

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

GDN-28

The Plural Society - III
Theory Revisited

12 Road 5/35
Petaling Jaya, Selangor
Malaya
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte
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366 Madison Avenue
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Dear Mr. Nolte,

In a pre-war study of Indonesia, J.S. Furnivall, one-time British civil servant in Burma, characterized Indonesia and Burma as plural societies. He referred especially to the great gulf that separated immigrant from indigenous peoples in both countries, but he also argued generally that a plural society is one in which separate groups are so different in organization, activities, and values that they do not form a unified society. At the same time, these groups are so dependent on one another that they cannot be separated. In Indonesia, for example, Indonesians and Chinese form completely separate communities, but one grows rice and the other buys, distributes and sells it. Like man and woman, they can neither get along with nor without one another. The perceptivity of Furnivall's analysis gave the phrase he coined a position in the standard vocabulary describing this part of the world. No matter what country in the region we consider, we learn that it is a plural society and that this constitutes one of the country's major problems.

For Furnivall, as for others who have followed his orientation, the plural society has an almost pathological character. It lacks a sense of unity or a common will. The only common meeting place of the different groups is the market place. This raises economic criteria to the position of ultimate values. The test of cheapness applies in all things, bringing with it the disintegration of society.

One of the major pre-war inferences drawn from this type of analysis held that only the presence of an external, more rational, and more powerful force could keep the separate groups from engaging in chronic, bloody conflict.

Though this inference has often been proved inaccurate, one of Furnivall's observations on Indonesia has an almost prophetic ring. He noted that the different groups are so far from having a common will that there was pressure from the more numerous natives (opposing the Chinese) to dissolve the tie between them, even at the risk of anarchy. Indonesia's past ten years of experience with its minorities, rising to the crescendo of the recent anti-Chinese riots and the destruction of Chinese property, demonstrate that the risk has been taken and the price is being paid.

Though a good deal of Furnivall's analysis is certainly accurate, his basic assumptions should be questioned, if for no other reason than the obvious difference in the meaning of pluralism between East and West. (I shall beg the question and leave the definition of East and West to others.) For Furnivall pluralism means essentially anarchy, or the negation of a social order based upon consensus. In the West, on the other hand, pluralism is the very foundation of liberal democracy and individual freedom. It is the fact of difference and the competition of different groups for the attention and allegiance of the individual that gives him

the opportunity to choose, which is the essence of his freedom.

I would argue that in this part of the world it has been not the plural character but the dependent character of the society that has reduced group differences to a state of near anarchy. Furnivall may be right in arguing that when groups meet only in the market place, society is destroyed by the exclusive play of economic forces. One can also argue from this, however, that when groups are denied the opportunity to come together in the political arena, they lose the ability to resolve whatever differences they have and to work out a practical accommodation.

One of the striking features of the position of the Chinese in Southeast Asia is the difference between their cultural and political assimilation. Of all the countries in the region, it is in Malaya that the Chinese have been least assimilated into the host culture. Far more in Malaya than in any other country have the Chinese retained such a strong and visible hold on their Chinese separateness, building their own schools, wearing their own dress and speaking primarily in their own language. At the same time, only in Malaya has there been any real political assimilation of the Chinese. This is essentially the only country in the region where Chinese are openly accepted (though with some reservations, to be sure) as legitimate citizens. Apparently cultural assimilation is neither necessary nor sufficient for political assimilation.

It is only in an independent state, however, that political assimilation becomes an issue. In the case of the Malayan school issue (GDN-2) we can see rather clearly the relation between independence and political assimilation. In 1950 the British government moved to improve Malayan schools. Following common bureaucratic procedure, a committee was formed and an expert was called in to study and make recommendations about the Malay schools. The committee contained no Chinese and took no testimony from Chinese educators, though these people had already built for themselves an extensive school system. Unfortunately, or fortunately if one accepts the utility of conflict, the committee made sweeping recommendations for a new national school system, which excluded Chinese and Indian languages and cultures. In part because of the strong objections raised to these findings, the government engaged two Chinese educators to make recommendations concerning the Chinese schools in Malaya. Even at this late date, less than a decade before independence, the foreign government failed to see and to act upon the necessity of creating a truly national school system that would both prepare children to be Malayan citizens and would also be sensitive to the wishes of the people.

As soon as the elected government came to power, two years before independence, it set about creating a national school system. This was to be one that would promote the development of the country and help establish Malay as the national language, but would also preserve and sustain the languages and cultures of the other communities in Malaya. The school issue was a loud and public one, especially around the 1959 elections. A perusal of the public debate, especially in the more extreme Malay and Chinese language newspapers, would have given anyone the impression that the country was about to blow up. Now the issue is almost dead. All the communities have come to a general acceptance of the solution. It accommodates the interests of all groups precisely because it was fought out in an arena where all groups were represented, in the political arena of an independent state.

