

Economic Dimensions of Ethnic Conflict. Edited by S.W.R. Samarasinghe and Reed Coughlan. London: Pinter Publishers, 1991. Pp. 248.

In their introduction to this volume, Samarasinghe and Coughlan outline what they conceive to be the economic issues relevant to understanding ethnic conflict. They begin with a consideration of ethnic stratification models which link the issues of class, economic development, and labour markets (pp. 2–5). Their discussion ranges from Wallerstein's world systems theory to Hechter's model of internal colonialism, dual labour market theory, and the concept of the middleman minority. They then move on to a discussion of how ethnic groups are differentially incorporated into society through resource competition, and the role of the state in mediating such processes.

Two useful points are raised with regard to the role of the state. First, one of the most intense areas of ethnic conflict is control over political power as embodied by the state. In contemporary times the state has become a potent instrument in which one group asserts dominance over other groups. In my view this is true of the modern state, its enhanced administrative and infrastructural capacity has made it possible to influence and redistribute resources in a way not possible in a rudimentary traditional state. Second, in the process of nation-building the modern state finds itself in a situation in which it is forced to play down ethnic loyalties and sentiments. Ironically, the authors state, "the principles of self-determination and national sovereignty put forth by the nation state are used against it by those with more circumscribed ethnic or ethno-regional loyalties" (p. 7). Secessionist movements throughout the world are examples of such sub-nationalism. Government efforts to alleviate ethnic conflict have the unintended effect of exacerbating ethnic consciousness and sharpening conflict.

The authors quite rightly point out that their discussion of ethnic stratification models are more conceptually focused since they link capitalist development to the development of ethnic stratification. Resource competition, however, is loosely examined in the context of the state and its role in economic and political development. I want to raise several questions here. First, are ethnic stratification and resource

competition mutually exclusive issues? What is the relationship between the two? Second, in as much as the authors have related the role of the state to resource competition, can one speak of ethnic stratification models minus the state? Hence what is the significance of the state in internal colonialism, dual labour market theory, or the concept of the middleman minority?

Notwithstanding the agenda for this volume as set out by the editors, its contributors promptly ignore the issues I expect them to address in their pieces. Goh Ban Lee (chap. 4) documents the consequences of “restructuring” in Malaysia as embodied in the New Economic Policy (NEP), which favours the redistribution of economic resources in favour of the so-called indigenous citizens of the country, the *bumiputra*. Eight years after the policy was introduced, Goh analyses its impact on employment and investment between the various ethnic communities in the period 1980–85. The gains made by *bumiputra*, the majority of whom are Malays, are impressive by any standard. For example, the proportion of *bumiputra* students at government-funded higher education institutions increased from 40 per cent in 1970 to 67 per cent in 1985; the proportion of Chinese students dropped from 49 to 26 per cent while that of Indian students remained the same (p. 77). Impressive progress has also been made in *bumiputra* participation in all occupational classifications. As far as investment is concerned Goh makes some interesting observations. After a high of M\$377 million in 1971, non-*bumiputra* investment in the manufacturing sector declined drastically between 1972 and 1980 (pp. 88–89). In all these years, their share of investment has not contributed to more than 35 per cent of the total. While Goh has assiduously documented the statistical impact of restructuring he has made little attempt to assess the thorny question of the success or otherwise of the policy. Ending on a pessimistic note, he expresses a commonly shared feeling amongst non-*bumiputra* that the NEP has been unfair to them in favouring *bumiputra*. The *bumiputra*, on the other hand, have been less than satisfied with the progress made in restructuring.

Goh’s work contains useful data tracking the impact of the NEP on the Malay, Chinese, and Indian communities. His reticence in using this data to reflect on ethnic stratification, for example, ethnic distribution in

the labour market and its consequences for the class structure of Malaysia, is reflective of those who work in this area (see Tai 1982). Husin Ali's contribution (chap. 5) makes some attempt to fill the gap. He suggests that the most striking change in post-independence Malaysia is the emergence of the middle class, which did not exist previously (pp. 103–5). The growth of the middle class is typically an urban phenomenon. The middle class, he argues, is constituted by three groups. First, the middle-range government or public servants are dominated by the Malays although the medical, technical, and educational services have a strong non-Malay representation. Second, the professionals are another middle-class group, the majority of whom are non-Malays. The Malay component in this group is steadily increasing. Third, the businessmen are mainly non-Malays but as a result of government policy, the number of Malays entering this group is phenomenal. The middle class is a growing phenomenon in Malaysia. Its expansion in the Malay community is even more significant. Much work to document the rise of the middle class needs to be done. Its ramifications for Malaysian society awaits assessment.

Phuwadol Songprasert's chapter is a comparative study of how well the Chinese and Malay Muslims have integrated themselves into the Thai polity and society. This is a useful study as it traces the separate historical trajectories of the Chinese and Malay Muslim *entrée* into the Thai nation-state. The historical and primordial connection between the Thai and Chinese has been well documented. Following the decisive defeat of the Burmese by Taksin, a half-Chinese ex-general, and the re-establishment of the Siamese state in Bangkok in 1776, Chinese migration into Siam was encouraged. Over the years the Chinese established their stranglehold over the Thai economy and today control 85 per cent of the retail and wholesale trade and an almost complete monopoly in industry (pp. 126–27). Despite periodic attempts to curb the economic power of the Chinese, which were associated with the rise of Thai nationalism, their economic hegemony has never been seriously challenged. The Chinese in Thailand have not experienced pogroms, which have been afflicted on their counterparts in neighbouring countries from time to time.

