

Wacana Pembangunan/*Discourses on Development*

Some Remarks on ‘After Development’ of Malaysia

HENG SIAM-HENG

INTRODUCTION

The 5th International Malaysian Studies Conference was held on 8-10 August 2006 at Universiti Putra Malaysia. The theme of the conference is ‘*After Development*’ in Malaysia: *Reflections on the Development Agenda and the Future*, and there was a special plenary session held on this theme. This short piece is an extended version of the observations and remarks made by me at the plenary session.

The conference document carries the following passage with a deep message:

Having gone through this journey of several decades of economic development, largely under the influence of development theorists and a developmentalist leadership bent on ‘catching up’ with the developed West and to leapfrog to become a developed nation, it is time for Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists to reflect on this process of development, its consequences and effects, and what the future might hold if we are to continue on the same trajectory, as well as to reflect on the fate of development studies. Such reflection and rethinking is not only timely but also necessary. This is especially so at a time when material development has dominated and subverted human development, when poverty and inequality seem to persist, and when the promises of a just and equitable society irrespective of race, colour, creed and gender remain largely a mirage. At the same time, such rethinking is equally necessary so that we can look afresh at development studies - a highly influential body of knowledge several decades ago but has been cast aside by the neoliberal push towards market fundamentalism and the belief in the minimalist role of the state.

The rest of this paper is very much inspired by the reflective mood and the challenges contained in the above passage.

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT TO BE EMBEDDED IN SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

As early as 2,300 years ago, the Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle insisted that economic development should be embedded in social development (Hsieh and Ye 1991). The role of economic activity is to promote the well-being of the

citizens of the ideal city state, of a just and harmonious community. Currently, the opposite of this position is happening in almost every corner of the earth. Economic development is seen to be more important than social development. Grow the GNP and let us hope that social problems would disappear mysteriously. One concentrated expression of this line of thinking is the well-known Washington Consensus. It consists of the following elements: macroeconomic stability, domestic liberalization, and international openness (Meier & Stiglitz 2001). The emphasis is on the economy. An alternative approach, in line with the thinking of Plato and Aristotle, would be social harmony, pleasant living and working environment, environmental protection, and cultural and intellectual advancement. The emphasis is on the social dimension, and this should be used to guide economic policies.

With this in mind, the notion of a developed nation has to be reexamined. The whole discussion of development is based on the premise that western nations like Germany and the USA are developed. Yes, these countries are certainly developed in the economic sense, in terms of their infrastructure, gross national product, etc. However, from a broad humanistic viewpoint, we may ask: is Western Europe developed? It is the perpetrator of colonialism and trans-Atlantic slave trade. Europe has been the birthplace of the two world wars, where the most advanced technological artifacts were used to kill each other. The two world wars have been described as acts of collective insanity by some historians. And we are still not out of such dark shadows – just look at the huge arms industries in the USA. This phenomenon continues to exist in the face of growing global inequality, continuing extreme poverty in most countries in Africa, and when three thousand million live on US\$2 or less per person per day. We have to re-define what is development and get our priorities right. From this perspective, development in the Western countries (including Japan) is lopsided, and its historical project of modernization and Enlightenment incomplete. (Enlightenment is used here as a short hand, to include the preceding period The Age of Reason).

Given that development is a nation-wide activity affecting all sections of the people, it is an issue that should invite open, rational and critical discussion from all the citizens. In other words, it cannot be confined only to the realm of experts, politicians, and academicians. The mass media would do well to run a regular column with contributions from all those interested. Universities can organize an annual development debate, something like the great economic debate held at Universiti Malaya decades ago.

ENVIRONMENT RESOURCES AND SOCIETAL RESOURCES

Textbooks tell us that economic development draws on land, labour and capital resources. What they neglect to say is that it also draws on societal resources

like social institutions, cultural heritage, social relations, public spirit and goodwill. Sustainability requires that we must be able to sustain a physical environment, food and other supplies as well as the social, intellectual, cultural and spiritual environment (Frankel 2005).

We are aware of the havoc brought about by economic development on the physical environment. Likewise, we ought to be conscious of its adverse impacts on the less visible *social* environment, on societal resources. This point is certainly not new. In fact, it has engaged the attention of sociologists like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. They were concerned with how societies could maintain their integrity and coherence in the process of modernization, when traditional values could no longer be assumed to hold sway (Palumbo & Scott 2003).

