

Lim Teck Ghee and Charles Brophy (eds.), *The Straits Philosophical Society & Colonial Elites in Malaya: Selected Papers on Race, Identity and Social Order 1893–1915*

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The Straits Philosophical Society, founded in Singapore in 1893, followed the tradition of other intellectual societies established throughout the British Empire. Initial membership, with the exception of one Chinese member, was drawn from the colonial elite, and membership was restricted to fifteen men. The Society featured the presentation of papers pertaining to the administration and formulation of colonial policy, and critics were encouraged to respond to each paper. The Society's membership later extended to include branches in Penang and Kuala Lumpur. Although the Society persisted until 1923 and continued to influence colonial policy, both its membership and intellectual thrust diminished after the outbreak of war in 1914. The papers contained in this volume cover the period 1893 to 1915, the peak period of the Society's activities.

The editors of this volume, Lim Teck Ghee and Charles Brophy, are eminently qualified for this task. Lim has had an extended and illustrious career. A polymath, his background includes his appointment as the Professor of Advanced Studies at Universiti Malaya and service as a policy advisor to the World Bank and United Nations. Charles Brophy, an independent scholar specialising in colonial history has largely focussed upon the political and intellectual history of modern Malaysia and Singapore.

It is salutary to reflect that the informative papers contained within this book were nearly lost to posterity. They were accidentally discovered in 1976 in the Penang Library by Lim Teck Ghee and had been placed in a box scheduled for disposal. Their loss would have erased an important chapter crucial to the understanding of colonial policy in Malaya.

The twenty-seven papers in this volume have been organised into four sections, namely the ideological basis of colonial rule; governing the colony: race, crime and the law; the colonial order and the Chinese; and studying the Malays and their religion. In some cases, a critique is offered of the paper delivered. These papers are not necessarily rigidly bound to a specific topic; they are often discursive and overlap with the subject matter of other sections. Each of these papers is introduced with an explanatory editorial precis, a summary of the subject matter of the address as well as the perspective adopted by the paper's author.

The three Straits Settlements consisted of Penang, ceded from the Malay state of Kedah to the East India Company (EIC) in 1786; Singapore, claimed by the British in 1819; and Malacca, transferred from Dutch to British control in 1824 following the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars. In 1832 these were collectively grouped together under EIC rule as the Straits Settlements. In 1858 following the Great Rebellion (also known as the Indian Mutiny), the Settlements were removed from EIC rule and placed under the control of the Colonial Office.

The papers collected in this volume reflect the perspectives of what Lim Teck Ghee has designated as the age of British high imperialism. The period immediately preceding the Society's formation witnessed a series of developments that underscored the Straits' strategic importance. These included the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the establishment of the telegraphic link between London and Singapore in 1871, a flourishing book trade, the intensification of metropolitan/colony interaction, and the Settlements' proximity to the rich resources of the Malay Peninsula. This more concentrated imperial role was accompanied increased economic penetration and assumption of British administration of the Malay states.

European expansionism was informed by colonial ideologies which advanced the nebulous concept of modernistic progress as the ineluctable imperative of history. According to this standpoint European societies represented the apex of modernistic achievement. The earliest encounters of European colonisers with traditional American peoples were thus envisaged in terms of confronting earlier versions of their own societies; in effect the equivalent of their own ancestors. British perspectives were later reinforced by the Scottish Enlightenment which depicted societies developing through established phases, each stage generating a particular mode of being and behaving. European historiography, regarded as universalistic and thus beyond contestation, established colonialism as a vital and indeed sacred dynamic serving to guide subject populations towards their predetermined futures. The possible displacement and disappearance of traditional societies could be viewed as not a consequence of European actions but as a quasi-natural phenomenon based on the failure of these peoples to embrace the necessary and inexorable challenges of progress and modernistic change.

Within India the British modernistic perspective was dramatically challenged by the Great Rebellion and led to the abandonment of the intense programme of reform designed to remake India in the British image. The emphatic Indian rejection of the modernising policies of colonial agenda was perceived by British observers as base ingratitude, but more fundamentally was interpreted that Indians were unworthy of the benisons of British rule. The Rebellion fundamentally reshaped the trajectory of British policy toward India resulting in the termination of the rule of the East India Company (EIC), the decision to co-opt Indian elites within the formal structures of the colonial administration, selective education of the sons of the elites, and increased sensitivity to traditional societal structures and beliefs. Henceforth the British colonialists would adopt a policy of "white" prestige which consisted of an attitude of studied remoteness from those whom they governed and which resulted in the constant pressure to maintain the dignified aloofness expected of a ruling class. The British colonial regime in the Straits Settlements reflected this new approach to administration and indeed many of those who filled official ranks in the Settlements had previously served in India.

