over how redevelopment is undertaken in Malaysia have previously been limited to stakeholders who are immediately affected by it. As urban redevelopment cases are deemed to solely involve contestations over private property, they often garner limited solidarity and attention compared to other national issues like living cost or major corruption cases.

However, the proposed Urban Renewal Act (URA) has shifted the conversation and contestation over urban redevelopment into a national discourse. Within this discourse, one of the key concerns is the potential gentrification and displacement of minority residents due to poorly implemented redevelopment. To this end, I seek to explore the arguments within gentrification studies to position URA alongside its legal predecessors to then argue that the use of these legal tools reflect an ever expanding real estate redevelopment frontier, a process that continues to find new areas of accumulation.

Redevelopment theory beyond the Anglo-American experience

The proposed URA distinguishes between three different types of urban renewal: redevelopment, regeneration and revitalisation. Of these, redevelopment involves the most significant physical change to the strata, often involving demolition and rebuilding. It is precisely this scale of

physical change that makes redevelopment the most contested aspect of urban renewal, because it does not only alter the built environment but also disrupts the lives and housing security of residents.

The most immediate concern for redevelopment is displacement, a process that is not necessarily direct, nor immediate. Drawing on the fallacy of measuring displacement in New York, Peter Marcuse (1985) argues that displacement should not only be understood through direct 'last-resident' displacement involving residents forced to move out (either due to eviction or not being able to afford rent hike) at a particular moment in time. In the context of the URA, displacement may occur indirectly through 'exclusionary displacement' where a unit is voluntarily vacated to make way for redevelopment which renders it out of reach for the next (similar) household. The proposed one-for-one housing replacement guarantees touted by previous redevelopments rests on upgrading where a unit originally valued below RM100,000 for example would be replaced with one valued at least four or five times the original value. However, as the asset value increases, so do maintenance fees, assessment rates, and the broader cost of staying for the same household as well as households of similar income profile. This narrowing of housing options for existing communities is how gentrification operates in practice.

To understand why this pattern recurs, it is useful to evoke Neil Smith's (1996) rent gap theory which posits that gentrification happens when the ground rent is monetised to match its "highest and best use". Capital often targets dilapidated housing complexes as these types of real estate have experienced a decline in value, thus upgrading provides the highest difference. His thesis is informed by the post-war US experience where 'white flight' into the suburbs led to disinvestments in the inner city. Post-colonial cities like Kuala Lumpur developed similar urban forms but through different land use dynamics. Yet, it may be useful to reflect on his thesis on Klang Valley's urban sprawl and hollowed out urban centres. Does the return of capital to Malaysia's dilapidated urban sites similarly monetises this gap and causes gentrification?

To ask this question, it is important to note that Smith's thesis assumes the existence of a free market in land and housing. His thesis has since been expanded by others to account for land and property that was previously outside or at the edges of the real estate market. Central to this is Matthias Bernt (2022) who argues that rent gap can only be realised when the "commodification gap" closes, and closing this gap requires extra-market factors which differ by context, almost often involving state regulation and legal interventions. One of the commodification gaps he identified, using the case of Russia, is referred to as the 'redevelopment gap,' the difference between the rent capitalised under an existing building and the rent that could potentially be extracted after demolition and rebuilding. Closing this gap demands "the lifting or bypassing of preservationist or ownership regulations."

Another expansion of Smith's gentrification thesis is from geographer Tom Gillespie (2020) who argues that urban redevelopment in postcolonial cities should be understood not simply as gentrification but as the production of a "real estate frontier". Each time capital exhausts one frontier, it requires new legal and political instruments to open the next frontier. Studying the case of Accra – the capital of Ghana – he posits that urban redevelopment there produces a real estate frontier through the transformation of state land into real estate. Guided by the strands of Bernt and Gillespie's respective works, this article will explore how legal instruments have enabled the closing of redevelopment gaps to expand the real estate frontier in Malaysia.

Real estate frontier in Malaysia

Beginning in British colonial times, land was turned into private property through the introduction of the Torrens system, which prioritised land record to prove claims over land. This system overrides existing local land law which assigned ownership based on 'working the land'. The former *adat* law – in principle – tied land ownership to productive use and allowed inheritance under the same principle. Torrens law transforms this into record-based ownership, enabling large tracts of land to be enclosed into private ownership without necessarily working the land. This structural change rendered all land homogenised, fragmented, and hierarchised, key processes for commodification, which allowed the plantation economy to thrive.

The Torrens system became the foundation for land laws in Malaysia, which was consolidated into the National Land Code (NLC) of 1965. Under the NLC, all land that is not alienated forms state land. However, the implementation of this law does not necessarily change how people conduct their everyday lives. Many took a while to alter their relationship (and worldview) to land, while some just chose to ignore the new framework. In the case of Malaysia's rapid urbanisation, newcomers to Klang Valley continue to open land regardless of formal title, forming what officials see as squatter settlements and other irregular settlements (Bunnell and Nah, 2004). These dwellings have long been demonised as invasions and illegal occupations of state land.

economic development of Malaysia or any part thereof or to the public generally or any class of the public" (Land Acquisition Act 1960, c.3). In addition, Prasad (2017) notes the use of the Essential (Clearance of Squatters) Regulation (ECSR), an emergency regulation, for clearances of settlements in the early 2000s. His case of Kampung Berembang, Kuala Lumpur highlights the use of ECSR alongside other emergency provisions to weaken protests by targeting movement leaders.

The redevelopment of squatter land in Klang Valley happened in various cycles between the 1970s and 2000s, involving government-led clearing of settlements and resettlement of occupants in high-rise public housings or Program Perumahan Rakyat (PPR) (Prasad, 2017). In most cases, the cleared land was redeveloped for highways, private housing, and commercial uses. To enable this process, two legal tools were used. Firstly, the state relied principally on the Land Acquisition Act (LAA), which empowers compulsory acquisition of private land for public purposes, later expanded to any purposes "which in the opinion of the State Authority is beneficial to the

There are still cases of squatter redevelopments, but this 'frontier' is largely exhausted. What we see in the last ten years is increasing interest in redeveloping ageing buildings. For the public sector, a prime example is the KL Urban Renewal programme, where Public Housing (PA) complexes across Kuala Lumpur are gradually redeveloped and residents who own their units were offered to move to the newly completed apartments close to the original site, such as the case of PA Sri Labuan. For privately owned complexes, the Kampung Sungai Baru flat and terrace house redevelopment illustrates the challenges of large-scale acquisition of fragmented private ownership. In both these cases, the properties are private properties that are tradeable in the property market. However, for large-scale acquisition, no existing legal tool was designed to ease this process smoothly. What we have seen in the interim is the use of the LAA when commercial negotiations between developers and existing owners fall through, especially in the case of Kampung Sungai Baru.

Malaysia's Urban Renewal Act and the Expanding Redevelopment Frontier

The problem is that the LAA is easily controversial and contested. Its use makes visible the fact that the state is acting on behalf of private interests, which undermines its own legitimacy.

Gillespie identifies a similar tension in Accra, where the state's compulsory acquisition of land for private developers provoked civil society challenges on the grounds that public powers were being deployed for private gain. In Malaysia, court challenges and public criticism of LAA use in urban redevelopment have repeatedly forced the state onto the defensive. In a sense, the URA may provide a legal solution to this problem. Rather than the state acquiring land under public interest provisions on behalf of developers, the URA institutionalises the relationship between state and appointed developer from the outset. It legalises this link by allowing the state to demarcate an area for urban redevelopment and bring in an "approved developer" to undertake the commercial development. The Kuala Lumpur Structure Plan 2040, gazetted in 2023, already identified 139 potential redevelopment sites in Kuala Lumpur alone. This design makes URA a significant tool in advancing the real estate frontier by resolving the legal and political friction that was slowing it down.

It is worth qualifying that these two examples – squatter settlements and strata development – are already commodified spaces, but with challenges to develop. For squatter settlements, despite owners having titles, previous cases have demonstrated that squatters are able to make legal claims based on their Temporary Occupation Licence (TOL) status and their identity as pioneers (pembuka tanah or peneroka bandar) (Bunnell and Nah, 2004). For ageing buildings, the existing ownership structures are fragmented and involve dissenting minorities which render it an 'underperforming' commodified space. Each site poses unique hurdles for acquisitions. By making land legible and investable, and rendering the occupiers illegal, these legal tools remove the obstacles that prevent capital from moving in.

What this means for our urban future

By establishing redevelopment as a quasi-public process with the state as initiator, the developer as appointed agent, and the consent threshold lowered by law, the URA makes resistance structurally harder. When the redevelopment authority, the appointed developer, and the legal framework are all aligned in the same direction, where do residents appeal to?

This is not to say that all redevelopment is predatory, or that ageing buildings do not pose genuine challenges for residents and the city alike. Similarly, not all redevelopment causes gentrification if residents are not pushed out from economic and social changes. The question is whether the legal infrastructure being built reflects those complexities. The history surveyed here offers a cautionary pattern: legal tools introduced for ostensibly rational planning purposes have consistently been deployed to close the 'redevelopment gap'. Each legal frontier surveyed here has concentrated the power to shape the city in the hands of state planners and appointed developers, and progressively reducing the avenues through which ordinary residents can include their voice.

