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Ethnicity and Class: Divides and Dissent in Malaysian Studies

Abdul Rahman Embong*

Ethnicity and class, two major paradigms constructed during the British colonial period, have shaped Malaysian studies until the present. Very few concepts other than ethnicity and class have triggered as much polemics among scholars, public intellectuals, policy makers, and activists in Malaysia. This is especially so in debates over political economy, state power, social change, and the perennial question "Who rules, who gets what, who wins, and who loses?" Ethnicity has become the dominant paradigm in academic analysis, and it shapes government policies, public opinion, and people's thinking. Ethnic preferences are so entrenched that they form a major cause of divides and dissent in society, and a millstone that constrains social cohesion and progress. Adopting a historical/retrospective approach, this article identifies four defining episodes or watersheds in post-World War II Malaysia that have a significant bearing on the complex relationship and contestation between ethnicity and class. Those episodes are: (1) postwar agenda of crafting the state and envisioning the nation, 1946–48; (2) social engineering under the New Economic Policy and nation building, 1969–71; (3) envisioning a multiethnic developed nation through Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia; and (4) post-2008 transition trap: reining in ethno-nationalist resurgence and moving toward a new Malaysia. It is suggested that the ethnic paradigm, being a social construct, may change and can be changed. However, efforts to change it should be guided by a non-ethnic, inclusive, and class-based paradigm that is sensitive to the complexity of the mediation between ethnic consciousness and cross-ethnic class solidarity.

Keywords: ethnicity, class, social construct, divides and dissent, Malaysian studies

Introduction

Malaysia is a multiethnic society, with a population of 32.4 million people in 2018 according to official estimates by the Malaysian Department of Statistics. It consists of Malays, Chinese, Indians, Orang Asli, Ibans, Kadazan, Dusun, and about 30 other minority groups

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besides a few million migrant workers from neighboring countries (Indonesia, Bangladesh, Nepal, Vietnam, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, etc.). Malaysia has evolved from a predominantly rural agricultural society, with only 25 percent of an urban population from independence in 1957 to the late 1960s, to become an industrialized and urbanized society with 77 percent of the population living in urban areas today.

The situation 60 years ago in Malaya (Malaysia) may differ in many respects from the situation today, yet certain aspects of the past resonate in the present. The plural society structure in Malaysia, inherited from British colonialism, was described by many analysts at the time of independence as an ethnically fractured society, with serious concerns that Malaysia may not—and could not—survive as a nation given the conflicts and tension between the different ethnic groups as manifested by the ethnic riots of May 13, 1969. However, the narratives began to change in many ways following the implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1971–90), and especially after the proclamation of Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia (Malaysian nation) in 1991, with aspirations to transform Malaysia into a developed nation by 2020. This was a period of rapid economic growth and rising prosperity accompanied by the rise of a multiethnic middle class, with the Malay middle class beginning to occupy cities and towns, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s as well as the early years of the twenty-first century.

Yet concerns about the past, especially with regard to ethnic divisions and differences, resonate in the present. Today, 60 years after independence, how best can we describe Malaysian society? Is it still "a fractured plural society" (Abdul Rahman 2007) as alleged by some of the early analysts? Or can we go along with the idea that Malaysia is an example of unity in diversity? Alternatively, is it a society in a state of stable tension or one characterized by divides and dissent?

Each of these concepts looks at society from a certain angle or perspective. The "fractured plural society" perspective assumes a pessimistic view of the relations between ethnic groups, especially between Malays and Chinese, as though there was no glue to hold the people together as a cohesive entity—an assumption that has been challenged by later developments and also by precolonial history, which manifested a high degree of pluralist acceptance of the other (see Conclusion).

The "unity in diversity" perspective is an optimistic and triumphalist one, quite the opposite of the fractured society approach. It sees society as comprising a colorful mosaic of peoples and cultures, with various ethnic groups living together for decades and centuries, a situation like in present-day Sarawak, Sabah, and Kelantan.

The "stable tension" (Shamsul 2010) perspective sees the problem as a paradox. While it acknowledges there is stability over the long run, it recognizes the constant tension, conflicts, and contradictions within society—although the latter do not derail

societal development. This is because Malaysians are said to believe in "tongue wagging" rather than "*parang*- or knife-wielding"—i.e., "they talk conflict, but walk cohesion" (Shamsul 1992; 1996; 2010)—and it is believed that what Malaysian society experiences is not "unity" *per se* but "social cohesion" and "moments of unity" (Shamsul 2008; 2010).

The "divides and dissent" perspective, which is the theme of this special issue, is intriguing and has its own edge. We can approach this concept from various angles. For the purposes of this paper, "divides and dissent" is an analytical construct that encapsulates the dialectics of power relations between the state and society: the divides are historically evolved, as a product of the division of labor in the political economy, certain state policies, the perpetuation of a racial superiority ideology, as well as the actions of those who hold the levers of power. The state refers not only to the postcolonial state but also to its predecessor, the colonial state under British colonialism, and the colonial political economy, its migration policies, and the ensuing division of labor as well as the idea of race imported into the Malay Peninsula from Western Europe after the 1850s. As will be shown below, the postcolonial state inherited the structure of division already constructed by the British, created new policies, institutionalized the division through various means, and inherited the race paradigm (today it is referred to as the ethnic paradigm) already embedded but contested during the British colonial period.

While divides were historically constituted, so too were dissent and contestations. The difference is that while divides emanate from or are related to state policies and the political economy, their consequences affect the whole of society, thus creating dissent and contestations from below among the different classes, groups, and organizations. How the dissent is articulated and how it expresses itself may differ during different historical periods and depending on the nature of the divides.

However, this perspective does not merely focus on divides and dissent as though the two sides are mutually engaged in a perpetual struggle without peace or compromise. The other dimension of "divides and dissent" is more forward looking. It adopts a transformative position, which is that state policies and the political economy can be restructured or changed on the basis of social justice and social inclusion, and that social transformation can take place, leading to the creation of a new social order. Such change should be able to minimize the divides and mitigate dissent; as such, it will contribute toward building cross-ethnic solidarity and social compromise, in fact, a new national reconciliation, between people of different classes and groups with the aim of achieving a common national goal.

With the above as the background, this paper seeks to address the question of ethnicity and class within the framework of divides and dissent in Malaysia and Malaysian studies. While taking a broad historical sweep, this paper will provide an overview of

debates on the subject of ethnicity and more so of class, draw some insights from the literature, and discuss prospects for social change into the future beyond ethnicity for a new Malaysia. To move in this strategic direction, the role of social science as an emancipatory project is crucial. It is suggested that the ethnic paradigm, which has characterized much of social science in Malaysia as well as policy making and public thinking, may change and can be changed. However, efforts to change it should be guided by a non-ethnic, inclusive, and class-based paradigm that is at the same time sensitive to the complexity of the mediation between ethnic consciousness and cross-ethnic class solidarity. In this regard, this paper suggests the potency of the *rakyat* paradigm as an alternative and transformative paradigm for a new and better Malaysia.