Following the Great Rebellion new theories of "race" and "progress" were to supplement previous ideologies and reshape colonial approaches to subject populations. This theory was known as Social Darwinism and was inspired by the 1859 publication of Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species by Natural Selection". British observers now theorised that race, moulded by biology, was an inescapable determinant in the formation and rankings of human societies. Science, it was posited, encased the concept of race in terms of biological inevitability. It followed that it was now possible to grade all races within a complex and definitive human taxonomy which ascribed predetermined sociobiological characteristics – culture, religious beliefs, societal structures - to each "race". According to this perspective the "white" races and

more particularly the North European/Saxon races stood at the summit of racial hierarchies and were thus invested with the responsibility to guide and uplift “lesser” races. But science not only explained European ascendancy but also catalogued the backwardness of “inferior” races, and in particular their inability to comprehend, let alone grasp, the manifest benefits wrought by the rule of higher civilizations. Social Darwinism implied the linear development of humanity in a trajectory that was propelled by “progress” and “creativity” both of which were defined by European perspectives. The rise of Social Darwinism displaced history with anthropology as the key to understanding the human approaches to modernity.

But Social Darwinism also emphasised the putative weakness of races deemed inferior. The reverse of evolution was racial degeneration, a product of unregulated human interaction and more particularly miscegenation. Degeneration explained the phenomenon of “stationary” societies and “uncivilised” peoples as well as the deterioration, decline and collapse of once powerful civilizations and empires.

The introduction of Social Darwinism was not only accompanied by the rise of pseudo-sciences such as phrenology, but also by a series of bromides which were accepted as scientific fact. These included, inter alia, emphasis upon the pernicious impacts of atavism and degeneration; the concept that East (Oriental) and West (Occidental) remained irrevocably distinct; that prolonged exposure to a hot tropical climate would invariably lead to a loss of European vitality (the tropical climate was also supposedly complicit in alleged habitual Malay “laziness”); the belief that lower and unworthy classes, especially the depraved and criminal classes replicated themselves and their anti-social characteristics through subsequent generations; that health and sanitation improvements invariably resulted in the survival of those who were weak and inferior.

The rise of empires are invariably accompanied by a justificatory rationale which serves the multiple tasks of propagandising those who are colonised, establishing the role and bolstering the determination of elite collaborators, and theoretically legitimising the colonising power’s rule to wider audiences. In the case of Malaya this was presented in terms of the alleged need for “good government” which as Collin Abraham has pointed out was presented as a “matter of imperial duty and moral obligation”. British rule was seen as necessary measure ensuring both stable government and sound administration which would result in planned exploitation of natural resources thus promoting economic development. The Social Darwinist ideology was exported to the Straits Settlements and subsequently to the entire Malay Peninsula, and was deployed to determine the role each “race” would fulfil within the structures of colonial rule, thus producing a society melding race and occupational groupings.

Within Malaya the colonial authorities established a hierarchy of “races”, each of which was evaluated against Eurocentric (and specifically British) civilizational models and accorded roles within the colonial economy based on the evolutionary stage they were adjudged to have attained. As is evident from the content of the papers contained in this volume, Malay society was seen as pre-modern. Malays were seen as biologically, culturally and historically below Europe, and as a race cast as feckless and habituated with an inculcated laziness and indolence that had come from generations of living in the enervating tropics. The colonial authorities determined that the Malays required protection from the supposedly more energetic and innovative immigrants, and thus should be excluded from the broader colonial economy, and

their role limited to the production of food. Moreover this “protection” would be further guaranteed by the maintenance of traditional power structures (as interpreted by the British), and the preservation of a kampong-based society. Several commentators in this volume recommended “protection” should extend to enacting measures to promote Malay welfare; these would include restricting the advancement of other races, and the provision of employment opportunities for Malays within the civil service. One notable contribution to this run of general commentaries was that of C.V. Kinnersley who noted the high level of administrative competence displayed within states run by Malays.

With regard to the Chinese European commentators simultaneously acknowledged the dynamism and energy immigrant Chinese had brought to the Straits Settlements and in particular their contributions to promoting trade and developing the local economy, while downplaying their claims of racial or political equality. However colonial authorities considered the Chinese as a race inferior to the Europeans; indeed, H.N Ridley, better known as the botanist who introduced rubber to the Malay Peninsula, believed that “their mental state of development is so low that they cannot compete seriously with the Saxon race, and it is probably that they will never be able to do so.” Colonialist discourse appeared to offer only limited distinction between the established Straits Chinese community, largely English speaking, in general loyal to British rule, and who were receptive to modern science and technology, and the remainder of the population consisting of recent arrivals, overwhelming male, largely uneducated and divided by dialect and regional loyalties. Predominantly “Chinese” issues discussed included diasporic nationalism, law reform and the use (and abuse) of opium. The more interesting papers dealing with the Chinese community are offered by the two Chinese members of the Society, Tan Teck Soon and Lim Boon Keng, who emphasised the importance of Chinese to trade while discussing Chinese political and social reforms. However, both reiterated British colonialist precepts, namely those of alleged Malay laziness induced by the topical climate, and the concomitant need for special protection and education (Tan), and the concept that miscegenation between Chinese and Malays would result in racial degeneration (Lim).