Ethnic sentiments still run high in Malaya. There is even what appears to me to be an increase in the frustrations of young people and in their perception of the ethnic base of those frustrations. Part of these frustrations are the natural result of a general expansion of opportunities for all people. Malay privileges are all the more frustrating to Chinese because the Chinese have moved more rapidly into the bureaucracy than any other group. (There are now more Chinese than Malays in the senior bureaucracy.) Chinese economic predominance is all the more frustrating to the Malays because the Malays have recently become far more affluent than they ever dared expect. A new Chinese political party emerges to champion Chinese interests, and a new Malay party under Aziz Ishak emerges to provide leadership for the anti-Chinese, anti-capitalist, anti-British sentiments that prevail. These are the external appearances of conflict that again make the country appear to be in a very dangerous period.

Nevertheless, if there is conflict of diverse interests, there is also an open political arena in which interests can be promoted and differences resolved. The contest, with its public conflict, appears to be a necessary part of this resolution in a representative government. Malaya is spared the danger of too much conflict by the existence of a political alliance between the major ethnic parties. This allows for a great deal of the conflict to be carried out in relative privacy. Here leaders can fight for group interests, but they can also make practical deals, because they are protected from the public loss of face inherent in any compromise.

Of course behind all of this accommodation, underpinning the rationality of her pragmatic approach to her problems, is Malaya's near balance of the two major ethnic groups. The anti-Chinese policies of other Southeast Asian countries are out of the question in Malaya simply because here there are too many Chinese to be pushed out. Regardless of how much each group might wish the other gone, it is necessary for both groups to "get along" with the other. This necessity imposes upon Malayan politics a rationality that is quite unique in the area.

With conditions such as these - independence and representation of nearly equal groups - the national state can resolve conflicting interests and in doing so build a society that contains both agreement and legitimate difference. It is here, I think, that Furnivall's analysis is furthest from the point. He saw the state primarily as a product of society; if there is no homogeneous social order there can be no state, there can only be anarchy. He failed to see what some social scientists have accepted for some time: that state and society are partially interdependent and partially autonomous spheres. This is well illustrated in the lack of interdependence between political and cultural assimilation in Southeast Asia. Furnivall was not the first to see the importance of general informal agreement for making laws effective in any society; nor was he the first to underestimate the power of laws to create the general agreement that ultimately makes them effective.

In creating by fiat a national education system, Malaya begins - for the first time in her entire modern history - to educate her young people as Malaysians rather than as Chinese, Malays, Indians or pseudo-Englishmen. The country is creating by law the conditions that will produce a greater sense of national consciousness than has ever existed before. I think it is impossible to overestimate the power of this new system. The state is working in other

ways as well. In protecting Malays in government and Chinese in the economy, and in helping Malays in the economy and extending the franchise of the Chinese, the state is giving all peoples a greater stake in its continued existence. The interests of most groups are being protected and furthered, but not without limits. Each set of interests is limited by the conflicting interests of others, and in the political arena where votes are cast, an accommodation is worked out.

There remains an important point of leadership. Malaya has experienced the fortunate historic accident of having as Prime Minister a rare Malay without anti-Chinese sentiments and with an equally rare ability to hold divisive elements together. One may speculate that without Tunku Abdul Rahman the groups would be at each others' throats. This, of course, gives rise to the question, "After the Tunku, who?" I would question, however, whether the Tunku is simply an historic accident, or whether he is precisely the type of leader this system tends to produce. Any leader who comes to power in Malaya on the basis of popular elections will represent some accommodation between the major ethnic groups. Here, however, another crucial question is raised. How long will elections last? The erosion of electoral democracy in the rest of Southeast Asia (with the exception of The Philippines) certainly cannot make one too hopeful. Once again the plural society may prove useful. It appears that each group has found sufficient strength and protection in the electoral process to warrant its continuation. In addition, it does not seem likely that either group would trust the other to exercise power fairly on the basis of coercion alone. Thus it may well be that the separateness of the groups in this plural society will sustain an electoral process in which differences can be resolved and sufficient consensus arrived at to make the national state viable.

Here, then, is at least one case where the plural character of the society does not preclude, and it may even further, the development of a viable national state and a society with both the necessary amount of homogeneity and a healthy amount of diversity. Though the possibilities often appear dim in other countries, I do not think this will be the only country in Southeast Asia where we shall see the working out of a suitable accommodation of diverse interests. It seems to me that the key to the problem Furnivall described as the resolution of the plural society, lies in representation in an independent government.

Sincerely,


Gayl D. Ness

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