The frontier concept also presupposes contestation: as Smith argues (1996: 231), "there are two sides to every frontier. Otherwise, it would not be a frontier". Contestation over redevelopment has arguably been case by case, compared to other civil society demands. There have been attempts to stigmatise residents opposing redevelopment as either NIMBYs (if they are propertied class) or rejecting development (if they are poor). Such discourse may not be productive to the larger issues of real estate capital expansion against the everyday survival strategies of city dwellers. What is clear is that these cases, whether they make it to the national headlines or not, are each a brick that forms the wall against a normalisation of redevelopment models that dismiss residents' rights. URA debates have been enriched by these protests as real case studies. The question for Malaysia now is whether the URA becomes a tool that rectifies that history, or whether it becomes the next chapter in a longer story of extending the real estate frontier. To answer that question depends on how civil society and affected communities engage with the lessons of previous redevelopment models.



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CITA BANGSA RUSTAM SANI

PENCARIAN MAKNA NASIONALISME KIRI

A U D I A L I

Wacana negara-bangsa yang disajikan kerap kali mengambil bentuk binari iaitu antara notion negara-bangsa yang bertunjangkan kebudayaan Melayu-Islam dan multikulturalisme yang menekankan kesamarataan juridikal. Binarinya berpunca daripada pertembungan politik arus perdana yang boleh ditelusuri pula kepada perbezaan aspirasi antara kumpulan etnik. Semestinya, etnik atau ras itu, telah menjadi lensa utama bagi masyarakat kita untuk memahami pergulatan sejarah. Maka, penyisihan idealisme haluan kiri daripada politik arus perdana telah mendorong pemikir-pemikir utama mereka untuk cuba menghasilkan sintesis baru dalam notion negara-bangsa, sebagai sebahagian daripada usaha mereka untuk menghidupkan semula analisis kelas sebagai lensa pergulatan.

Antaranya ialah arwah Rustam Sani, seorang sosok yang pernah berkecimpung dalam akademik sebelum melibatkan dirinya dalam politik, terlebih dahulu melalui Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) dan setelah bergabung dengan parti kelahiran “Reformasi”, kemudiannya Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR). Pergulatan beliau tentang soal ini bersangkut paut bukan sahaja dengan aspirasi politik tetapi juga sejarah peribadinya. Ayahnya, Ahmad Boestamam, merupakan salah seorang pejuang nasionalis berhaluan kiri yang sepanjang kerjaya politiknya, telah dijeratkan dalam binari yang kian melekat dalam imaginasi masyarakat. Di samping tekanan daripada kerajaan kolonial dan kemudiannya konservatif-nasionalis, persoalan bangsa, atau “the national question” telah menghantui usaha dalam kalangan kiri untuk membina wadah politik yang mampu merungkaikan komplikasi antara ras dan pembangunan.

Oleh itu, apabila Dr. Mahathir Mohamad mengutarakan konsep “Bangsa Malaysia” pada tahun 1991, Rustam Sani tampil sebagai pendukung awal. Walaupun hanya seketika, imaginasi nasionalisme terangkum ini menggarap imaginasi konservatif-kapitalis dan kiri-progresif. Setelah menyertai PKR, Rustam Sani dikatakan instrumental sebagai ahli fikir di belakang tabir, membawa semangat kiri dalam politik arus perdana.¹

Menelusuri persoalan bangsa, beliau menulis buku “Ke Mana Nasionalisme Melayu?” pada tahun 2004. Namun, wajar pula diingati bahawa pada tahun itu juga, UMNO yang diterajui Pak Lah telah mencapai kemenangan besar dalam pilihanraya umum. Atas garisjuang Islam Hadhari dan pembangunan zon ekonomi kian terpinggir, kemenangan tersebut seolah-olah telah memadukan wadah perjuangan “Melayu” yang dapat dilihat gemanya dalam “gelombang hijau” Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) dalam pilihanraya tahun 2022 di negeri-negeri Utara dan Pantai Timur. Sebagai peninjau dari luar, mungkin kita tergerak untuk menggelarkan fenomena ini sebagai gerakan Melayu-Islam, tetapi bagi pendokongnya, tiada tanda sengkang atau apa-apa yang lain yang membezakan antara Melayu dengan Islam. Gagasan itu semestinya membawa nasionalisme sempit, tetapi mempunyai juga ciri merangkumi kerana “Ad-Deen” (الدين) itu berdasarkan ketetapan iman, maka mengandungi potensi, atau sekurang-kurangnya cita-cita, kesejagatan. Dalam konteks semasa yang menyaksikan persilangan antara konflik geopolitik dan kebangkitan populisme-kanan, ciri inilah yang membuatnya semakin resonant sementara gagasan “Bangsa Malaysia” semakin mati dan lesu.

Ras Dan Pensejaraan

Setiap gagasan politik berdiri atas pensejaraan tertentu. Dalam binari yang tidak lekang dari pemikiran politik arus perdana, wujudnya penekanan sama ada ke atas kepribumian etnik Melayu dan hak-hak yang terkait ataupun penekanan terhadap sejarah panjang campuran, atau hybridity masyarakat. Dalam pensejaraan konservatif, kerajaan kolonial telah menghakis status pribumi etnik Melayu melalui serangan demografik, yakni pengimportan buruh migran ke rantau ini. Oleh itu, tahun 1874 (Perjanjian Pangkor) wujud dalam ingatan kolektif sebagai saat berputiknya dualiti antara “kita”, iaitu orang Melayu dan raja-raja dan “mereka”, iaitu penjajah dan masyarakat migran. Selanjutnya tahun 1948 dan 1957 dianggap sebagai “pengorbanan” Melayu kerana telah menerima kewarganegaraan masyarakat lain dalam proses merangkul kemerdekaan. Dalam pensejaraan liberal, wujud pula usaha untuk menonjolkan sejarah panjang aliran penghijrahan masyarakat berbeza, sama ada mereka berasal dari Jawa dan Sumatera atau tanah besar Cina dan India malah Champa, yang telah menghasilkan kosmopolitanisme dunia Nusantara yang sarat dengan jaringan dagang. Ingatan ini dimobilisasikan untuk mengukuhkan tuntutan pemeliharaan kebudayaan tersendiri dan kesamarataan hak melalui konsep “Malayan” dan kemudiannya “Malaysian Malaysia”. Inovasi Rustam Sani dalam kancah ini adalah dengan menghubungkan kedua-dua pensejaraan ini dan meletakkan beban sejarah ke atas politik Melayu bagi mentransformasikan nasionalisme Melayu menjadi nasionalisme Malaysia.²

Semestinya, semua masyarakat terhasil daripada aliran penghijrahan manusia. Apa yang dikatakan sebagai suku, budaya, bangsa, malah peradaban itu adalah manifestasi sejauh mana campur gaul antara manusia itu berupaya untuk mencipta suatu identiti yang menenggelamkan perbezaan yang lain. Apa yang dikatakan sebagai “Melayu” mempunyai makna tertentu bagi zaman dan kelompok tertentu. Istilah itu boleh merujuk kepada rantau ini secara keseluruhan (seperti yang digunakan dalam sumber Eropah dan Cina), nama-tempat bagi sesuatu masyarakat berhampiran Bukit Siguntang di Palembang, atau merujuk kepada orang Istana (dan tidak semestinya rakyat jelata dan tidak semestinya berketurunan Melayu “jati”), dan merujuk juga kepada diaspora pelayar-pedagang setelah terjatuhnya kesultanan Melaka. Oleh itu dari abad ke-15 sehingga 19, lebarnya istilah “Melayu” itu sehingga seseorang itu boleh menggelar dirinya “nisab Mengkasar anak Melayu”. Apa yang menjalinkan pelbagai identiti ini dalam ke-Melayu-an mereka ialah penggunaan bahasa Melayu dan agama Islam.³