Ethnicity versus Class: Situating the Debate

Ethnicity and class are two major paradigms or perspectives that have shaped Malaysian studies over many decades, even prior to Malay(si)a's independence and more so during the post-independence period. Paradigm here is taken to mean a way of "making sense of the world, to find patterns there— . . . that helps to define what is important, what problems deserve attention, and how they might be solved" (Milner *et al.* 2014, 4). Both ethnicity and class denote borders. In this sense, they contain the potential for divide by creating the "us" and "them" and subsequently cause dissent. Surveying the literature, arguably no other concept in Malaysian studies has caught the imagination of—and spurred polemical debates among—scholars, public intellectuals, policy makers, and activists more than the intertwined concept of ethnicity and class. This is especially so when the debate is in relation to the question of political economy, state power, and social change, with a focus on the perennial question of "Who rules, who gets what, who wins and who loses?"

Notwithstanding the controversies surrounding these two concepts, ethnicity in particular has influenced and shaped government policies during the post-independence period, especially when it remains entrenched in the NEP, National Development Policy, National Mission Policy, and New Economic Model. The ethnic paradigm also shaped the ideologies and programs of political parties as well as influenced public debates, attitudes, behavior, and interactions among Malaysians and between them and others.

The issue of ethnicity and class from the perspective of paradigms has been analyzed by various scholars (see, in particular, Shamsul 1998; Milner *et al.* 2014, Chapters 1, 2, 3). In an essay published by *Akademika*, Shamsul (1998, 33-59) argues that there are four "competing paradigms" in Malaysian studies: ethnicity, class, culture, and identity.

Of these four, he maintains that two—ethnicity and class—have a longer history as their origins can be traced to the colonial period, while culture and identity are products of the postcolonial era. Indeed, Shamsul (1998) argues that Malaysian social science (read: Malaysian studies) had its origins in colonial knowledge, with the ethnic paradigm and class paradigm as its main organizing concepts.

Shamsul (1998) notes further that both these concepts were first used in the public domain as part of sociopolitical advocacy by public intellectuals and activists before they entered academia and became powerful paradigms, shaping Malaysian studies and public policies. Between the two, the ethnic paradigm has been so pervasive that social science knowledge in Malaysia has undergone an "ethnicisation of knowledge," and even class—which is non-ethnic—has sometimes been examined based on ethnic categories (Shamsul 1998).

This observation, which was made some two decades ago, is close to reality even today. As the ethnic paradigm has become the dominant paradigm (Milner *et al.* 2014), Malaysian studies and Malaysian policy making have unfortunately been replete with ethnicized analysis, and the knowledge corpus and discourse have also tended to be highly ethnicized. It is even alleged that ethnic preferences or considerations shape the thinking of many scholars and influence their analysis and judgments. For example, M. Shamsul Haque of the National University of Singapore claims that "among the local scholars, with few exceptions, there is a common tendency to support or oppose these ethnic preferential policies depending on the ethnic backgrounds of scholars themselves" (2003, 240). While this claim may be an overstatement that requires careful empirical verification, the point is taken that such a malady does affect many Malaysian scholars.

Based on a reading of history, a number of scholars are generally agreed that ethnicity (previously the term "race" was used) is a social construct, created during the British colonial period in the nineteenth century (Hirschman 1986; Milner 2011). It was the principal organizing concept under the British "plural society" paradigm, which led toward the hardening of ethnic identity among the various ethnic groups in the country and gave rise to the contentious notion that ethnic groups are like social blocs with impenetrable boundaries, not porous or permeable. Racism as an ideology was imported from Europe after the 1850s with the rise of social Darwinism in European social and political thought and in public debates. The significant change in the European ideology about themselves (seeing themselves as superior to other races) and their relations with Asians or colonized subjects had a significant impact on the British colonies, including the Malay Peninsula (Hirschman 1986). This change, together with the influx of immigrants from south China and India, the colonial division of labor, and the colonial divide and rule policy laid the social and ideological basis for the construction of race (read:

ethnicity) in Malaya. While the immigration of large numbers of Chinese and Indians into the Malay Peninsula in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was significant in terms of changing its demographics, it was not merely the presence of immigrants and the British divide and rule policy and the division of labor that created the "race" ideology and racism (and subsequently its ethnic variant). Rather, it was the importation of the European race ideology and the spread of racial theory as well as how the colonial state institutionalized it through the construction of racial categories in census reports and other forms of administrative requirements that provided the staying power of the race or ethnic problem in Malaysia until today (Shamsul 1998; Milner 2009; 2011; Milner *et al.* 2014).

To sum up the discussion thus far, we can discern the two opposing theses or schools of thought that have been at the heart of Malaysian studies. First—and dominant—is the "ethnic bloc" thesis and its variants. This thesis basically argues that ethnic groups that before Malaysia's independence existed merely as categories have become ethnic blocs; these are "structurally defined ethnic groups" or "structural entities" and can only have "total relations" (Freedman 1960) with one another on a nationwide scale but not as everyday interactions. This thesis, advanced by scholars such as Maurice Freedman and others, was inspired by the work of J. S. Furnivall in the 1930s on "plural society." To quote Freedman:

> "The Malays" did not interact with "the Chinese" and "the Indians." Some Malays interacted with some Chinese and some Indians. But as "Malays," "Chinese," and "Indians" come to be realized as structural entities on a nation-wide scale, they can begin to have total relations with one another. (*ibid.*, 167)

In the current context, the plural society and ethnic bloc thesis has been transformed into a new ideological and political construct, *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy). This is a new construct that has been advanced by United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) ideologues since the mid-1980s with the intention to exercise Malay hegemony, thus further entrenching the divides.

The second thesis is the class thesis, which argues that society is divided into social classes and that members of ethnic groups are not homogenous socially and economically, and that they belong to different classes. In the Marxian sense, social class is defined in terms of relations with the ownership and control of the means of production, while in the Weberian sense class is seen in relation to market capacity, taking into consideration education and skills. Those advocating a class perspective maintain that ethnicity is a social construct and a legacy of British colonialism in Malaya. Some scholars also emphasize that based on household income and inequality studies conducted in recent years,

intra-ethnic differences are more pronounced than differences between ethnic groups—meaning that ethnic groups are differentiated by class rather than ethnic traits. They argue that ethnicity is not primordial since it belongs to the sociocultural realm, that at the core of ethnicity is a class problem, but it is mediated by ethnic consciousness, meaning that ethnicity and class are intertwined. While what is seemingly racial or ethnic can eventually be changed, efforts toward bringing about the change have to be sensitive to the complexity of the mediation between ethnic consciousness and class interests.

