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Pluralism of Determinisms: economic theory and development in Malaysia (1981-1996)

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Abstract

This will paper will address pluralism in economics by discussing the concept of development as it developed in the debate in Malaysia between 1981 and 1996. It is argued that the conceptualization of development—as of any social phenomenon—is not only a theoretical, but simultaneously an epistemological and even ontological process, making pluralist positions such as taken by Mäki (2002) or Dow (2002) untenable. Whereas it might be possible to develop neat delineations of ontology and epistemology within methodological discussions, such distinctions do not uphold in the praxis of social research. Knowledge of social reality is always at the same time constitutive of that reality. From this analysis follows that theoretical positions are politically-laden. Any methodological position is therefore an ethico-political one and should be evaluated as such, rather than on basis of the one and only Truth. In this respect, it should be recognised that any mode of knowing always at the same time is constructive by constituting a particular reality, and destructive, in suppressing other potential realities (as has been noted by the likes of Giddens and Foucault). On basis of this duality, we argue for a pluralism in the true sense of the word; a pluralism aiming at the cultivation of a plurality of truths, not a destruction of all truths. In terms of the Malaysian debate, we advocate a competition of notions of development rather than succumbing to either powerless relativism or authoritarian monopolisation of truth.

Introduction

Over the past decades, the debate about the problems and challenges of developing countries has become increasingly uniform. From the 1980s onwards, the so-called Washington consensus has dictated market-conform policies and openness as the only route to economically sustainable development. More recently, increased attention for the conditions under which these policies need to be applied has added some institutional demands, conveniently summarized under the header ‘good governance’. Problems on the ground notwithstanding, the belief that by now, we by and large know what brings about successful development, has found an increasingly warm reception among development economists. The main challenge that remains, according to this belief, is implementation.

This decrease in plurality within the development debate is ultimately traceable to the origins of the ‘neoclassical counterrevolution’ (Toye 1993), which was decidedly anti-pluralist. Explicitly rejecting the separate discipline of development economics on basis of the universal applicability of neoclassical principles ruled out pluralism both in terms of theoretical substitutes as theoretical complements (Mäki 2002). All economic development was to be subject to the same economic logic, just as it was to be subject to the market system.

Given these vanishing pluriformities, the development of the debate about development forms an ideal background against which to discuss the problems and advantages of pluralism in the economic debate. Studying the recent history of the development concept in Malaysia allows us to both assess what plurality means in practice, and what the causes and consequences behind its disappearance are. On basis of such a discussion, it is possible to develop a grounded position *vis-à-vis* pluralism in economics.

This exercise needs to be divided into two parts. First, we need to delimit the meaning of pluralism within the development debate. For this, it will be necessary to address the relation between reality, theory and methodology in order to specify what a rejection or advocacy of pluralism with regard to development would actually imply. Only following that can we enter a discussion about whether pluralism is desirable in such a debate or not.

This is also the structure of the argument put forth in this paper. Through a discussion of the development of political-economic debate in Malaysia in the first one-and-a-half decade of Mahathir’s rule, the first section addresses the relevance of epistemology for ‘actual’ development. A second section will—based on the same analysis—subsequently take up the issue to what extent pluralism is desirable in the Malaysian development debate. In the conclusion, these insights will be taken back to a more general, abstract level again.

1. Conceptualising Development

Malaysia: A Development Success-Story

The 1980s were a crucial period for the Malaysian economy. It entered the decade in a worsening recession, and left it in a period of unprecedented economic growth. At the beginning of the nineties, the economic problems of the early 1980s seemed to belong completely to the past, and Malaysia was able to make one of the most serious claims to the severely contested title of “the fifth NIC”. This period of prosperity culminated in many ways in the declaration of the Vision 2020 programme by Dr. Mahathir in 1992, in which he set out plans for Malaysia to be an economically developed country by 2020, alongside several social goals. Given the economic situation at the time, the economic part of this promise seemed to be, although rather ambitious, not impossible. What had happened in the 1980s that had turned around the economic situation so dramatically?