Hubungan ini dan perkaitannya dengan institusi beraja dilihat oleh pentadbir kolonial sebagai elemen penting dalam mentakrifkan sesuatu bangsa, menjurus kepada penerbitan semula Sulālat al-Salāteen (salasilah raja-raja, سلالة السلاطين) oleh Stamford Raffles sebagai “Sejarah Melayu” (Malay Annals) pada tahun 1821. Dalam kata lain, “Melayu” dalam erti kata ras atau etnik adalah hasil rekayasa yang agak moden, terhasil daripada dialektik antara ketaksuban penjajah untuk mengklasifikasikan masyarakat mengikut ras dengan keinginan pembebasan masyarakat pribumi. Dalam konteks inilah, melalui buku “Ke Mana Nasionalisme Melayu?” dan “Asal-usul Sosial Golongan Kiri Melayu”, Rustam Sani melakarkan bagaimana gerakan menuntut pembebasan dipelopori lapisan petani, pekerja, dan intelektual Melayu yang kecewa dengan penyerapan bangsawan Melayu dalam apparatus pentadbiran kolonial. Kebangkitan nasionalisme Melayu ini mula memobilisasikan kesatuan satu sejarah bagi satu bangsa yang menjangkau kenegerian atau kesetiaan terhadap raja/pembesar tertentu, melahirkan memori kolektif yang bermula dari abad ke-14. Maka, semasa gerakan ini rancak diatur, bermadahlah Burhanuddin al-Helmy, salah seorang pelopor nasionalisme Melayu: “di atas robohan kota Melaka, kita dirikan jiwa Merdeka”. Dari sudut ini, wujud titik pertemuan antara pensejarahan

konservatif dan interpretasi kiri yang diwarisi Rustam Sani. Dalam “Wasiat Nasionalisme Melayu”, ahli fikir UMNO, Alias Mohamed melihat konsep nasionalisme Melayu terkait rapat dengan kekusaran mengenai kemunduran ekonomi dan masyarakat tani tradisional. “Semangat Abdullah” – merujuk kepada pemikir pemodenan Munshi Abdullah - dari tahun 1831 dikatakan diwarisi oleh pemikir Kaum Muda pada tahun 1920-an, dan kemudiannya menemui manifestasi politik massa pada pertengahan abad yang berbagai cabang. Warisan intelektual bersama antara kiri dan kanan ini boleh dikesani dalam kekaguman kedua kelompok terhadap penulisan Ungku Aziz, Za’ba (Jejak-Jejak di Pantai Zaman) dan Syed Hussein al-Attas (Mitos Pribumi Malas). Kemunduran ekonomi dilihat sebagai satu keadaan yang terhasil daripada penyisihan dalam ekonomi kolonial. Terdapat persetujuan bahawa agenda pasca-Merdeka perlu dipenuhi dengan usaha pemerkasaaan ekonomi dan kebudayaan Melayu.⁴

Pun begitu, proses mendefinisikan Melayu sebagai etnik dan ras, maka sebagai “bangsa” terpaksa berdepan dengan kerumitan struktur masyarakat yang terhasil daripada sejarah panjang “bumi di bawah bayu” ini sebagai jalan pelayaran yang menemukan Timur dan Barat. Pada zaman dominasi kesultanan pra-kolonial, proses asimilasi pedagang dari rantau luar ke dalam masyarakat setempat distrukturkan oleh keadaan sosio-politikal tertentu. Penghijrahan ini dan proses asimilasi dipengaruhi pelbagai peristiwa dan proses bersifat world-historical.

Kemunculan kapitalisme melalui jaringan perdagangan Asia, misalnya, telah mencipta kelas pedagang dari Asia Barat, Benua Kecil India dan Selatan Cina yang menyusun atur hubungan pengeluaran komoditi. Kemenangan tentera Islam (Uthmaniyyah dan Mughal) dan keputusan dinasti tertentu di Tanah Besar Cina untuk membenarkan atau mengharamkan perdagangan bebas turut menjadi faktor dalam keputusan kumpulan pelayar-pedagang berbeza untuk mengassimilasikan diri dalam masyarakat setempat. Wang Gungwu, sejarawan China dan Asia Tenggara, melihat proses ini sebagai pertemuan antara tamadun Asia, iaitu Indic dan Sinic dan tamadun Mediterranean, iaitu Islam dan Kristian. Masyarakat di rantau ini ialah hasil daripada pengolahan dan penerimaan elemen ketamadunan tertentu, mengikut daya masyarakat tersebut untuk mengemudi dunia perdagangan pra-moden dan kemudiannya, untuk mengemudi dominasi imperialisme Barat.⁵

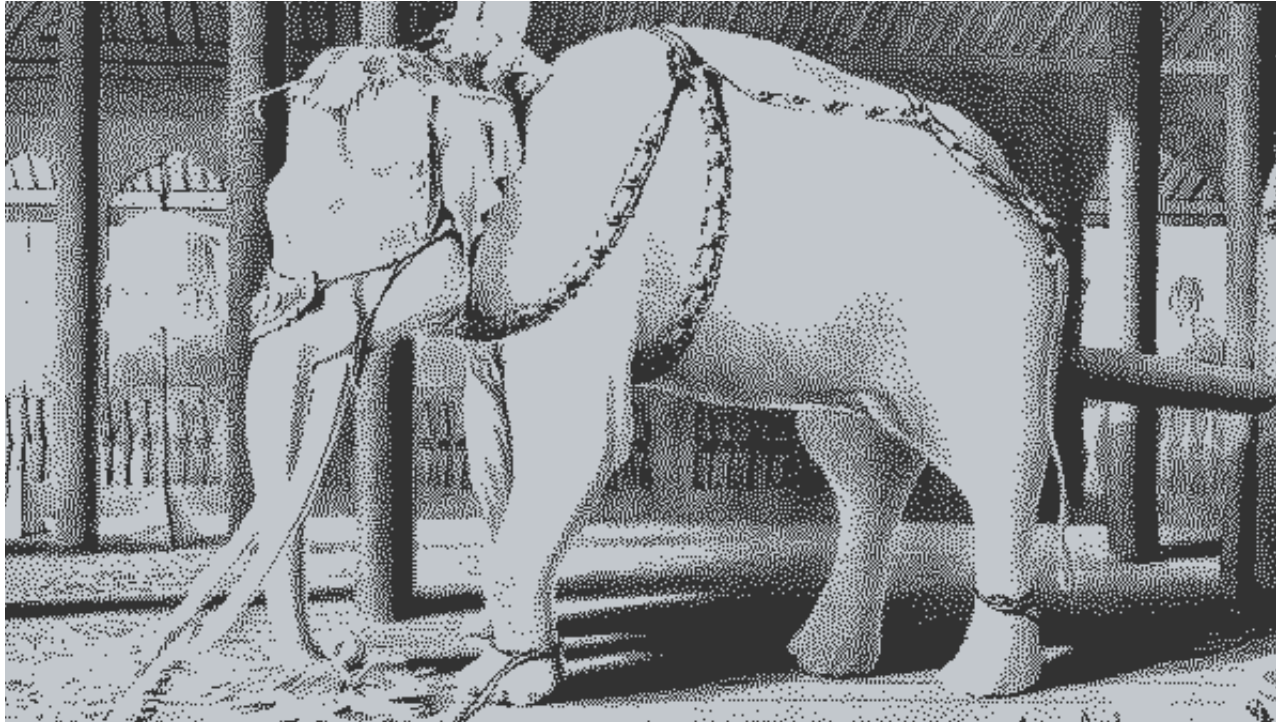
Struktur politikal “divide et impera” pada zaman pemerintahan kolonial yang digandingkan dengan pengimportan buruh paksa besar-besaran telah menafikan sebarang percubaan asimilasi mendalam, justeru mencipta pola masyarakat kolonial yang seolah-olah telah “membekukan” evolusi budaya dalam masyarakat masing-masing. Namun, perbezaan budaya mungkin hanyalah simptom bagi perbezaan dari segi keupayaan setiap masyarakat untuk mengawal kapital dan sumber lain. Jaringan niaga kekeluargaan memainkan peranan yang penting dalam mendorong identifikasi antara kegiatan ekonomi dan ras/etnik tertentu. Kita dapat melihat kemunculan pembesar-pentadbir Melayu, kongsi Cina, masyarakat pedagang Arab-Hadhrami dan Chetti di satu sisi dan petani Melayu, pelombong Cina dan buruh Tamil di sisi lain sebagai penanda kesenjangan agihan kapital dalam masyarakat kolonial yang semakin berkait rapat dengan keturunan. Anthony Reid membangkitkan satu pemerhatian mengenai Betawi di bawah jajahan Belanda yang menunjukkan dinamika ini:

“In the earlier stage, before 1770, the Malay trade diaspora had some interesting similarities with the Chinese one.... From the 1780s, however, the stereotype of the ‘Malay perahu’ came to be the modern one of a small vessel filling the lower end of the trading networks. The gap with Chinese vessel sizes grew ever wider. And in Dutch eyes, the importance of distinguishing between different ethnic categories among these small boat-owners was reduced. Increasingly all vessels based in Sumatra, the Peninsula or Borneo were seen as ‘Malay.’”⁶

Pola pemilikan kapital secara khususnya telah menstrukturkan hubungan kaum antara Melayu dengan Cina, juga mengesani tatanan politik sehingga sekarang. Kebergantungan ekonomi kolonial ke atas perdagangan dan juga kilang-kilang pemprosesan pelbagai komoditi telah mencipta hubungan yang berselang-seli antara kesepakatan dan permusuhan antara pentadbir/pembesar negeri-negeri Melayu dengan sosok-sosok perniagaan berketurunan Cina. Dari pengeluaran padi, candu, timah, dan gambir, misalnya, peniaga berketurunan Cina memainkan peranan “orang tengah”, membangkitkan tohmahan dan stereotaip negatif.⁷

Cita Bangsa Rustam Sani

Bagi elit berketurunan Cina, kepentingan perniagaan mendorong mereka untuk memupuk hubungan erat dengan kerajaan kolonial British, lantas menerbalikkan proses asimilasi dalam masyarakat setempat yang boleh dikesani terutamanya di Pantai Timur dan Utara. Manakala bagi kaum pekerja yang membentuk gelombang migrasi yang besar pada hujung abad ke-19 dan awal abad ke-20, pertalian emosi dan sejarah rapat dengan gerakan kebangkitan di Tanah Besar Cina menggarap imaginasi. Sinifikasi, satu proses yang menyatukan pelbagai dialek dan etnik dari Cina dalam satu kebudayaan, berlangsung dalam tempoh yang sama berlakunya kebangkitan nasionalisme Melayu.