Class in Malaysian Studies: A Selective Overview

In his essay cited earlier, Shamsul (1998) argues that the baseline knowledge of Malaysian studies is to be found in colonial knowledge exemplified by the works of orientalists who studied the Malays and others, and that ethnicity and class are legacies of that era. Indeed, the literature suggests that in Malaysia, class as a concept emerged with the formation of modern classes and the rise of the labor movement since the early twentieth century (see Stenson 1980; Jomo 1986), and that it came into popular usage especially after World War II, at the height of the anticolonial movement.

The growth of academic analysis using various academic perspectives, namely, ethnicity and class, is related to the growth of universities and social sciences in Malaysia and the training of social science scholars both in Malaysia and abroad. The formation of the University of Malaya in Singapore in 1949 and subsequently the upgrading of the Kuala Lumpur campus into the full-fledged Universiti Malaya in 1961 (with the one in Singapore being renamed the University of Singapore) enabled the early phase of the institutionalization of the social sciences, while the formation of new universities and faculties of the social sciences since the 1970s contributed to a more vigorous contestation between the two schools of thought. Indeed, from the late 1940s to the 1970s ethnicity was institutionalized even academically, with the establishment of the Department of Malay Studies, the Department of Chinese Studies, and the Department of Indian Studies.

This paper will not discuss in detail the formation of the plural society, the colonial political economy, British immigration policies, and the division of labor imposed by Britain that eventually led to the identification of ethnicity with economic functions. This is for a dual reason: there is an extensive literature on the plural society and ethnicity; and the intent of this paper is to examine class as a social formation and an analytical tool, and to suggest going beyond the ethnic paradigm, whereby a class-based perspective—the *rakyat* paradigm—may be a viable alternative.

Despite the dominance of ethnic analysis and ethnicized knowledge, class analysis also flourished. We can see some broad trends with regard to studies of class (including on social stratification) from the 1960s and 1970s until today, which analyze not only new social formations but also the shift in the focus of studies. Studies in the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s tended to focus more on the political economy and how classes, especially the capitalist and working classes, were related to this. However, studies of class since the 1990s seem to have changed noticeably, with their focus being on the middle and corporate classes, although studies of political economy, corporate ownership of wealth and control, as well as studies of the working class continue to be undertaken.

In this quick and necessarily selective overview, studies on class during the post-independence period can be classified into several broad themes or categories as follows:

(1) works on the political economy of growth with a focus on ownership and control of wealth, class formations, and the growth of the corporate sector and its connections with the state;
(2) studies on the working class, trade unions, and the state;
(3) studies on the rise of the middle class, middle class consumption, politics and civil society organizations, and globalization;
(4) works that examine ethnicity and class as paradigms or tools of analysis

(1) Works on the political economy of growth with a focus on ownership and control of wealth, class formations, and the growth of the corporate sector and its connections with the state

Some of the landmark works in this first genre include James Puthucheary (1960), Jomo K. S. (1986), James Jesudason (1988), and Terence Gomez and Jomo (1999), although they all have a different focus. Puthucheary's magnum opus, *Ownership and Control in the Malayan Economy* (first published in 1960), for example, contains a class analysis of the Malayan economy in terms of who owned and controlled it, stressing that Malaya's wealth was owned and controlled along class rather than ethnic lines. He shows that Malaya's wealth was concentrated in the hands of Western foreign capitalists while Chinese capital was secondary, and that Chinese capitalists were only few in number as the majority of Chinese, like their Malay brethren, were poor and downtrodden. Thus Puthucheary's famous statement that "exploitation and poverty are class problems, not communal problems" (Puthucheary 1960, 174). Puthucheary also demolished the prevailing notion that "the Chinese as a community exploit the Malays—that the Chinese are rich because they exploit the Malays" (*ibid.*).

Jomo's magnum opus, *A Question of Class: Capital, the State, and Uneven Development in Malaya*, also belongs in this category, though it has some differences. In this work, first published in 1986, Jomo takes a long view of history and undertakes a class analysis of the political economy of Malay society during the precolonial or feudal era, before proceeding to examine class formation and class structure in the colonial and postcolonial periods. A theoretically well-informed piece of work, this book discusses class relations in precolonial Malaya, the transformation of Malay peasantry under colonialism, the expansion of capital in the colonial economy, and capitalist fractions and postcolonial development. The focus is on local and industrial capital, the postcolonial state and labor, as well as the ascendance of statist capitalists, including what the author calls "the administocrats" as a governing group. The book shows that the top capitalist class (employers) totaled approximately 3 percent of the workforce in the last several decades, while the middle and working classes expanded at the expense of the shrinking rural classes.

With a specific focus on Chinese businesses as well as multinationals in the context of ethnicity and the state, Jesudason (1988) examines the effect of the ethnicity-based affirmative action of the NEP on such businesses. He also notes the relaxation of the affirmative policies after the 1986–87 recession in order to attract foreign capital, a move that lifted some restrictions on Chinese businesses. In the 1990s, works on the Malaysian political economy and big business continued to be published. Two of them are Gomez and Jomo (1999) on the political economy of Malaysia, and Gomez's work (1999) on Chinese businesses in Malaysia in which he argues that Chinese companies managed to perform well in Malaysia, especially after the recession in the mid-1980s, due to a clear change in the Malay-dominated government's attitude to Chinese capital.

(2) Studies on the working class, trade unions, and the state

This theme can be seen in some early works such as those by Charles Gamba (1962) on the origins of trade unions; Abdul Rahman Embong (1974) on ethnicity and class; B. N. Cham (1975) on class and communal conflict in Malaysia; Martin Brennan (1982) on class, politics, and race; and Hing Ai Yun (1985) on the question of development and transformation of wage labor in Peninsular Malaysia. In this brief review, we will cite four notable studies on the working class since the 1970s. One of the earlier ones is the study by Michael Stenson (1980) on class, race, and colonialism in Malaysia, in which the author argues that prior to 1969 the failure of capitalist development in Peninsular Malaysia resulted in the persistence of colonial division of labor and slowed the growth of class formation, including the expansion of the working class. Focusing on Indian workers in the plantations, this book attempts to illustrate the structure and functioning of the

colonial and neocolonial order, and the formation of class affiliations and working class alliances after World War II. It notes that the deliberate fostering of Malay capitalist and working classes under the NEP of the 1970s accelerated class formation, unlike during the earlier decades.

Besides Stenson's study on Indian labor, there is P. Ramasamy's 1994 work which discusses the question of plantation labor, trade unions, capital, and the state in Peninsular Malaysia based on his PhD dissertation completed in the 1980s. Accompanying the works on the Indian working class, other writers such as Zawawi Ibrahim (1998) and Donald Nonini (2015) study the working class among the Malays and Chinese respectively. Zawawi, for instance, undertakes a study of the Malay working class on a plantation in Kemaman, Terengganu. Although published in 1998, his book, *The Malay Labourer: By the Window of Capitalism*, was actually based on research conducted in the early 1970s. In this work, Zawawi adds a different dimension to the debate on class exploitation by highlighting not the exploitation of surplus value as suggested by Karl Marx, but status exploitation by superiors toward Malay workers.