In contrast, the origin of Malay Muslims in southern Thailand may be traced to the height of the Melaka sultanate in the fifteenth century when they penetrated and settled in the southern provinces of Thailand, which were dependencies of the Malay state (pp. 124–25). The Thai regained control over these Muslim provinces and exerted its influence further south as the Melaka sultanate declined at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Thailand relinquished control over the Malay states to the British in 1909, with the exception of the southern provinces over which it had consolidated its administration. No serious attempts were made to draw the Malays into the Thai nation until the late 1930s. The rise of Malay nationalism after World War II and the formation of Malaysia in 1963 precipitated the rise of separatist movements in southern Thailand.

Phuwadol's discussion could have gained greater mileage if he had been willing to address himself to some of the issues raised in the introductory chapter by Coughlan and Samarasinghe. In particular, his historical accounts could have been discussed in the context of the differential incorporation of the two ethnic communities into the Thai nation-state. I want to make several points. The idea of the "Thai nation" first popularized by King Vajiravudh in the first quarter of this century refers to the nation-religion-king, in which all three elements are inextricably bound together (Wyatt 1984, p. 229). The Chinese could claim historical allegiance to two important elements. They were no strangers to Buddhism; the general who defeated the Burmese, reunited the Siamese state, and became king was a half-Chinese himself.

Premdas (1990) identifies two important characteristics of separatist movements — they seek a territorial base or "homeland", and they have emerged as a consequence of the nation-state. Pattani, one of the southern provinces, became a Muslim kingdom in the fifteenth century as a dependency of Melaka. The Thai separatist movements in the south therefore had a traditional homeland around which it could build its political demands. No doubt the principles of self-determination and sovereignty espoused by the Thai nation-state galvanized ethno-regional loyalties and spawned separatist responses in the south. But contrary to the view raised in the introductory chapter, that government efforts at nation-building may have the unintended consequence of creating

circumscribed ethnic consciousness, the notion of “Thai nation” was ethnically based and was an anathema to Malay Muslims in the south.

Peiris’s work (chap. 8) is an excellent discussion of plantation workers in Sri Lanka, of whom the majority are Tamils, and its implications for ethnic relations and ethnic conflict in the island state. The establishment of the plantation industry in Sri Lanka in the nineteenth century generated a continual flow of immigrants from South India to work in the tea, rubber, and coconut plantations. Many of these immigrants were illegal. Legislation passed in the first two years of Sri Lanka’s independence in 1948 resulted in the exclusion of the large majority of some 800,000 Indian Tamils domiciled there at that time from Sri Lankan citizenship (p. 171). The new laws required Indian Tamils who wanted Sri Lankan citizenship to re-apply for it under strict conditions of qualification. The majority of Indian Tamils applied for Sri Lankan citizenship, but by 1964 only 134,000 had been accepted. In 1964 an Indo-Ceylon agreement was reached to eliminate the problem of statelessness by requiring both the Sri Lankan and Indian Governments to grant citizenship to agreed quotas of stateless Tamils (p. 172). Progress made in implementing this agreement has increased the electoral strength of Tamils especially in the plantation areas of the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka (p. 176).

In recounting Peiris’s discussion of the status of Tamils in Sri Lanka, what comes to my mind is the applicability of dual labour market theory in explaining the Tamil predicament. None is forthcoming in the chapter. However, what is more significant is the question of citizenship status of Tamils and their ramifications for inter-ethnic politics and conflict in the island. A distinction is made between Tamils who are Sri Lankan citizens, Indian citizens, and those who are stateless. The Tamil separatist movement in Sri Lanka draws considerable support from South India, from where Tamils originate (p. 178). Naturally, the Indian Tamils have closer political links to South India than Sri Lankan Tamils; yet the political leaders of the former have consistently opposed the separatist movement led by Sri Lankan militants. Consequently, the Sri Lankan Government has been more responsive to the demands of Indian Tamils than it has been in the past “to preserve their present political alignment and prevent their possible radicalization”. What Peiris’s discussion

graphically illustrates is the significance of citizenship in understanding ethnic relations in Sri Lanka. I suggest that a theory of citizenship and the state will go a long way to fill the obvious gaps created by well-trodden models of ethnic stratification.

The chapters reviewed here are useful contributions to an understanding of ethnic relations in their respective societies. My reluctance in giving an unqualified stamp of approval is clear. None of these papers have attempted to apply theories of internal colonialism, dual labour market, or the concept of the middleman minority in their analyses. None of these papers have paid much attention to the role of the state, let alone reflect on it conceptually. The reluctance of the editors to critically assess these individual papers in the light of the theoretical issues they themselves have raised is an instance of an all too often glaring omission in edited volumes of this kind. I have demonstrated how this can be done.

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