Maka, pembentukan nasionalisme Melayu berlaku dalam konteks pertembungan perbezaan ras yang semakin rigid. Dalam mengolah dan mengutarakan idea-idea pembebasan, pelopor nasionalisme Melayu pada 1920 dan 30-an mula menelaah proses pembinaan bangsa yang merangkumi hubungan antara pentaksiran ras Melayu, kedudukan raja-raja Melayu, ekonomi dan pembangunan, pengukuhan Bahasa Melayu, dan peranan Islam dalam masyarakat. Akhirnya budaya dan usaha politik sedar membawa lapisan masyarakat berbagai kelas, iaitu masyarakat tani tradisional, Jawi Peranakan dan Arab Hadhrami, bangsawan dan raja Melayu, serta kelompok lain yang berasal dari kepulauan yang kini dipanggil Indonesia dalam lingkungan ke-Melayu-an.

Dalam pensejarahan Rustam Sani, pertembungan yang berlaku apabila masyarakat yang mudah disatukan sejarah dan budayanya dalam bentuk “Melayu” bertemu dengan masyarakat kolonial yang majmuk telah menghasilkan cabang cita-bangsa (nation-of-intent), iaitu antara Melayu dan Malay(sian). Bagi beliau, satu-satunya usaha serius awal untuk menyatukan kedua-dua aspirasi ini ialah melalui gagasan kerakyatan “Melayu” yang diutarakan oleh gabungan kiri, Pusat Tenaga Rakyat – All Malayan Council of Joint Action (PUTERA – AMCJA) pada tahun 1947. Dalam kerangka “Perlembagaan Rakyat” status kerakyatan ini merangkumi kumpulan etnik lain - atas dasar jus soli - selain mengiktiraf status kepribumian etnik Melayu.

Bagi kelompok radikal Melayu yang ketika itu mengimpikan “Melayu Raya”, satu gagasan yang lebih luas pemahaman sosiologikal dan wilayahnya, langkah ini mungkin dilihat menuju ke arah itu. Bagi kelompok kiri etnik lain, usaha ini melambangkan pula kesediaan untuk membina budaya dan negara-bangsa yang boleh mewarisi sejarah masyarakat masing-masing dalam satu sintesis baharu. Maka perjuangan pembebasan yang berkerangka “Malayan” berubah menjadi “Melayu” dalam usaha kolektif untuk meleburkan istilah tersebut supaya menjadi nasionalisme sivik. Pada saat itu, lonjakan mental ini mungkin dianggap lebih mudah. Bukankah *nom de guerre*, Ahmad “Boes” tamam itu sendiri diinspirasi oleh perjuangan nasionalis pemimpin Indian National Army (INA), Subhas Chandra Bose?

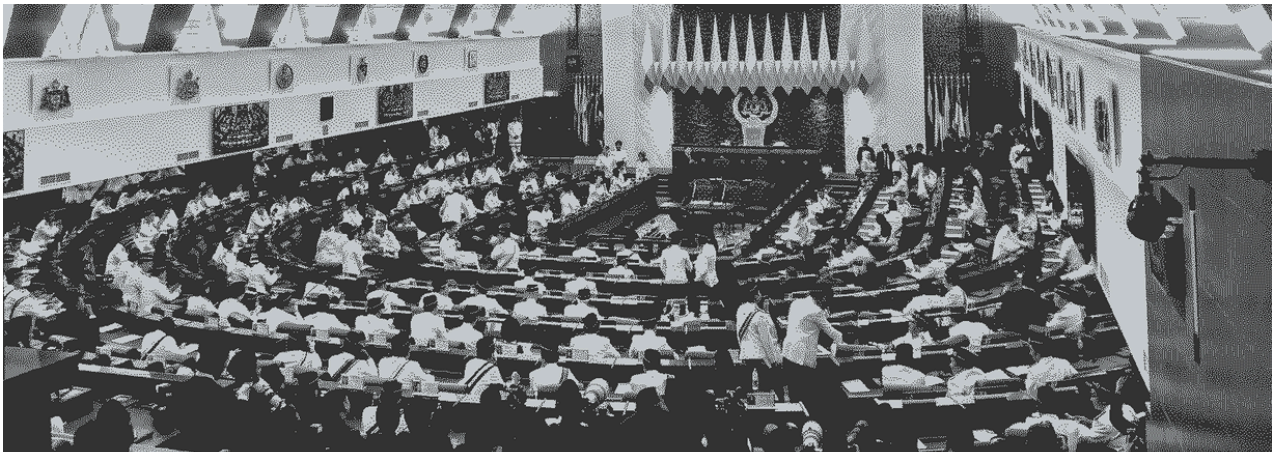
Cabang cita bangsa

Kita tidak akan ketahui apa yang dimungkinkan sekiranya aspirasi ini diberi peluang untuk berkembang. Percaturan realpolitik dan perhitungan Perang Dingin telah menggagalkan gabungan kiri lantas menenggelamkan aspirasi inklusif ini dalam projek pembangunan ethno-nasionalis di bawah UMNO. Kelowongan alternatif ini dipenuhi pula oleh projek politik “Malaysian Malaysia” yang diperjuangkan Democratic Action Party (DAP). Dari PUTERA-AMCJA ke Barisan Sosialis ke perjuangan solo PRM, persoalan bangsa terus menjadi cabaran utama dalam membina garis juang yang koheren dalam kerencaman sosial dan aspirasi-nya. Soal kebudayaan yang menggelodak pada dekad 1960 dan 70-an membataskan usaha untuk membina wadah politik yang jelas.

Di satu sisi, terdapat kelompok kiri yang lebih selesa dalam kerangka multikultural, maka mereka berhujah bahawa pertukaran budaya yang bebas dalam kerangka pembangunan nasional secara organik akan menghasilkan asimilasi.⁸ Dalam konteks ini, mereka menyokong usaha setiap masyarakat untuk memelihara hak kebudayaan tersendiri. Selaras dengan Lenin, mereka berpendapat bahawa asimilasi kaum tidak akan tercapai melalui kekerasan, tetapi melalui percambahan idea dan perbezaan. Dalam praktik politik, kita mendapati kaedah berbeza dalam memaknai pendirian ini. Misalnya, di Universiti Nanyang di Singapura (sekarang Nanyang Technical University) - iaitu universiti independen yang ditubuhkan masyarakat Cina - terdapat usaha besar-besaran untuk mengajar Bahasa Melayu kepada penuntut dan buruh berketurunan Cina.⁹ Sementara itu, sebahagian daripada elemen kiri dalam kesatuan sekerja dan gerakan mahasiswa mula menyokong persatuan-persatuan bahasa dalam memperjuangkan “hak kebudayaan” mereka.

Sesetengah yang lain pula mengambil pendirian bahawa pembangunan nasional hanya akan dikecapi melalui pengukuhan kebudayaan Melayu sebagai asas kesatuan satu “bangsa”. Bagi mereka, autonomi dan “hak kebudayaan” ialah penanda bagi masyarakat yang masih berpecah-belah dan gagal untuk menghasilkan kebudayaan nasional yang mampu menyokong usaha pembangunan yang benar-benar berdaulat. Walaupun mereka mengakui bahawa tidak semestinya hanya Bahasa Melayu yang diamalkan, rata-rata terdapat persetujuan bahawa bahasa ini yang benar-benar mampu menjadi “jiwa bangsa” baharu ini. Dalam lapangan politik, ada di antara mereka – misalnya, James Puthucheary dan Abdullah Majid – yang menyokong usaha UMNO (walaupun di belakang tadbir). Dalam lapangan kebudayaan, terdapat juga penulis-penulis Melayu yang cuba untuk menjadi perantara antara masyarakat berbeza. Dalam puisinya, “Anak Jiran Tionghua”, Usman Awang menulis:

Bumi tercinta resapkan wahyumu
Jantung mereka ialah langitmu
Darah mereka adalah sungai
Nafas mereka adalah udaramu



Perpecahan ideologi telah menghasilkan garis juang yang samar dan ambivalen. Walaubagaimanapun, kegagalan untuk membentuk wadah politik yang stabil telah menyebabkan tempas elemen perjuangannya dalam berbagai serpihan. Dalam politik pembangkang, elemen ini telah menjadi penghubung retorik antara politik Melayu dengan aspirasi multikulturalisme yang wujud dalam “Malaysian Malaysia”, memungkinkan gabungan-gabungan politik bagi mencabar hegemoni UMNO. Manakala dalam koridor kekuasaan, elemen ini dimobilisasikan dalam kerangka pembangunan seperti Dasar Ekonomi Baru (DEB) bagi mencapai objektif serampang dua mata untuk membasmi kemiskinan dan menghapuskan jurang antara kaum, meskipun ia wujud dalam konteks kepimpinan dan dominasi Melayu. Bagi Rustam Sani, usaha ini tidak mampu untuk merungkaikan kerumitan sosial antara ras dan pembangunan kerana pewaris nasionalisme Melayu masih belum menerima sepenuhnya tanggungjawab historikal untuk membina nasionalisme yang lebih terangkum.