The Chinese working class has been relatively understudied as the focus tends to be on the Chinese wealthy class, or the towkays (Nonini 2015; Evers 2016). Fortunately, there are some welcome exceptions. Nonini (2015) in his book *"Getting By": Class and State Formation among Chinese in Malaysia* focuses not on the Chinese towkays but on workers, namely, truck drivers, the largest segment of the Chinese working class in Bukit Mertajam, Penang, where he undertook the study (for a perceptive review, see Evers 2016).

Malaysian workers and their unions, such as the Pan-Malayan Federation of Trade Unions, were active and militant in the 1940s in taking industrial action as well as other moves to support the independence struggle. However, they were ruthlessly suppressed, an act that has continued through the post-independence years until the present, although the form it took differed during different periods. A number of studies on trade unions have been undertaken. For example, Patricia Todd and Jomo K. S. (1988) examine the trade union movement in Peninsular Malaysia from the immediate post-independence years until 1969, highlighting that the trade union movement continued to be a target of repression after 1957 with the suppressing of labor militancy during the 1960s, which almost rendered the movement ineffective. The authors further deepen their analysis in another joint work (Jomo and Todd 1994) that examines trade unions and their relations with the government, the latter's anti-union laws, and the curtailment of trade union activities.

The decline in union membership and activism has become a subject of study in recent years. J. Ganesan (2016) in his study of the decline of union membership in

Malaysia notes that while trade union membership is a vital element in assessing the strength and status of a trade union, trade unionism has suffered a big decline. Based on a study of unionized employees in various sectors, Ganesan concludes that a combination of factors—industrial relations climate, employers' hostility toward unions (adopting suppressive and avoidance tactics when dealing with unions), as well as internal constraints faced by unions, such as the ability to organize, etc.—all affect the membership of trade unions and their roles. Ganesan's study succeeded the one by Peter Wad (2012), which focuses on the question of revitalizing the Malaysian trade union movement using the electronics industry as a case study.

One lacuna in the study of trade unionism is the role of female workers. The growth of the female workforce in Malaysia does not automatically translate into an increased participation of women workers in trade unions, and more so in their leadership. Rohana Ariffin (1989) draws attention to the role of women in trade unions in West Malaysia, a subject that has not been given sufficient attention despite the growth of the female workforce. Her study was followed by Vicki Crinis (2008), who studied women labor activism and unions in the country. Based on data collected through interviews with leaders of the Malaysian Trades Union Congress (MTUC) and various other unions, the author examines the role of women in Malaysian unions since the 1970s by concentrating on MTUC and its private sector union affiliates rather than the public sector unions affiliated to the Congress of Unions of Employees in the Public and Civil Services Sector. Crinis notes that women's union activism in Malaysia has received very little attention—overshadowed by men's—even though women have engaged in strikes and other organized forms of labor protest and have participated in a variety of labor movement activities such as Labour Day celebrations and public meetings on labor policy.

(3) Studies on the rise of the middle class, middle class consumption, politics and civil society organizations, and globalization

The rapid processes of industrialization, urbanization, and economic growth and the accompanying prosperity of the 1980s and 1990s have given rise to a multiethnic middle class in Malaysia, with the most significant phenomenon being the rise of the Malay middle class. The middle class is seen not only as a product of upward social mobility and a force of consumption, but also as a bearer of values, namely, a democratizing force championing democracy, civil society participation, transparency, and good governance as well as the value of tolerance and acceptance of others irrespective of ethnicity and religion.

Studies on the middle class from the late 1980s until the 2000s address these issues in various ways. The role of the middle class in democratization has been a point of debate

among several scholars, for example, Saravanamuttu (1989), Kahn (1992; 1994; 1996a; 1996b), and Abdul Rahman (1995; 1996); while studies on the rise of the middle class—its family, community, lifestyles, and civil society participation—have been undertaken by Abdul Rahman (1995; 1996; 2001b; 2001c; 2001d; 2002a) and others. Middle class consumption has been an important subject of study, as can be seen in the works of Rokiah Talib (2000), who writes on middle class lifestyles and consumption, and Johan Fischer (2008), who examines what he calls "proper Islamic consumption" among the Malay middle class in Malaysia.

Attempts have also been made to take a comparative approach in the study of the middle class, as can be seen in Abdul Rahman (2001b) on the Southeast Asian middle classes, Victor King's (2008) comparison of the middle classes in Vietnam and Malaysia, and Athi Sivan's (2014) casting of the debates on the new middle class in Malaysia in the context of the larger Southeast Asian knowledge-scape.

An important aspect of this study is related to the question of the role of class analysis under conditions of being in a connected world in which globalization continuously reconfigures class relations. Is it sufficient to examine class relations merely within nation-state borders and the constraints of methodological nationalism, or is it necessary to take a broader view beyond the nation-state by studying transnational class relations? Important as it is, this dimension remains understudied in Malaysia. One of the few works, though somewhat dated, is by Abdul Rahman (2001b), who argues that attempts at studying transnational classes such as the transnational capitalist class, managerial class, and subordinate classes are fraught with problems of conceptualization and require refinement. However, he maintains that despite the ending of the Cold War, the framework of class analysis remains potent and relevant.

(4) Works that examine ethnicity and class as paradigms or tools of analysis

As explained earlier, paradigms are ways of making sense of the world, identifying patterns and ordering priorities, and problem-solving. How have ethnicity and class been articulated as paradigms in Malaysia, and how should we handle the connections between the two?

Works such as those by Shamsul A. B. (1998) and Charles Hirschman (1986) on this issue have already been referred to at some length above. Other works include those by Hua Wu Yin (1983) on class and communalism or ethnicity, and Collin Abraham (1997) on the British colonial divide and rule strategy as the root of Malaysia's race relations. However, for reasons of brevity, this section refers to only two other works, both edited volumes, by Syed Husin Ali (1984) and A. Milner *et al.* (2014), which regard ethnicity and class as social constructs reflecting reality on the ground and—also very important—as

paradigms to guide analysis. What is clear in their works is an attempt to find ways to bridge the divides and promote some kind of consensus while maintaining the right to uphold different points of view in Malaysian studies and also in society.

