

Conferences, Workshops, and Seminars

International Conference on Cultural and Social Dimensions of Market Expansion, 16–17 October 1995, Labuan, Malaysia

The second seminar in a series of international conferences on “Cultural and Social Dimensions of Market Expansion”, sponsored by the Goethe Institute, was held in Labuan, the new international offshore financial centre of Malaysia. The venue itself was chosen as a backdrop to the theme of the seminar outlined in a keynote paper by the conference chairman Hans-Dieter Evers of the University of Bielefeld, Germany, on “The Changing Culture of Markets”. Market forces are widely believed to achieve prosperity, well-being, and development. This discourse is in itself part of the culture of markets analysed in his paper. But will the current meaning of markets disappear with the rise of virtual market-places, internet shopping, and offshore business? Counter-vailing tendencies are emerging, but nevertheless it can be speculated that the expansion of global markets has reached such a stage of development that it will lead to a demise of the present market culture.

The Javanese concept of *tegel* (heartless) was used by Sjafri Sairin (Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia) in his paper entitled “Market Expansion, Consumer Culture and the ‘Heartless Society’” to demonstrate, how Indonesian political debate has reacted to recent market expansion and consumerism. The topic of consumerism was pursued in three further papers. Chua Beng Huat (National University of Singapore) pictured in his paper on “Fragments of Consumer Culture in Singapore” the transformation of Singapore from a city of material privation to one of excessive consumption and consumerism. His “fragment” was concerned with the arrival and spread of the American hamburger franchise McDonalds. Though McDonaldization has elsewhere been interpreted as Americanization, in Singapore the company has opted to insert its image into the government-led campaign for Singapore-ness

and Asian values. The simplistic equation of product consumption with the imaginary consumption of a culturally desired Other thus has to be rejected.

In her paper on “Symbolic Consumption as a Way of Life”, Solvay Gerke (University of Bielefeld, Germany) dealt with the emergence of a new, consumption-oriented middle class in Indonesia. From her extensive field research, she claimed that with market expansion, life-style and cultural practices are gaining greater significance as a new system of social ranking, in contrast to class-based socio-economic criteria of classification. Since many members of the new Indonesian middle class possess the financial resource to purchase expensive items, consumption is symbolically enacted. In this form of “virtual consumerism” the use of symbolically significant items — such as shopping bags from expensive stores — is substituted for the actual consumption good. Further evidence for this argument was provided by Irwan Abdullah (Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia) in his paper on “The Body”, in which he shows the way the female body is constructed by advertisements of body care products for the new Indonesian middle class.

A further set of papers concentrated more on the negative social impact of market expansion. Mely Tan (LIPI, Indonesia) gave a detailed account of Indonesia’s economic miracle, which has drawn extensive praise from World Bank experts. However, Tan expressed a deep concern for the regional and social discrepancy among Indonesians in gaining access to the spoils of market expansion, a phenomenon which may lead to social disintegration. This theme was further explored by Hamzah Jusoh and Habibah Ahmad (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Sabah), in their study entitled “People’s Integration in the Development of Labuan as an IOFC”. They show that the local population has been largely bypassed by the rapid government-sponsored development of Labuan. A similar picture emerged from the paper by Tommy Firman and Pradono (Bandung Institute of Technology) on “Socio-Cultural Aspects of Shaping the New Economic Region of Batam” and the paper by Vejai Balasubramaniam (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) on “Sectoral Imbalances and Political Behaviour in Sabah”.

Another important dimension of market expansion was discussed by

Heru Nugroho (Gadjah Mada University, Indonesia) in his paper on “Javanese Culture and Expanding Rural Financial Markets”. Based on field research in Bantul, Yogyakarta, the paper highlights Javanese as well as Islamic values as set against debt and the activities of moneylenders. The various ways with which Javanese moneylenders and their clients circumvent these moral inhibitions are analysed.

The frontiers of market expansion were further explored by Yao Souchou (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore) in his paper, “The Romance of Asian Capitalism: Geography, Inscription of Virtue, and the Chinese Traders in Belaga, Sarawak, East Malaysia”. Hard work and pioneering endurance determine the lives of traders on the fringe of the world market, but this “fact of life” has still to be discursively reproduced in order to make it real. Living in an outpost town in the jungle needs to be given meaning by the narrative of virtue, hard work, and danger. A romance of pioneering entrepreneurship is thus constantly recreated in stories told in coffee shops and over dinner to visitors. This form of “self-orientalism”, which is created by Belaga traders to justify the hard work of market expansion, finds a parallel in the exhortations of Asian values and Asian nationalism by some Southeast Asian political leaders.

The emergence of this nationalist ideology is interpreted by Shamsul A.B. (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia) as a reaction to rapid economic development and the ruptured relationship between individual and society. In his paper on “The Politics and Poetics of Identity in an Expanding Market Economy: The Case of Malaysia”, he argues that a variety of nationalistic discourses or “nations-of-intend” can be discerned and consequently the state can no longer be regarded as the sole guardian of the nation as an imagined community.

The whole debate on the cultural and social dimensions of market expansion can be seen, according to Syed Farid Alatas (National University of Singapore) as part of the process of market expansion itself. In the past decade a political economy of social science has been developed that claims to explain the dependency of Asian social science on the West by using a market analogy. Alatas proposes a “rhetorical programme” of social science research that hinges on its ability to capture

the attention of its audience. This audience is local and global at the same time and the discourse on market expansion is itself subject to the forces it attempts to analyse.

The reflection on the discourse on the culture of markets may very well be a path towards a better understanding of the cultural and social dimensions of market expansion. This then will be further pursued during the next seminar in the conference series to be held in August 1996 in Indonesia.

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