Sebaliknya, pembangunan pasca-kemerdekaan telah melahirkan gabungan kelompok elit antara kaum yang terus mengekalkan pemisahan budaya dan mental antara masyarakat masing-masing. Keadaan ini bermaksud nasionalisme Melayu telah gagal dan perlu wujudnya usaha sadar untuk membina satu aspirasi baru. Dalam buku terakhirnya “Failed Nation” yang diterbitkan pada tahun 2008, beliau menulis:

“To my mind, communalism in the national question shall remain as long as Malaysia is a state constituted by a multiple of nations competing for supremacy of percentages in almost all areas of our social life. This battle of percentages will continue as long as anything and everything in our social and national life are divided along identifiable ethnic lines – Chinese banks, Malay universities, etc.”

Dari sudut ini, penulisan beliau selaras dengan bien-pensant dalam bidang sains sosial dan sejarah. Shamsul A.B, sosiologis UKM, misalnya telah menghuraikan jenis-jenis cita-bangsa yang terhasil daripada kerumitan hubungan etnik dalam sejarah negara.¹⁰ Lebih awal lagi pada tahun 1962, Wang Gungwu turut menulis: “Malayan nationalism consists of two component parts: a nucleus of Malay nationalism enclosed by the ideal of Malay-Chinese-Indian partnership”.

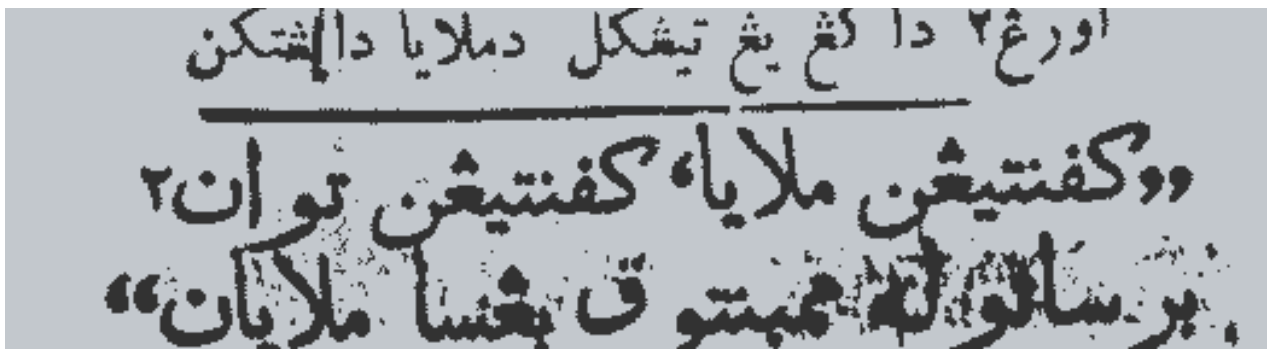
Namun kedua-duanya, seperti kebanyakan daripada mereka yang menulis mengenai negara-bangsa, menulis dengan nada jarak-jauh akademik dan dengan pengertian tersirat bahawa masyarakat plural dan multikultural itu sentiasa positif. Sebaliknya, Rustam Sani menulis dengan nada politikal: politikal dalam erti kepartiannya, politikal juga dalam erti menegaskan peranan penting yang dimainkan nasionalisme Melayu dalam memaknai pembebasan dan pembangunan pasca-merdeka. Dengan nada itu juga, beliau melihat multikulturalisme sedia ada serta aspirasi politikalnya secara lebih kritis, sebagai kesinambungan silo masyarakat di bawah tatanan kolonial. Sebaliknya, beliau mengharapkan satu sintesis yang dipacu oleh komuniti politik Melayu itu sendiri, dan demikian, harapannya bagi satu “Bangsa Malaysia”. Pada penghujung hayatnya, mungkin PKR yang dianggapkannya sebagai wadah yang mampu untuk merealisasikan aspirasi tersebut. Mungkin bagi beliau, “ketuanan rakyat” yang pernah dilaungkan sosok Reformasi ialah penghubung antara momen 1947 dengan “Wawasan 2020”.

Melewati “Melawan Lupa”

Membaca Rustam Sani, kita ditinggalkan dengan berbagai persoalan. Pertamanya, kita perlu juga akui bahawa mana-mana idea yang dikatakan boleh “menyatukan” bangsa, semestinya akan membangkitkan rasa curiga. Isu-isu yang dibangkitkan dalam soal pendidikan, rumah ibadat, dan sebagainya berkait rapat dengan kefahaman identiti diri melalui sejarah masyarakat tertentu. Apakah sebenarnya yang akan memaknai keterangkuman “Bangsa Malaysia” (atau apa-apa nama yang lain) bagi mengatasi rasa curiga ni? Dalam hampawa politik kiri yang berkesan, penulis-penulis kiri telah cuba untuk membangkitkan rasa kesatuan ini melalui penulisan dalam Bahasa Melayu dan penterjemahan sastera lain ke dalam Bahasa Melayu. Namun, setakat ini kita mendapati bahawa evolusi kapitalisme di negara telah mencipta cabang linguistik yang baru, antara ekonomi swasta berbahasa Inggeris dan Mandarin dan pentabiran negara berbahasa Melayu.

Kita turut mendapati bahawa wujudnya usaha bersungguh-sungguh untuk “melawan lupa” dalam kalangan kiri kontemporari dengan menimbulkan sejarah perjuangan kiri yang menghasilkan Perlembagaan Rakyat 1947. Walaupun nilai sejarah ini tidak dapat disangkal, gagasan ini perlu disifatkan sebagai hasil usaha politik dan keadaan zamannya yang tersendiri. Bermaksud, ianya progresif setakat mana ianya bertujuan untuk menghasilkan negara-bangsa yang menafikan penguasaan kolonial ke atas tatanan masyarakat dan ekonomi. Dari segi landasan intelektual dan teoretikalnya, tiada perbezaan ketara daripada apa yang terhasil di bawah hegemoni UMNO yang telah mengutamakan pembangunan yang dipacu langkah-langkah “statist”. Sejak dari 1917, gerakan kiri sedunia telah menunjukkan cara pembangunan yang berbeza daripada kapitalisme laissez-faire dan ini diguna pakai oleh pelbagai kerajaan pasca-penjajahan, sama ada mereka berhaluan kanan atau kiri.

Kini, kita berdepan pula dengan persoalan eksploitasi yang merentasi batas “kerakyatan”. Bukan bermaksud perjuangan nasionalis sudah berakhir; sebaliknya perjuangan pembebasan sesuatu “bangsa” di Palestin, Sudan, Iran dan lain-lain kini bertindih pula dengan krisis-krisis lain yang tidak mengenal sempadan: eksploitasi buruh merentasi kewarganegaraan, kerosakan ekologi yang mengandungi implikasi ketidakadilan sosial, dan kemunculan dunia multipolar yang menawarkan pilihan rakan dan musuh tanpa semestinya menawarkan pembebasan sejagat. Sekiranya “rakyat” memainkan peranan subjek pembebasan dalam perjuangan menuntut kedaulatan, apakah subjek dan aspirasi seterusnya yang mampu menyatukan perjuangan dalam mendepani kekuasaan elit, kerosakan ekologi, dan kemunculan tatanan antarabangsa pelbagai kutub?



1 Richard Kamalanathan, “Rustam Sani - the last leftist”, Malaysiakini, Apr 2025

2 Beban ini dimanifestasikan sebagai tanggungjawab untuk memperkasakan Bahasa Melayu sebagai bahasa ilmiah yang digunakan dalam pelbagai lapangan. Kaedah usaha ini tidak begitu jelas dalam penulisan beliau, tetapi barangkali boleh dicapai melalui pemeraksanaan kebudayaan Melayu melalui penterjemahan oleh institusi-institusi kebangsaan. Pendirian ini turut dipegang oleh sosiologis, Abdul Rahman Embong, yang turut menggalakkan penterjemahan sastera “kesukuan”, yakni Mandarin, Tamil dan sebagainya, ke Bahasa Melayu. Lihat “Negara Bangsa: Proses dan Perbahasan”, Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2000.