It is also a problem confronting Malaysia. The Malaysian economic developments so far have thrown up a string of problems, recognized by the present Prime Minister when he tabled the 9th Malaysian Plan in the parliament. They are ethnic polarization, corruption, environmental degradation, crimes, and persistent pockets of poverty. These are issues of crucial importance and need to be addressed in the coming years. If we take the humanistic approach, these are problems that cry out for more urgent attention than a high-growth GNP.

In a sense, the need for an all-round development has not escaped the attention of the Malaysian government. It is contained in Vision 2020 as articulated by Dr Mahathir and launched in 1991. To quote him:

...Malaysia should not be developed only in the economic sense. It must be a nation that is fully developed along all the dimensions: economically, politically, socially, spiritually, psychologically and culturally. We must be fully developed in terms of national unity and social cohesion, in terms of our economy, in terms of social justice, political stability, system of government, quality of life, social and spiritual values, national pride and confidence...

The paramount challenge is to carry out the Vision 2020 holistically, in its wholesome totality.

ASIAN PROJECT OF CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL REJUVENATION

Vision 2020 may be seen as an eloquent articulation of a national vision beyond the narrow perspective of economic development. It also makes a lot of sense when seen in the context of historical experiences of other countries.

Economic development is often accompanied by profound social and cultural changes in the field of ideas – philosophy, literature, humanities, science and mathematics, music, fine arts, architecture, etc. Between them, these changes usher in a great societal transformation known as modernization. To illustrate

the point, the European modernization in the field of ideas has been the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. The Renaissance is a sort of searching and schooling period while the Enlightenment is like the prime of life where the most brilliant achievements in the field of ideas took place. As stated earlier, the European Enlightenment project is incomplete in a few ways – its failure to realize its ideals of a humanistic civilization, its narrow interpretation of rationality, and its worship of reason and knowledge. Its ideals are not dead, and are partly continued by the thinkers of Romanticism. There is much that Asia can learn from its magnificent achievements and its shortcomings.

Various parts of Asia were showing nascent signs of social transformations before their encounter with the West. The Song dynasty of China around 1000 AD saw the advent of practical rationalism based on experiment, the putting of inventions, ideas and theories to the test.

...We also find curiosity at work in every realm of knowledge – arts, technology, natural sciences, mathematics, society, institutions, politics. There was a desire to take stock of all previous acquisitions and to construct a synthesis of all human knowledge... (Gernet 1999: 330).

The process, including the May 4th Movement of 1919, progressed unevenly, with twists and turns. It was never extinguished for too long. The same could be said of India (Nehru 1946; Keay 2000). In Japan, it resulted in the Meiji reform (Eisenstadt 1996). Most parts of Asia have started the process of looking for a way out of the past, while recognizing the need to draw critically on the cultural achievement of the past. However, we are still a long way from achieving a grand synthesis, from creating something new to respond to the needs of the time. In other words, Asia has by and large gone through the phase of Renaissance. We are yet to embark on the tasks of constructing the great intellectual and cultural edifice for Asian modernization. We need many more figures in various fields with the caliber and vision of Tagore.

History of intellectual ferment and cultural rejuvenation suggest they occur when there is a conversation and exchange between different ideas and cultures in the midst of deep-going social transformations. As a response to the new issues thrown up in such societal change, fertile minds draw insights from different divergent sources and creatively synthesize them to produce new ideas to answer the needs of the time. While bearing the best of the past, they also bear distinct hallmarks of their times, thereby deserving the claim that they are genuinely original achievement of the best brains.

Such perspective on diversity of cultural heritages meeting each other conjures up an image of opportunity. The elements of the diverse cultural heritages are seen as invaluable building blocks of something that is new, rich, enduring and wonderful. The position is diametrically opposite to that assumed by ‘the clash of civilizations’. Of course there will be challenges to be faced when different cultures meet, but these are not seen in the negative light. They

are just like the difficulties and challenges faced by a scientist in the journey of discovery. They are to be expected, and overcoming them can only make the whole journey a more enriching experience.