Syed Husin's edited volume *Ethnicity, Class and Development: Malaysia* (1984) attempts to link the debate on ethnicity and class to development and modernization. This is expected and necessary because the concern in post-independence nation building was the creation of employment, increase in income and standard of living, as well as social justice within and among ethnic groups and classes. In the introduction, Syed Husin (1984, 7) notes that not much serious study was undertaken on ethnicity and class despite the recognition that the problem of ethnicity and ethnic relations was ever present in people's daily lives, and that it could be a threat to national unity and people's welfare. But how do we view the relationship between ethnicity, class, and development? Syed Husin argues that "Not only the process of development through time has led to the emergence of ethnic and class groups, but also ethnicity and class can determine the nature of development and its effects on a particular society, community or group" (*ibid.*, 8). He emphasizes further that in Malaysia, discontents—which are essentially class in nature—are often expressed in ethnic terms, meaning that class consciousness is mediated by ethnic consciousness and has to be discerned accordingly. Summing up the situation up to the early 1980s, Syed Husin counsels that

> both the ethnic and class forces pull the society apart, in vertical and horizontal directions as it were, but at the present juncture of history the ethnic pull is more forceful and dominant. Thus ethnic dissatisfactions and conflicts voiced through educational, cultural and even religious issues, if examined closely, may be found to have strong politico-economic or class basis. (*ibid.*, 10)

The collaborative work by Anthony Milner, Abdul Rahman Embong, and Tham Siew Yean (2014) is quite different from any of the others. Titled *Transforming Malaysia: Dominant and Competing Paradigms*, the book seeks to analyze the various paradigms that have emerged not only in modern times but—importantly—from the precolonial history of the Malay Peninsula, and to see whether any of these societal paradigms can be tapped for purposes of "transforming Malaysia." What Milner and his colleagues attempt is to move away from merely seeing ethnic groups as a demographic fact and ethnic categories, and to see race (ethnicity) as a paradigm that has become dominant in shaping Malaysia and Malaysian studies despite the divides it creates. The key point running through the book is that since ethnicity is a social construct, the battle is at the level of ideology and ideas and can be changed.

Prior to this important work, Milner published a trilogy—*Kerajaan: Malay Political Culture on the Eve of Colonial Rule* (1982), *The Invention of Politics in Colonial Malaya*

(2002 [1995]), and *The Malays* (2011 [2008])—in which he suggests that baseline knowledge about Malay society can be found in traditional Malay texts about the Malay world and its polity. Importantly, such knowledge was defined by the structure of power then, i.e., that of the *kerajaan* with the *raja* or *sultan* at the apex of power; and that this polity, which developed for centuries well before colonial rule, was legitimated and strengthened by the *kerajaan* ideology and economy. Hence the staying power of the *kerajaan* paradigm, which was essentially a class-based concept.

The other side of the dialectics of the *kerajaan* and *raja* in the *kerajaan* world was the *rakyat* or the people who were subjects of the ruler. What is important to emphasize here is that in the *kerajaan* world, the term *rakyat*—although the latter were relegated as the subject class—did not have racial or communal overtones because the *rakyat*, irrespective of their racial or ethnic origin, were subjects of a ruler. Also, while the *kerajaan* and *rakyat* paradigm originated and was absolutely crucial in the traditional Malay polity, these two concepts—especially the *rakyat*—reverberated into subsequent stages of history and have tremendous relevance for the future (Abdul Rahman 2014, 59–81). Indeed, at the height of the anticolonial struggle for independence after World War II, the term *rakyat* became a principal organizing concept, and the status of the *rakyat* was elevated from a lowly position "to the grand status of the makers of history, and motive forces in the struggle against colonialism and for an independent nation" (*ibid.*, 71). *Rakyat* was not merely an organizing concept at the ideological level; on the ground, the *rakyat* formed the human masses for mobilization in the independence struggle. What is appealing about the *rakyat* paradigm is that it is an inclusive and transformative one originating from below that is not defined by ethnicity, thus indicating the potential to break through the ethnicity-based societal paradigm that has dominated Malaysian history and Malaysian studies in the last six decades.

From this brief overview, we must note three points. First, ethnicity was a social construct, a product of colonialism, and inherited by the postcolonial state. From independence in 1957 until today, it has been used as a strategy to perpetuate and consolidate power by the UMNO-led ruling coalition, a strategy and policy that generates division and dissent in a multiethnic society. Nevertheless, given its nature as a social construct, it provides hope and opportunity for change, but change will be protracted and difficult, requiring nuanced approaches.

Second, Malaysia is both a multiethnic society and a class society. While ethnic identity may be fluid, being members of ethnic groups—except in specific cases—is something ascribed and cannot be changed. Class relations, on the other hand, are social categories and changeable. Members of ethnic groups are found in different social classes together with other ethnic groups as class membership transcends ethnic boundaries.

However, when it comes to managing ethnicity and class, both have to be analyzed together because in Malaysia class and ethnicity are intertwined, and class consciousness is heavily laced and mediated by ethnic consciousness.

Third, the potency and relevance of the *rakyat* paradigm to serve as a mobilizing concept for social change and transformation should be noted and explored further. It has its appeal because not only is it rooted in the country's history and tradition, but it is a class-sensitive concept that is inclusive and transcends ethnic boundaries. It has the potential to serve as an organizing concept not only in social science but also in public advocacy.

Traversing the Route to Independence and After: Watersheds in Malaysian History

The dramatic push against colonialism and toward independence involving people of various ethnic groups and classes in Malaya was a post-World War II phenomenon, while development, nation building, and transformation into a developed nation in the twenty-first century are agendas of the postcolonial state. Looking back over the last 60 to 70 years, we can identify several watersheds in Malaysian history that served as turning points in sociopolitical, ideological, and economic life and saw the acting out of both "divides and dissent" in public debates, mass action, political movements, policy negotiations, attempts at social compromise, etc. The concept of a historical watershed is used here to mean an important historical change, a turning point in history that differentiates an era from the previous one and ushers in something new. For the purpose of this paper, we shall highlight four such watersheds: (1) postwar crafting of the state and envisioning of the nation, 1946–48; (2) social engineering under the NEP and nation building, 1969–71; (3) envisioning a multiethnic developed nation through Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia; and (4) being trapped in post-2008 transition: reining in the resurgence of ethno-nationalism and moving beyond the crossroads to a new Malaysia.

We will discuss at some length the postwar watershed because of certain significant developments and experiences during this period that laid the sociopolitical and constitutional basis for the new Federation of Malaya/Malaysia. The discussion of the subsequent three watersheds from the postcolonial period until the present will, of necessity, be briefer, focusing mainly on the essential events during each phase that are relevant to this study.

Postwar Developments until Independence: Crafting the State, Envisioning the Nation

The most important historical watershed during this period of history was the postwar crafting of the state and envisioning of the nation in 1946–48.[1] World War II was a turning point in world history and the history of Southeast Asia. For Southeast Asians, the defeat of the European powers at the hands of the Japanese during the early years of the war shattered the myth of European invincibility and white man's superiority while inspiring confidence that Asians could rise up and take their destiny in their own hands in the struggle for national independence. These sentiments were sweeping across postwar Malaya, and so when the British returned in September 1945 and reimposed their rule, they triggered a movement on the ground to secure Malaya's future. In fact, the few years after August 1945 saw a hive of activities not only by the British to reestablish their control over Malaya, but among local people, various organizations, and groups, and local leaders emerged. They were awakened and driven by the motivation to craft the yet-to-be-formed independent state and to forge a nation out of the diverse ethnic groups. The constitution, state system, citizenship, government structure, democratic participation, power sharing, and forging of political coalitions were adumbrated during these critical years before 1957.