3 Anthony Reid, “The Imperial Alchemy: Nationalism and Political Identity in Southeast Asia”, Cambridge University Press, 2010. Terutamanya Bab 4.

4 Shahrudin Maaruf, “Idea-idea Melayu tentang Pembangunan”, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2020

5 Sebagai rujukan tentang kemunculan kapitalisme, lihat Jairus Banaji, “A Brief History of Commercial Capitalism”, Haymarket Books, 2020; dan Alexander Anievas & Karim Nisancıoğlu, “How the West Came to Rule”, Pluto Press, 2014. Untuk interaksi antara Asia Tenggara dan China, lihat Wang Gungwu, “Only Connect”, 2001. Times Academic Press

6 Reid, Imperial Alchemy, ms. 90.

7 Berkenaan stereotaip negatif, lihat Shahrudin Maaruf, 2020, terutamanya analisa penulisan Abdul Rahim Kajai dan Ishak Haji Muhammad. Lihat juga memoir Aziz Ishak, “Special Guest: The Detention in Malaysia of an ex-Cabinet Minister”, 1977. Bagi hubungan antara kaum, lihat Wu Xiao An, “Chinese Business in the Making of a Malay State, 1882 - 1941”, RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.

8 Perenggan ini dan seterusnya adalah berdasarkan kajian arkib baharu oleh Charles Brophy yang belum diterbitkan. Sebahagian daripada hujah ini boleh dirujuk dalam Charles Brophy, “The ‘theory of the unity of all classes and races against foreign capital’ in Malaysia: Socialism, communalism, and uneven development in the thought of James Puthucherry”, Modern Asian Studies, Volume 56, Issue 6, November 2022, pp. 1813 - 1844

9 Perkongsian oleh bekas ahli Parti Komunis Malaya yang pernah menuntut di universiti tersebut. April 2026, London, UK.

10 Shamsul A.B, “Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia”, 1996.

REVITALISING DEPENDENCY THEORY

WHERE IS MALAYSIA / SOUTHEAST ASIA?

CHRISTOPHER CHOONG



Dependency theory in international political economy

Over the past few years, there has been some commendable intellectual energy devoted to revitalising dependency theory for contemporary political economy analysis. Notably, Ingrid Kvangraven from King's College London has debunked longstanding misconceptions about dependency theory and developed the vision of approaching it as a research programme.² Other historical, theoretical, and empirical efforts have revisited the interpretive framework of dependency theory for the twenty-first century,³ adapting and extending the classic studies of dependency and applying it to current issues such as the digital economy,⁴ financialisation,⁵ gender, race and more.⁶

Dependency is broadly defined as “a situation in which the economy of certain countries is conditioned by the development and expansion of another”.⁷ It takes the world economy as its unit of analysis, rather than individual nation-states, and focuses on the structural dynamics of global capitalism. A dependency research programme, in turn, has the core tenets of adopting a global historical analysis, theorising the global economy as polarising, and featuring domestic structures of production and external constraints in the Global South.⁸ However, this way of studying the international has been a neglected tradition in International Political Economy

where the renewed research agenda is articulated as having the conceptual tools to engage more effectively in policy debates while privileging the interests and standpoints of the Global South.⁹

¹ I would like to thank Dr Belén Villegas Plá, Fatin Nadhirah, and Jeremy Lim for their constructive comments and literature recommendations. I welcome further feedback and suggested readings on the topic.

² Kvangraven, I. H. (2020). Beyond the Stereotype: Restating the Relevance of the Dependency Research Programme

³ Ahumada, J. M. and Torres, M. (2024). Dependency Theory: An Underdevelopmental Thought from Latin America to the Entire World

⁴ Franco, S. F., Graña, J. M. and Rikap C. (2024). Dependency in the Digital Age? The Experience of Mercado Libre in Latin America

⁵ Pérez Caldentey, E. and Vernengo, M. (2021). Financialization, Deindustrialization and Instability in Latin America

⁶ Madariaga, A. and Palestini, S. (2021). Dependent Capitalisms in Contemporary Latin America and Europe

⁷ Dos Santos, T. (1970). The Structure of Dependence

⁸ Kvangraven, I. H. (2020).

⁹ de Oliveira, F. A. and Kvangraven, I. H. (2023). Back to Dakar: Decolonizing international political economy through dependency theory

While different strands of dependency scholarship from Latin America and Africa have been drawn to inspire this intellectual endeavour, Southeast Asia remains largely absent from the conversation. To the extent Southeast Asia is mentioned,¹⁰ it is sometimes invoked as a counterfactual to dependency theory, with the region's growth and industrial achievements cited as empirical evidence¹¹ to disprove the premise that peripheral countries could not industrialise by integrating into the world economy dominated by metropolitan capital—although not all strands of dependency theory dismiss the possibility of industrialisation in the periphery.

“there has been little or no Southeast Asian scholarship to date that can claim to have attempted to advance the study of the region in a theoretically specific and systematic manner comparable to that of authors such as Baran, Frank, Laclau, Cardoso, Dos Santos, Furtado, Sunkel, O'Donnell or Evans writing on Latin America, or Amin, Rodney, Ake, Meillassoux, Mamdani, Leys or Shivji writing on Africa.”¹⁴

More than 40 years later, the Southeast Asian lacunae remain intact. The neglect of Southeast Asia is regrettable as it is the region most penetrated by metropolitan industrial capital¹⁵ at least until the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997/1998, underpinned by the internationalisation of production, a new international division of labour, and novel permutations of state capitalism. Hence, this essay revisits dependency scholarship in Malaysia to make the broader argument that engagement with such scholarship in Southeast Asia not only has the potential to enrich political economy analysis but also brings distinct contributions to ongoing efforts to revitalise dependency theory. More pertinently, political economy studies of race and gender in the region, which have intersected with different configurations of international/national capital, can help address the race and gender lacunae of dependency theory. Such intersections resonate with recent calls to bring dependency theory into closer dialogue with anti-colonial¹⁶ and feminist¹⁷ scholarship.

Revisiting dependency scholarship in Malaysia

It should be clarified at the outset that dependency scholarship in Malaysia does not refer to a dogmatic commitment to a set of theoretical propositions, nor does it necessarily represent a coherent and systematic way of theorising. Instead, the body of work is constituted by an inclination to utilise Malaysia as an empirical source to engage with dependency theory and historical materialist approaches, such as world-systems theory and the neocolonial thesis.¹⁸ While dependency scholarship was influential in Malaysia during the 1950s and 1960s,¹⁹ subsequent studies were also published, especially in the 1980s.

One of the defining works, published in 1960 under the title *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy*,²⁰ was written by the economist and trade unionist James

Malaysia's economic success from the 1960s to the 1980s was previously noted as a “critical test for the neocolonial thesis or the dependency school.”¹² Furthermore, the endurance of pre-capitalist modes of production in the region allegedly challenges the idea that pre-capitalist formations were adversely modified under conditions of capitalist integration¹³—the idea also known as the development of underdevelopment thesis, associated with the neo-Marxist dependency theorist, Andre Gunder Frank. As noted by the political economists Richard Higgott and Richard Robison in 1985,

Puthucheary while he was in prison. Drawing on the ideas of Gunnar Myrdal and Hans Singer (the latter known for his structuralist critique of the Economic Commission of Latin America),²¹ Puthucheary argued that underdevelopment in Malaya was not merely due to “the lack of natural resources and the smallness of the market” but was “created by the capital development which has already taken place.”²² Puthucheary demonstrated how corporate Malaya was structurally owned and controlled by foreign capital via the British agency houses, which were invested in extracting primary commodities to feed metropolitan industrial needs. Profits were repatriated rather than channelled to spur industrialisation in Malaya. Puthucheary characterised such dependent economies as “outposts of the economy of the industrial countries.”²³

The social anthropologist Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, in one of his early works published in 1979, adapted the ideas of dependency theorists Walter Rodney and Andre

¹⁰ de Oliveira and Kvangraven, ‘Back to Dakar’.

¹¹ Stephen D. Krasner, ‘International Political Economy: Abiding Discord’, *Review of International Political Economy* 1, no. 1 (1994): 13–19.

¹² Charles Hirschman, ‘Development and Inequality in Malaysia: From Puthucheary to Mehmet’, *Pacific Affairs* 62, no. 1 (1989): 72–81.

¹³ Richard Higgott et al., ‘Theories of Development and Underdevelopment: Implications for the Study of Southeast Asia’, in *Southeast Asia – Essays in the Political Economy of Structural Change*, eds. Richard Higgott and Richard Robison (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

¹⁴ ¹⁵ Higgott et al., ‘Theories of Development and Underdevelopment’.

¹⁶ Felipe Antunes De Oliveira, ‘Who Are the Super-Exploited? Gender, Race, and the Intersectional Potentialities of Dependency Theory’, in *Dependent Capitalisms in Contemporary Latin America and Europe*, ed. Aldo Madariaga and Stefano Palestini, International Political Economy Series (Springer International Publishing, 2021).