Malaysia is fortunate to be a meeting point of four major civilizations – the Western, Islamic, Indian and Chinese. It is a great challenge of civilizational proportion for Malaysians to inherit ideas from the past, synthesize and integrate ideas from these four main streams, and to produce original ideas in the process of solving problems arising from on-going modernization. Some of these ideas would be relevant to solve the question of political democratization. If economic co-operation and competition with the West can be expanded to include friendly co-operation and competition in the field of ideas, this new arena could well be an alternative to the so-called geopolitical rivalry between an emerging Asia and the West. An Enlightenment together with economic modernization happening in Malaysia, India or Indonesia provide a good example of modernization by Islamic communities and this hold deep implications for countries in the Middle East.

Asian modernization takes place within the current historical context of globalization. It is a context where the West plays a dominant role in economic life, culture, politics, technology and military power. This is very different from the European modernization where they themselves were the domineering world powers. They groped around for a while in the beginning for ideas to resolve their multi-faceted problems, and in the process absorbed ideas from the Middle East and Asia (Hobson 2004). Over a period of few centuries, they produced highly original ideas, developed social, economic and political institutions. While Asia has been willing to accept Western science and technology, there has been some reluctance to accept democracy, human rights, rule of laws, gender equality in many Asian countries. An idea should be judged on its own merit. It remains a historical task for modern Asia to draw on their cultural and intellectual resources to critically adapt such ideals for their own societies. We need not assume that there is only one single formula of democracy, namely the liberal democracy of the West. Some societies may well invent their own form of democracy which strikes a cord with their deeper aspirations (Spariosu 2004). Asia should carry the torch of the European Renaissance, the Enlightenment and Romanticism to greater heights of achievement. This would be a meaningful civilizational contribution that Asia can return to the West.

CONCLUSION

As a way to conclude this piece, it may be appropriate to look at the three inter-related key questions which form the focus of the conference:

- What remains of the Malaysian development agenda?
- What are the post-development issues and agendas?
- What are the implications for development studies?

Undoubtedly, Malaysia has achieved much in physical terms – the highways, the Petronas Twin Towers, golf courses, and other visible symbols of material progress. With a bit of luck and petrol dollars, Malaysia could catch up with some of the less affluent countries in the West pretty soon. But is that the only goal we are after? Is that what we want when the country is operating under the strain of ethnic polarization, crimes, corruption, environmental degradation, etc? It is important to recall that ancient Greece is remembered for its philosophical, intellectual and cultural brilliance and not for its material achievements. It is important to recall that Asoka and Akbar are remembered for their respect for diversities in world views and pluralism in social and religious life.

Drawing upon history and informed by humanistic values of the great spiritual traditions, one may say that Malaysian developmental agenda is far from finished. It is my ardent hope, if not a romantic and idealistic dream, that Malaysia can carve out a development path of its own, to chart a new direction in development studies, guided by the more enduring values bequeathed to us by human civilizations. In so doing, it provides a powerful alternative to the current mainstream thinking in development studies. Would the ideas distilled from the experience be named the Kuala Lumpur Consensus?

REFERENCE

- Eisenstadt, S.N. 1996. *Japanese Civilization*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Frankel, E.G. 2005. *Managing Development – Measures of Success and Failure in Development*. New York: Palgrave.
- Gernet, J. 1999. *A History of Chinese Civilization*. 2nd edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hobson, J. 2004. *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hsieh, Ching-Yao & Ye, Meng-Hua. 1991. *Economics, Philosophy and Physics*. Armonk, N.Y.: M.E. Sharpe.
- Key, J. 2000. *A History of India*. London: HarperCollins.
- Meier, G.M. & Stiglitz, J.E. (eds.). 2001. *Frontiers of Development Economics*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Nehru, J. 1946. *The Discovery of India*. Reprinted 2004. New Delhi: Penguin.
- Palumbo, A. & Scott, A. 2003. Weber, Durkheim and the sociology of the modern state. In edited by The Cambridge *History of Twentieth-Century Political Thought*. Bell, T. & Bellamy, R. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spariosu, M.I. 2004. *Global Intelligence and Human Development*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vision 2020 can be accessed on the website:

<http://www.pmo.gov.my/website/webdb.nsf/vALLDOC/BA7051FF90767AD848256E84003129CA> (accessed 27 August 2006)

Heng Siam-Heng, PhD
East Asia Institute
National University of Singapore
Singapore
E-mail: eaihsh@nus.edu.sg