There were several crucial questions that needed carefully negotiated resolutions. For example, what would be the form of the new state in independent Malaya—a union or a federation? What about the question of citizenship, in particular, how to resolve the tension between indigeneity (being natives of the land) and immigrantism (being people who migrated to the Malay Peninsula)? Would the new political system be a parliamentary democracy, and if so, how would it resolve the tension between the traditional monarchy and the modern system of elected representatives and universal suffrage?

During the postwar period, sociopolitical forces seem to have drawn rather clear ideological lines. On the one hand, those who espoused Malay ethno-nationalism formed UMNO in May 1946 with the slogan "*Hidup Melayu*" (Long live the Malays) and worked with the British. On the other hand, those who espoused progressive nationalism and cross-ethnic solidarity established the Malay Nationalist Party in October 1945 (six months before the formation of UMNO); this party was distinctly anti-British with its historic battle cry of "*Merdeka*" (Independence).

Two constitutional proposals were crafted. One was the top-down Federation of Malaya constitutional proposals that became the basis for the Federation of Malaya Agreement in 1948 and later 1957. The Federation of Malaya constitutional proposals

1) Several parts in the section below are based on or paraphrased from the author's earlier work on envisioning the nation in Malaya (Abdul Rahman 2015).

were formulated during the British-Malay Conference of UMNO and representatives of the Malay rulers between June and December 1946. The Federation of Malaya Agreement came into effect on February 1, 1948, establishing a Malayan Federation without Singapore.

Quite opposed to the Federation of Malaya constitutional proposals was another vision of the nation and state: the People's Constitutional Proposals formulated by Pusat Tenaga Rakyat (PUTERA, Center for People's Forces)-All-Malaya Council for Joint Action (AMCJA) in December 1946 and early 1947 as an alternative to the British-UMNO constitutional proposals. Although there were some convergences between the Federation of Malaya Proposals and the People's Constitutional Proposals—with regard to the position of the Malay rulers, Malay language, religion, and customs—the differences were also sharp. While in the British-UMNO-initiated Federation of Malaya Proposals Singapore was left out of the federation, in the People's Constitutional Proposals Singapore was included as an integral and indivisible part of the Federation of Malaya.

The Federation of Malaya Constitution guaranteed the rights and special position of the Malays as well as rights, powers, and sovereignty of the Malay rulers in their respective states. But how was "Melayu" or "Malays" defined? It is here that the fundamental difference lies. "Melayu" in the People's Constitutional Proposals was fundamentally different from "Melayu" (Malay) as envisaged in the Federation of Malaya Agreement and eventually in the Federation of Malaya Constitution. In Article 160 of the Federation of Malaya Constitution, "Malay" (Melayu) is defined as someone who professes to be a Muslim, habitually speaks the Malay language, and adheres to Malay customs.[2)]

While "Melayu" (Malay) in the Federation of Malaya Constitution emphasizes religion, language, and culture as markers of identity, the People's Constitutional Proposals contained a novelty especially with regard to the question of nationality—*Malayan* or *Melayu*? The term "Malayan" was detested as it was associated with the aborted Malayan Union, but what about "Melayu"? The People's Constitutional Proposals (Section 2) proposed that the nationality be termed Melayu, with allegiance to the federation, and that the term does not carry any religious implications. With the benefit of hindsight, this move was clearly an attempt at mediating between the sensitive ethno-national question (Malays as the original people of the land) and the broad-based class question, which recognized equal rights as citizens before the law. This proposal was seen as more open

2) The question of domicile was also included: the parents needed to be domiciled in the Federation or Singapore on Merdeka Day, born in the Federation or Singapore before Merdeka Day, or born before Merdeka Day of parents one of whom was born in the Federation or Singapore or was a descendent of a member of the Merdeka Day population.

and inclusive by defining Melayu in terms of allegiance to and acceptance of the land, Malaya, which was the object of loyalty (for further discussion, see Abdul Rahman 2015).

The different envisionings of the nation and crafting the state in the post-World War II period, as explained above, were advanced via competing models of consultation and engagement. The British top-down approach began with the Malayan Union Order in Council, April 1946, which was roundly opposed and rejected. Following the rejection and withdrawal, the British announced the setting up of a 12-member Constitutional Working Committee composed of six representatives of the Malayan Union government, four representatives of the Malay rulers, and two UMNO representatives to draw up a new set of constitutional proposals for Malaya to replace the Malayan Union. The Constitutional Working Committee sat for several months from June 1946 and published its constitutional proposals on December 24 that year. But the Constitutional Working Committee was not inclusive—it did not have representatives from the Malay Nationalist Party (MNP), which had pulled out of UMNO in June 1946, and other organizations.

The PUTERA-AMCJA coalition, which came into force in February 1947, had a mass strength of about 600,000, a large number in a small population of about 4.9 million then. Their alternative proposals to the Working Committee's constitutional proposals were formulated based on broad-based consultations. PUTERA-AMCJA was able to mobilize massive rallies throughout the length and breadth of the country, including in Singapore, against British colonialism and advanced the independence struggle. Indeed, its most well-known political action was the launching of a successful nationwide *hartal* (otherwise known as All Malaya Hartal) on October 20, 1947 to coincide with the opening of the British Parliament, where the Revised Constitutional Proposals were due to be debated.

The significance of the PUTERA-AMCJA coalition and model of consultation can be summed up as follows:

(1) the interethnic coalition was unprecedented in the country's history and showed the formula for future interethnic unity, cooperation, and cross-ethnic class solidarity;
(2) the coalition was an inclusive multi-stakeholder coalition that included various social forces—workers, peasants, women, youth, intellectuals, businessmen, etc.—throughout the country;
(3) it was a coalition of organizations that came together on the basis of shared principles and democratic consultations, guided by the spirit of mutual respect, compromise, and acceptance, which was key to the success of negotiations and cooperation; and
(4) it was a coalition with an imagined nation which was also conceptualized in some

detail through the People's Constitutional Proposals—an envisioning of the nation "from below" that had come to compete with the top-down envisioning proposed through the British-initiated Constitutional Working Committee proposals.