Readers seeking discussion of matters affecting the growing Indian presence will find little in these pages. Other than a couple of dismissive comments, there is an absence of discussion regarding the Indian population despite the presence of a considerable Indian labour force, and an increasing Indian role in security, administration and finance. W.R. Collyer curtly informs us that “The people of India are unfit for “any kind of self-government and how necessary it is, for order and peace, that some white race should rule them,” while H.N Ridley comments that “Indians, for the most part, are inferior to the Malays in almost everything.”

Given Eurocentric Social Darwinism insistence that Christianity was the highest form of civilised religion, a viewpoint reinforced by pervading Victorian dogma, it was perhaps inevitable that British missionaries would express hostility to Islam. Missionaries tended to downplay the importance of Islam in defining Malay culture, contending that Malays beliefs were remained enmeshed in an earlier Hindu milieu resulting in animism and superstition. It was further asserted that Malays were ignorant of the Qur’an, and that their lack of intellectually left them incapable of developing a systematic religious philosophy. The Reverend Shillabeer was affronted by the “filthy details” of the Arabian Nights and the alleged carnality of Malays, and contrasted the “lethargy” of Islam with the productive impetus of

Christian civilization. One of the more interesting contributions to this discussion was offered by the Reverend G.M Reith who contended that given Christianity and Islam's similarities a more productive approach would be for missionaries to develop dialogue upon the common heritage shared by both religions.

The colonial officials who delivered these papers were largely representative of a privileged class, men who had been educated in elite British public schools and universities, and their presentations represent the dominant sociological and anthropological perspectives of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. At that time many upper-class British were deeply concerned by the perceived eugenic threat to established social structures posed by the restive "lower orders" back home, classes who in terms of character as defined by Social Darwinism were equated with the colonised non-European races. These concerns surface in several papers contained in this collection and are expressed in the language of racialized class. Thus, for example, Gilbert Brooke opines that over education beyond people's station produces under desirable results and "neurotic degeneracy" in society, while H.N. Ridley considers that increased medical knowledge and improved sanitation leads to the survival of the weak and inferior. In a revealing commentary, Ridley, having reduced the philosophy of utilitarianism (a philosophy that provided Britain with the institutions of the workhouse and the panopticon), to the unmitigated pursuit of happiness, concludes that utilitarianism by its very nature could only appeal to "suffragettes, socialists, Home Rulers and other such monomaniacs".

Colonial theory provided colonisers with a context for the articulation of the production of new forms of knowledge, that of the observers regarding the nature, impulses and behavioural norms of those whom they observed. These forms of knowledge were regarded as beyond contestation and largely excluded alternative perspectives. Many scholars have commented on the phenomenon whereby those colonised internalise the central colonial ideologies, subsequently refracting back to colonisers very perceptions about those whom they rule, thus validating those assumptions. The promulgation and incorporation of long discredited colonial theorising in official ideologies is evident in the national ideologies of many, perhaps most, post-colonial societies.

In Malaya/Malaysia colonial theorising instituted the idea of fixed racial and religious identities which became deeply implicated in Malayan life and were to lead to the emergence of communalism and racial profiling. In particular the central tenets of Malay feudalism "laziness" and inherent backwardness were accepted as factors hindering the economic and social progress of Malays. This was often coupled with the additional assertion that immigrant "races" were either detracting from or actively preventing Malay advancement. Themes of race, culture and modernity were to become prominent in the development of Malayan nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s and were to feature in the communal constitutional bargaining leading to Merdeka, and later in the expulsion of Singapore from the Malaysian Federation.

In 1971 the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) produced a book, *Revolusi Mental*, which reproduced and expanded upon the colonial stereotypes of the Malay character that allegedly hindered Malay progress. In his book *The Malay Dilemma*, future Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad reproduced long discredited Social Darwinist maxims which purported to explain inherent Malay societal “weaknesses” compared to the supposed innate robust and exploitative qualities of immigrant communities and argued for special measures to promote the biological and cultural development of Malay society. Malay nationalists stressed the role of Islam as not only a force for Malay rejuvenation, but as the defining and ultimate characteristic of Malayness. Islam was subsequently redefined in increasingly performative terms, in the process either marginalizing or actively excluding the rich corpus of adat (custom) which had long been integral to traditional Malay culture.

In Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, following the colonial theorising of commentators such as G.D. Havilland who advocated “breeding colonies among the better classes” advanced eugenic theories to develop and heighten the intellectual and cultural profiles of Singaporean society.

This well-edited volume is crucial in filling a gap in the intellectual history of both Malaya and Singapore. In particular it reveals the debates and philosophies that informed the construction of the received knowledge of colonial administration. It is thus astonishing that a century after the Straits Philosophy Society ceased its deliberations the ramifications of its theorising continue to resonate within the former colonies.

REFERENCE

Collin Abraham. 2004. *The Naked Social Order: The Roots of Racial Polarisation in Malaysia*. Subang Jaya: Pelanduk.