¹⁷ Belén Villegas Plá, ‘Dependency Theory Meets Feminist Economics: A Research Agenda’, *Third World Quarterly* 45, no. 8 (2024): 1325–42.

¹⁸ The literature reviewed here is not exhaustive. Markedly absent is the book by the economist Martin Khor Kok Peng, ‘The Malaysian Economy: Structures and Dependence’. In addition, there is the approach of the anthropologist Zawawi Ibrahim, who brought a critical lens to the epistemology of world-systems theory. It is also reflected in the latter's book, *The Malay Labourer: By the Window of Capitalism*.

¹⁹ Hirschman, C. (1989). Review: Development and Inequality in Malaysia: From Puthucheary to Mehmet

²⁰ James Joseph Puthucheary, *Ownership and Control in the Malaysian Economy: A Study of the Structure of Ownership and Control and Its Effects on the Development of Secondary Industries and Economic Growth in Malaya and Singapore* (Eastern Universities Press, 1960).

²¹ Kvangraven, I. H. (2020).

²² ²³ Puthucheary, J. (1959). *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy*

Gunder Frank to study the Malay peasantry. Like Puthuchery, he explained the underdevelopment of the rural peasantry as the result of its integration into the world capitalist economy, where “these relationships have been proven to be one-sidedly advantageous, i.e. the development of the centre is at the expense of the continuing underdevelopment of the periphery.”²⁴ Following capitalist integration, rural plantation agriculture was similarly subject to international price fluctuations while subservient to the industrial demands of Britain, an economic condition Shamsul labelled “the dependent and installed mode of production”.²⁵

In a nuanced analysis published in 1982,²⁶ the political economist Lim Mah Hui delved into the dependency debate surrounding Bill Warren’s claims that imperialism had played a progressive role in spreading capitalism to Third World countries, thereby paradoxically undermining the imperialist project itself. Grounded in the empirics of the Malaysian economy, Lim surmised that genuine capitalist development had indeed occurred in the country since the 1950s, as evidenced by rapid industrialisation and the development of productive

forces in manufacturing and agriculture. However, Lim cautioned against Warren’s sweeping dismissal of external constraints confronting peripheral countries, and instead highlighted foreign control (despite the decrease in foreign ownership) and new forms of dependency on “foreign markets, foreign technology and foreign supply of capital and intermediate goods”.²⁷ He also weighed in on the debate over domestic class formation, specifically whether the local capitalist class was “comprador” or “independent” in character, eventually suggesting an “interdependent yet contradictory relation between indigenous and foreign capital”.²⁸ A similar critique of Warren’s optimistic view of imperialism was made by Hua Wu Yin, also a political economist, in the 1983 book *Class and Communalism in Malaysia*, pointing to how “the repatriation of profits by foreign investors... is likely to retard the ‘development’ of indigenous capital and its linkages with the local economy.”²⁹ However, the more interesting aspect of dependency scholarship in Malaysia is that it has not shied away from engaging with the question of race and, to a certain extent, gender. In fact, numerous studies focus on race and ethnic relations as their primary subject of inquiry. Hua, for example, was mainly concerned with racialised communalism in Malaysia.

His principal thesis was that the ruling class could not satisfy the material needs of the masses due to its dependence on metropolitan capital and therefore had to resort to communalism as a repressive, racialised mode of political settlement.³⁰ In a 1986 article titled *The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya*, the sociologist Charles Hirschman suggested the need to go beyond cultural explanations of “primordial bonds” to unpack the “race problem” in Malaya.³¹ He arguably foregrounded dependencies wrought by British colonialism/imperialism as a global historical framework for studying race relations and their entanglements with domestic class formation (and antagonism).

Lim, in another article published in 1980, grounded ethnic relations in world-systems theory, positing that such relations could not be adequately examined at “the level of inter-personal interactions or at the level of cultural and social exchange... but at the level of economics – more specifically at the levels of the relations of production and exchange.”³² Similarly, Azlan Tajuddin, a sociologist at La Roche University, employed a world-systems approach to analyse ethnic divisions and democratisation in Malaysia in his 2012 book *Malaysia in the World Economy (1824-2011)*.³³ Articulating the historical-world systemic framework as the capitalist world economy, Tajuddin drew on world-systems scholars like Immanuel Wallerstein and Thomas Shannon to challenge modernisation theories, most notably, on their proposition that industrial development in the Global South can only be achieved through the infusion of Global North investments, organisational standards, work ethics, and cultural values. He argued that Malaysia’s “managed” democracy, imposed by the local ruling elite, emerged as a political form due to ethnic and class dynamics rooted in Malaysia’s dependent development, leading to state-driven industrialisation being seen as “the only logical path toward the pursuit of happiness.”³⁴

On gender, Hua, who was mentioned earlier, contested Warren’s claims not only by articulating the racial implications of rural outmigration (for the urban electorate) but also pointed to the mobilisation of “the super-exploited class of women”³⁵ from rural areas to help resolve “the crisis in metropolitan capitalism that necessitated a search for cheap wage-zones to increase productivity.” The concept of super-exploitation is a key concept in dependency theory, with intersectional potential to engage deeper with the analysis of gender and race.³⁶

²⁴ Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, ‘The Development of the Underdevelopment of the Malaysian Peasantry’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 9, no. 4 (1979): 434–54.

²⁵ Shamsul, ‘The Development of the Underdevelopment’.

²⁶ Mah Hui Lim, ‘Capitalism and Industrialization in Malaysia’, *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* 14, no. 1 (1982): 32–47.

²⁷ ²⁸ Lim, M. H. (1982). *Capitalism and industrialization in Malaysia*

²⁹ Wu Yin Hua, *Class and Communalism in Malaysia* (Zed Books Ltd., 1983).

³⁰ Hua, *Class and Communalism*.

³¹ Charles Hirschman, ‘The Making of Race in Colonial Malaya: Political Economy and Racial Ideology’, *Sociological Forum* 1, no. 2 (1986): 330–61.

³² Mah Hui Lim, ‘Ethnic and Class Relations in Malaysia’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 10, nos 1–2 (1980): 130–54.

³³ Azlan Tajuddin, *Malaysia in the World Economy (1824–2011): Capitalism, Ethnic Divisions, and ‘Managed’ Democracy* (Lexington Books, 2012).

³⁴ Tajuddin, A. (2012). *Malaysia in the World Economy (1824–2011): Capitalism, Ethnic Divisions, and “Managed” Democracy*

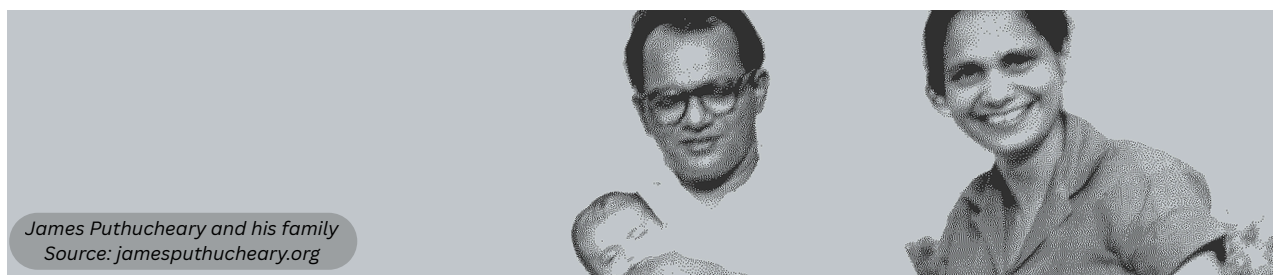
³⁵ Hua, *Class and Communalism*.

³⁶ Antunes De Oliveira, ‘Who Are the Super-Exploited?’

Hua unpacked the feminisation of wage labour in Malaysia via the concept of super-exploitation while incorporating feminist criticisms of gendered (and racialised) ideas of manual dexterity³⁷ and nimble fingers³⁸ of the “oriental female”.³⁹

A 1991 article by the anthropologist Carol McAllister also centres feminist perspectives in her global historical analysis of Negeri Sembilan women in Malaysia.⁴⁰ Using the Trotskyist formulation of uneven and combined development, a theory arguably compatible with dependency theory,⁴¹ McAllister examined women’s everyday resistance “through their continuing participation in matrilineal and Islamic traditions”.⁴² She highlighted how traditional and modern practices co-existed and were “combined” as they were incorporated into “the international wage-and-market economy”.⁴³ However, McAllister did not conceptualise women’s agency as merely the outcome of the country’s specific integration into the world capitalist economy. Instead, she prioritised women’s experiences in “issues of residence, family, marriage, childcare” and “cultural processes such as education, religion, ritual, and even play”⁴⁴ to broaden understanding of the processes of uneven and combined development (beyond work and property), while unsettling the simplistic dichotomy of traditional and modern.