How the British and their local UMNO partners responded to the PUTERA-AMCJA and its People's Constitutional Proposals changed the course of Malaysia's history. The British responded by first pushing through the British-Malay Rulers-UMNO envisioning of the new nation through their constitutional proposals by instituting them in the Federation of Malaya Agreement proclaimed on February 1, 1948. Next, they used force by declaring a state of Emergency in June that year accompanied by mass arrests and the launch of a full-scale war against anticolonial forces under the guise of the "Emergency." The PUTERA-AMCJA united front and the organizations within the coalition were banned, many of the leaders were arrested and imprisoned, and quite a number retreated to the jungle to wage guerrilla war against the British.

Looking back, we can see that the PUTERA-AMCJA united front was something unprecedented in the country's history and served as a pioneering model for political cooperation and coalition as well as building a new nation together. The essence of cooperation and coalition can be cross-ethnic and class-based like PUTERA-AMCJA, or ethnicity-based like the alliance of three ethnicity-based parties—UMNO, Malayan (later Malaysian) Chinese Association (MCA), and Malayan (later Malaysian) Indian Congress (MIC)—that was formed in the early 1950s and expanded to become Barisan Nasional (BN, National Front) in 1973. The bottom-up consultative approach adopted by PUTERA-AMCJA ensured that the process was inclusive of various ethnic and religious groups, both genders, and, importantly, various classes, namely, peasants and workers who constituted the backbone of pre-Merdeka society in Peninsular Malaysia. In sum, the experience of PUTERA-AMCJA shows that a cross-ethnic multi-stakeholder coalition that is class-based is not only possible but necessary to build an inclusive nation.

Six Decades of Post-Merdeka Developments: Ethnicity versus Class?

The six decades after Merdeka is a highly significant historical era of decolonization, postcolonial nation building, and development. This period has been marked by three watersheds. The first was the social engineering under the NEP, which was formulated and launched during 1969–71; in this the state played an active role in development planning and practice, restructuring society, and rebuilding the basis of national unity. This was followed almost two decades later by a second watershed, which entailed the envisioning of a multiethnic developed nation through Vision 2020 and Bangsa Malaysia with

the promise of going beyond the ethnic paradigm. But the route to Vision 2020 in terms of economy, politics, and society was full of twists and turns as well as reversals, thus pushing Malaysia into a third watershed, the "transition trap" post-2008 general elections with the key challenge being to reign in the Malay right-wing ethno-nationalism pushed by UMNO and its supporters, and to move beyond the crossroads to a new Malaysia.

The first decade or so after independence was a challenging period for Malaysia: the legacies of British colonial rule had to be transformed or changed. To start with, the country's economic structure was highly lopsided. Western, especially British, foreign capital controlled the lifeline of the economy, with Chinese traders—and to some extent Indian merchants—being dominant in local commerce, trade, and retail. While some members of the Malay elite were involved in government administration and politics, the majority were farmers and fishermen living in rural areas. Chinese lived mainly in urban areas and Indians on the rubber estates. Poverty and unemployment were high. Some 49.4 percent of all households in Peninsular Malaysia were estimated to be in poverty in 1970, with Malay households constituting 74 percent of all poor households. Unemployment, mostly youth unemployment, was dangerously high at 8 percent. What was worse was that while poverty and unemployment were essentially a class problem, they manifested themselves in ethnic forms, and class inequality was seen as ethnic inequality. This was an outcome of the policy of leaving growth and distribution to market forces—admittedly while there was growth, there was greater class inequality (for details, see Abdul Rahman 2002a, 51). This classic case of the identification of ethnicity with differentiated economic functions—a potentially divisive structure with serious implications for ethnic conflict—could create an explosive situation threatening stability and security. This was the structural trigger at the root of the May 13, 1969 tragedy.

This was the context for the introduction of the NEP, which began in 1971 and continued until 1990. It was a massive social engineering exercise to implement an affirmative action policy with the twin objectives of eradicating poverty irrespective of ethnicity, and restructuring society to remove the identification of economic function with ethnicity. In the formulation of the NEP objectives, there was a clever though uneasy intertwining between ethnicity and class, whereby class perspectives had to be tempered with specific ethnic dimensions.

The outcomes of NEP development policies and plans implemented since the 1970s, under the helm of a developmentalist state, are well known (Nelson *et al.* 2008). Economic growth rates were high over the decades. Incomes were rising along with the expansion of higher education and managerial, administrative, and professional/technical occupations. Towns and cities were occupied by a rising multiethnic middle class. After two decades of such growth and expansion, a new mood seemed to prevail—one of psy-

chological confidence and triumphalism, especially among the middle class. This was the context for the announcement by Prime Minister Mahathir in February 1991 of Vision 2020, which was essentially an envisioning of a multiethnic developed nation and the formation of a multiethnic Bangsa Malaysia—Malaysian nation—by 2020 and beyond.

Fast-forwarding to the twenty-first century, we should take note of a few crucial developments. While the rapid industrialization and modernization of the last century have given rise to new social forces, especially the middle class and its civil society organizations, civil society has also been a space seized by un-civil elements—namely, the noisy Right consisting of right-wing Malay ethno-nationalists who raise the banner of *ketuanan Melayu* (Malay supremacy) and vehemently oppose reform and change (Abdul Rahman 2016). This happened in Malaysia especially after the post-2008 transition, which saw serious reversals in the power base of UMNO/BN and a sharp move toward the right with the upsurge of right-wing Malay ethno-nationalists. The struggle has become a sharp tussle between the forces of democratization and reform—which are often class-based and cross-ethnic—on the one hand, and ethnicity-based right-wing backlash and conservatism on the other. The issue is how to rein in ethno-nationalism on the one hand, and on the other to build class solidarity and struggles across non-ethnic lines to move society beyond the crossroads to a new Malaysia.

Looking back, the post-Mahathir era after 2003 under Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi promised to be one of opening up, democracy, integrity, transparency, accountability, and social justice. However, these promises were rather short-lived, especially after Najib Razak took over power in 2009, and more so since 2016, with the explosion of his 1MDB scandal and charges of kleptocracy leveled against him and his regime. The sharp right-wing backlash unleashed by Malay ethno-nationalists was not only tolerated or condoned; it was even encouraged, especially by the top UMNO leadership, as the latter were concerned about losing their already weakened power base. The consequence of this is that Malaysia remains trapped in the post-2008 transition, which sees the diverse sociopolitical forces contending with each other and pushing the country in different directions—along ethnic and religious lines as well as lines of class. While democratic civil society organizations such as the multiethnic Coalition for Free and Fair Elections (BERSIH) coalition have been on the rise, with the opening up of spaces to disseminate reformist ideas and progressive mass actions, the same spaces have also been seized by right-wing ethno-nationalists who are hell-bent on preventing reform and change. They use various ideologies for mobilization such as racism, religious bigotry, and perverted patriotism. This can be seen especially in the activities of the Red Shirts, a Malay right-wing movement led by Jamal Yunus, a grassroots UMNO leader who is aligned with the present top UMNO leadership (*ibid.*).

Conclusion: Prospects of Moving beyond the Ethnic Cul-de-Sac

Based on the analysis above, what can we make of the contestations between ethnicity and class as social facts, policies, and programs and as paradigms, or ways of thinking and analysis? Will Malaysia remain trapped in the ethnic paradigm and Malaysian studies continue to be characterized by ethnicized knowledge? Or is there hope of their being more innovative and forward looking and breaking out of this ethnic prism?

Empirical evidence shows that Malaysia today seems stuck in a cul-de-sac, a stalemate of sorts. Politically and socially, it is caught in a tussle between the forces of repression and reaction versus the forces of reform and change. Despite fast losing popular support and being riddled by internal divides and dissent, the UMNO-BN regime still retains power and wants to cling on to it. The Pakatan Harapan parties (comprising Parti Keadilan Rakyat [PKR, People's Justice Party], Democratic Action Party [DAP], Amanah, and its newest member, Parti Bumiputera Bersatu Malaysia), on the other hand—while gaining popular support—are still weak and struggling to cobble up a credible coalition, a unified strategy, a common manifesto, and a logo. Between the two coalitions, UMNO-BN has always operated within the ethnic paradigm while Pakatan Harapan reiterates a commitment to a multiethnic coalition and an inclusive Bangsa Malaysia, thus upholding the class paradigm, although some sections of the coalition—especially its newest members, those from Parti Bumiputera Bersatu Malaysia (the UMNO breakaway party)—ocasionally go off track and remain stuck in the old ethnic mold.

Malaysian history has been through difficult and dangerous periods and has come forward with at least two different models of coalition: the PUTERA-AMCJA and National Front (Barisan Nasional). At present, Malaysians urgently need a viable framework of effective collective and sustained action. What lessons can be learned from the experience of the class-based PUTERA-AMCJA in forging unity and cooperation? Also, what lessons can be learned from the experience of the ethnicity-based Alliance and its successor, Barisan Nasional? A viable coalition, a new forward-looking type based on principles of equality and mutual respect, is necessary. It is here that important lessons can be drawn from the PUTERA-AMCJA experience, its broad-based coalition of various classes and groups, and their demonstration of cross-ethnic solidarity and resolute struggles for justice, independence, and social progress.

In terms of government policies and programs, the ethnic paradigm is deeply entrenched. It is at the core of the NEP and subsequent policies favoring the Bumiputera, while data—especially on income, assets, and wealth—is compiled and disaggregated along ethnic rather than class lines. However, there is constant tension and flux between the two, and dimensions of class do emerge quite strongly when social exclusion and

income inequality are examined. For example, Malaysia is committed to the various protocols of the United Nations, including the latest Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 2016–30, which emphasize social inclusion and building an inclusive society as part of sustainable development. Such thinking has emerged in the Eleventh Malaysia Plan (11MP) (2016–20), which advances six thrust areas that essentially deal with strengthening social inclusion. In fact, in 11MP the government has also adopted the income class model of analysis, which shows the differences in income, assets, and wealth of the top 20 percent (T20), the middle 40 percent (M40), and the bottom 40 percent (B40). In short, policy makers have made important conceptual concessions by moving beyond ethnicity to class through the construction and application of income class categories, but the dominant paradigm remains ethnicity based.

In Malaysian studies among Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists, ethnicity and class remain important conceptual tools and paradigms. Class analysis remains fresh and vigorous, although it could be sharper, more comprehensive, and consistent, while ethnicized analysis and ethnicized knowledge are widespread. Unlike in policy making and practice, in academia competing paradigms in research and knowledge construction are always welcome; the growth of competing paradigms such as ethnicity, class, culture, and identity, as suggested by Shamsul (1998), or Milner's *kerajaan* and Rahman's *rakyat*, as discussed earlier, is a healthy development. As long as there is constant productive debate between these paradigms with the aim to let truth prevail, there is life and hope in academia. However, social scientists in Malaysia have to take a principled stand. They need to tell truth to power based on their perspectives, convictions, and facts, and not try to be politically correct or let their judgment of policies be clouded by their ethnic origin.

In this regard, the question is whether Malaysian studies—being part of the emancipatory project of social science—can be more innovative and forward looking and break out of the ethnic paradigm. Two points may be noted here, the first related to the culture of society and the second to the nature of knowledge construction and competing paradigms. While there are critical views on the concept of the colonial-constructed plural society, it is important to emphasize that plurality as a concept transcends ethnic boundaries. Malaysia's historical trajectory seems to be—to borrow Shamsul's terminology (2010)—in a plurality continuum: beginning with precolonial plurality, followed by the colonial plural society, and now the new plurality of the post-independence era. By plurality here is meant a free-flowing, natural process articulated not only through the process of migration but also through cultural borrowings and adaptations (Shamsul 2010). This plurality that expresses itself in the culture of public acceptance of others by Malays is something quite ancient in the Malay Peninsula, predating colonialism. Indeed, many

> Southeast Asian coastal and riverine societies (e.g., the Melaka Sultanate of the fifteenth century) that became plural in character during the colonial period, or saw the degree of pluralism increase, did so with little social trauma or opposition, showing that the Malay society then was relatively open and accommodative, not exclusivist. (Abdul Rahman 2002b, 40)

What this shows is that Malaysian society is a rich historical and cultural resource, a reservoir of wisdom, understanding, balance, and acceptance of others by people of various ethnic groups toward each other. With such a civilizational resource, what Malaysia needs is a flourishing social science that can confidently advance inclusive and rigorous analytical frameworks in the study of the state, economy, society, and culture, as well as guide policy thinking, formulation, and practice.

This brings us to the final question of whether a multiethnic or class-based paradigm is possible in academic analysis and social interaction. Ethnicity is a challenge to this paradigm, but as shown throughout the paper, ethnicity is a social construct. As such, it may change and can be changed. What is required is consciousness and a strong will to change, and the presence of a viable alternative. Here is the crux of the problem: is the class-based paradigm good and succinct enough? Paradigms involve the power of words, power of analysis, and power of articulation. To have such compelling power, any paradigm has to be analytically sharp and persuasive, historically informed, and able to capture the popular imagination. The paper has shown that the *rakyat* paradigm (Abdul Rahman 2014), which is a variant of the class paradigm in Malaysian studies, may be considered as an alternative. *Rakyat* is not merely an organizing concept at a conceptual level; on the ground, the *rakyat* form the human masses for mobilization in the independence struggle and in subsequent development and nation building. What is appealing with the *rakyat* paradigm is that it is inclusive and class based, embracing Malays and non-Malays, a profound fact that has long historical roots. An inclusive paradigm originating from below, which is not defined by ethnicity, the *rakyat* paradigm has the potential to mitigate the divides and dissent, be most bonding and enduring, and break through the ethnicity-based societal paradigm that has dominated Malaysian history and Malaysian studies over the past several decades.

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