Two other works worth mentioning are the anthropologist Aihwa Ong’s *Spirit of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*⁴⁵ and the sociologist Diana Wong’s *Peasants in the Making: Malaysia’s Green Revolution*.⁴⁶ Both published in 1987 and based on fieldwork conducted from 1979 to 1980, they examined the experiences of working-class and peasant women within the context of their incorporation into the world capitalist economy. Although these two publications do not directly speak to dependency scholarship, they—and works of a similar nature—can be fertile ground for harnessing the intersectional potentialities of dependency theory⁴⁷ and inscribing gender onto historical materialist analysis of the polarising global economy.



Researching dependency in Southeast Asia

While the exposition of dependency scholarship above focuses on Malaysia, the broader argument is for the recovery of dependency theory in Southeast Asia. Doing so, as suggested at the start of this essay, not only enriches studies on the political economy of the region but also makes distinct contributions that can deepen and extend efforts to revitalise dependency theory as a research programme. Researching dependency in Southeast Asia has mutually generative effects on the political economy of Southeast Asia and the dependency research programme, in which two potentialities are unravelled in this concluding section. First, there is the potential for critical reassessments of past and present events in the region, given the current historical conjuncture of global capitalist crisis underpinned by the shift from liberal containment to defensive imperialism.⁴⁸ Second, there is the potential for recovering a global historical materialist understanding of race and gender while visibilising

racialised-gendered relations of dependency in the world capitalist economy. On the first potentiality, the present moment of global capitalist crisis, as manifested in several Southeast Asian countries undergoing premature deindustrialisation,⁴⁹ offers an opportunity to re-evaluate the empirical evidence from the region used to contest dependency theory.

The point here is not to return to the fatalism of a misconstrued notion of dependency (that peripheral economies cannot industrialise), but to draw on a longer time horizon to engender a more circumspect interpretation of the region’s growth and industrial achievements while examining “how internal dynamics... in relation to the dynamics of centre countries... enforce certain patterns of industrialisation”.⁵⁰ Dependency theory, as a historical materialist approach to the international, must be able to explain dependency on a world scale, and in this regard, accounting for Southeast Asia (beyond its role as a “counterfactual”) is crucial for articulating the uneven and combined dynamics of dependency.⁵¹

³⁷ Linda Y. C. Lim, ‘Women Workers in Multinational Corporations: The Case of the Electronics Industry in Malaysia and Singapore’, *Michigan Occasional Papers in Women’s Studies* 9 (1980): 1–60.

³⁸ Diane Elson and Ruth Pearson, “‘Nimble Fingers Make Cheap Workers’: An Analysis of Women’s Employment in Third World Export Manufacturing”, *Feminist Review* 7, no. 1 (1981): 87–107.

³⁹ Hua, *Class and Communalism*.

⁴⁰ Carol McAllister, ‘Uneven and Combined Development: Dynamics of Change and Women’s Everyday Forms of Resistance in Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia’, *Review of Radical Political Economics* 23, nos 3–4 (1991): 57–98.

⁴¹ Felipe Antunes de Oliveira, ‘The Rise of the Latin American Far-Right Explained: Dependency Theory Meets Uneven and Combined Development’, *Globalizations* 16, no. 7 (2019): 1145–64.

⁴² McAllister, C. (1991).

⁴³ McAllister, C. (1991).

⁴⁴ McAllister, C. (1991).

⁴⁵ Ong, A. (2010). *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*.⁴⁶ Ong, A. (2010). *Spirits of Resistance and Capitalist Discipline: Factory Women in Malaysia*

⁴⁶ Diana Wong, *Peasants in the Making: Malaysia’s Green Revolution* (ISEAS Publishing, 1987).

⁴⁷ Antunes De Oliveira, ‘Who Are the Super-Exploited?’

⁴⁸ Walden Bello, ‘King Donald and His Asian Vassals’, *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 2025, <https://fpif.org/king-donald-and-his-asian-vassals/>.

⁴⁹ José Gabriel Palma and Jonathan Pincus, ‘Is Southeast Asia Falling Into a Latin American Style “Middle-Income Trap”?’ in *The Great Upheaval: Resetting Development Policy and Institutions in the Asia-Pacific* (Cambridge University Press, 2022).

⁵⁰ Kvangraven, ‘Beyond the Stereotype’.

⁵¹ de Oliveira, ‘Dependency Theory Meets Uneven and Combined Development’.

At the same time, situating the political economy of industrialisation/deindustrialisation within a dependency framework provides an alternative to neoliberal⁵² and neo-institutionalist⁵³ framings of the middle-income trap that do not account for dependency and structural effects of capitalism. It means not premising technological and productivity gaps on the lack of (neoliberal) integration into the world economy, but starting the interrogation with the terms and conditions in which Southeast Asian countries were incorporated. Understanding the *longue durée* of dependency also involves sourcing lessons from the rich archives of anti-colonial and anti-imperial resistance, rather than exceptionalising the present imperial power of the United States of America (without negating discontinuities and change).

On the second potentiality, the political economy of Southeast Asia is rife with racial and gender dynamics, which can address the race-gender lacunae of dependency theory. It has already been shown via the race and gender dimensions of dependency scholarship in Malaysia discussed above. But it can be extended to wider Southeast Asia, in which racialised⁵⁴ and gendered⁵⁵ social formations are colonial legacies⁵⁶ and postcolonial realities⁵⁷ (see, for example, *Fantasising the Feminine in Indonesia*⁵⁸). Although there are laudable efforts to reconcile dependency theory with anti-colonial/anti-racist ideas⁵⁹ and feminist economics,⁶⁰ the encounters of Southeast Asia with metropolitan capital suggest that these dynamics must be understood in historically grounded ways. New forms of work in the region, such as the proliferation of digital care platform work,⁶¹ further underscore the need to understand emerging forms of racialised and feminised relations⁶² of dependency in the world economy.

Centring racialised, gendered bodies and experiences in articulating the global structures of dependency also averts the critique of developmentalism inherent in the classic works of dependency theory.⁶³ It broadens the scope of industrial policy⁶⁴ in a region where state-led industrialisation, with its sectoral concerns and domestic value-added production, tends to be valorised as “development”, at risk of only “changing the identity of the owners of industrial capital”⁶⁵ from foreign to local capitalists. In other words, visibilising racialised-gendered relations of dependency redirects the gaze to links between “economic upgrading” and “social upgrading”⁶⁶—without conflating them. Finally, anchoring race and gender in dependency theory shifts the focus on interpersonal, behavioural, and cultural explanations to the global systems of production, circulation, and distribution, where racial and gender hierarchies are not only embedded but also essential to the functioning of the world capitalist economy.

⁵² Pietro Masina, *Southeast Asia, the Middle-Income Trap, and the World Bank: A Critique of Neoclassical Mythology*, hal-03744657 (SEATIDE Integration in Southeast Asia: Trajectories of Inclusion, Dynamics of Exclusion, 2016).

⁵³ Richard F. Doner and Ben Ross Schneider, ‘The Middle-Income Trap: More Politics than Economics’, *World Politics* 68, no. 4 (2016): 608–44.

⁵⁴ Farish A. Noor and Peter Carey, ‘Introduction Why Race Mattered: Racial Difference, Racialized Colonial Capitalism and the Racialized Wars of Nineteenth-Century Colonial Southeast Asia’, in *Racial Difference and the Colonial Wars of 19th Century Southeast Asia*, eds. Farish A. Noor and Peter Carey (Amsterdam University Press, 2021).

⁵⁵ Juanita Elias, ‘The Gendered Political Economy of Southeast Asian Development’, in *The Political Economy of Southeast Asia*, Fourth Edition, ed. Toby Carroll et al., *Studies in the Political Economy of Public Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

⁵⁶ Diana S. Kim, *Rethinking Colonial Legacies across Southeast Asia: Through the Lens of the Japanese Wartime Empire* (Cambridge University Press, 2025).

⁵⁷ Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz, *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia* (University of California Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ Laurie Jo Sears, *Fantasizing the Feminine in Indonesia* (Duke University Press, 1996).

⁵⁹ Antunes De Oliveira, ‘Who Are the Super-Exploited?’

⁶⁰ Villegas Plá, ‘Dependency Theory Meets Feminist Economics’.

⁶¹ Ambika Tandon and Aayush Rathi, *Fault Lines at the Front Lines: Care Work and Digital Platforms in South and Southeast Asia* (Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, 2021).

⁶² Paula Rodríguez-Modroño et al., ‘A Social Reproduction Analysis of Digital Care Platform Work’, *New Political Economy* 29, no. 4 (2024): 616–27.

⁶³ R de Oliveira and Kvangraven, ‘Back to Dakar’.

⁶⁴ Sam Ashman et al., ‘Radical Perspectives on Industrial Policy’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Industrial Policy*, eds. Arkebe Oqubay et al. (Oxford, 2020), 178–204.

⁶⁵ Ashman et al., ‘Radical Perspectives on Industrial Policy’.

⁶⁶ Donatella Alessandrini, ‘A Not So “New Dawn” for International Economic Law and Development: Towards a Social Reproduction Approach to GVCs’, *European Journal of International Law* 33, no. 1 (2022): 131–62.