The short answer—the one which can be found in publications of foreign economic institutions like the World Bank—seems to be that Malaysia in the second half of the 1980s made a move towards market liberalisation and a more private sector oriented economic approach. This approach rested on three main pillars; (foreign) private sector investment was deregulated and promoted, public sector expenditure was reduced, and various state-owned companies were privatised or corporatised (World bank 1993; Ismail and Meyanathan 1993). These more or less “textbook” reforms triggered a strong inflow of foreign investment in the second half of the 1980s, fostering high levels of economic growth (9% a year from 1988 on). As such, Malaysia has often been held as an example of good governance for other developing countries, often plagued with inefficiencies due to excessive government intervention and expenditure, to emulate (Privatisation Master Plan 1991; World Bank 1993; Bruton 1992). One of the reasons for the World Bank’s approval was probably that the economic problems Malaysia faced in the mid-80s were very similar to the problems faced by many developing economies; accumulating debts, external shocks, structural rigidities due to excessive state intervention. The reaction to such problems, however, was deemed very different. In the influential World Bank study *The East Asian Miracle* of 1993, the authors specifically contrast the successful East Asian economies with the cases of Mexico and Côte d’Ivoire, as exponents of the whole of Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank 1993, 118). It is argued that the swift and appropriate reaction to macroeconomic dislocations common to emerging economies is what distinguishes countries like Malaysia from their Latin American and Sub-Saharan counterparts; “appropriate” might then be understood as following the kind of orthodox policies often advocated by World Bank and IMF in

such cases¹. In Malaysia's case, the high economic growth of the late 1980s and early 1990s started because "a combination of terms of trade shocks and fiscal imbalances prompted the government to move in 1986 away from state-led industrialization" (World Bank 1993, 135). The Malaysian government was prepared to abandon its interventionist strategy when problems emerged, and even "to pronounce certain policies and their implementation as outright failures" (Ismail and Meyanathan 1993, 47). For example, "the Privatization Plan was, in fact, an admission that mistakes had been made during...Malaysia's development" (ibid, 23).

These evaluations and interpretations of the Malaysian success are important in that they reveal an underlying theory of economic development. The story rests on two assumptions. First, the large role of the state in the economy is taken to be an operationalisation of a statist ideology, associated with a focus on social justice rather than overall growth, and an emphasis on heavy industry and the internal market. Thus, the public sector approach in Malaysia is equated with a focus on distribution and restructuring, rather than on maximising growth and allocative efficiency. Moreover, state-led industrialisation is taken to indicate distrust in the functioning of the market and the private sector.

The second assumption is to some extent the corollary of the first; liberalisation, deregulation, and privatisation are considered to be indications of a shift towards a free-market approach. Where the past policies focused on restructuring, even when it compromised growth, in name of social justice, now growth became priority number one. Furthermore, distrust for the private sector was replaced by an almost unlimited belief in the private sector. Thus, the changes in economic policy in Malaysia in the mid-80s not only amount to a fundamental shift in strategy, but also of priorities, if not objectives and ideology. In short, a new development concept emerged, defined as the movement towards a future state of equilibrium, to come about naturally if not obstructed by misguided government intervention. That these assumptions and conceptions underlie the presentation of facts as has been given above might best be illustrated by Ismail and Meyanathan's remarks in their World Bank study about the "inherent tension" between private sector promotion and distributive goals, in which two things are contrasted that are not actually each other's logical opposites² (Ismail and Meyanathan 1993, 23).

A couple of things should be noticed here. First of all, development is defined purely in relation to a future state. This is explicit in the broad developmental project announced in 1991 called 'Wawasan 2020' (Vision 2020), in which Malaysia commits itself to be a fully developed country in less than three decades. In a way, the year 2020 is to be the end of history. Such ambitions

¹ Indeed, the Malaysian reforms can be seen as more or less textbook reforms, provoking the suggestion that they were undertaken under IMF pressure (Jomo K.S. et al, 1987), even though Malaysia never had to actually step to the IMF for support.

² Private sector promotion is a means, while distribution is an objective. Moreover, one could argue that there is nothing in private sector orientation that would make it inherently harmful to distribution objectives.

have a corollary in neoclassical growth theory, which also defines development solely in terms of achieving some future equilibrium or steady state (Solow 1956)

More significantly, both this state and the structural process of development towards it are considered to be objectively given; they are simply beyond discussion, because determined by reality. 'Developedness' is defined in terms of income levels, and is to be brought about by market processes³. The literature about the Malaysian reforms in the 1980s reveals the belief that if one leaves everything to the market, economic principles of competition and rational behaviour will automatically bring about the efficient equilibrium. The Malaysian government, in the form of Dr. Mahathir, understood this well and acted upon it, and was therefore rewarded with development, i.e. growth. Underneath this belief lies the idea that economic processes are subject to certain principles and economic laws that are inescapable. These principles dictate that if one wants to develop, one has to do what these laws tell one to do when striving for development. Any other action can, in the words of Ismail and Meyanathan (1993), only be seen as a "mistake", leading to "failure". Successful development, in this vision, is a matter of avoiding such mistakes. In the end, all that is needed therefore is 'good governance', which is 'getting the prices right'.

Determinism in Development

The technocratic conception of development as growth, to be brought about through the market mechanism has some important consequences for debate. As has been argued, both goal and means of the development process are considered to be objectively given. Consequently, any deviations from these strategies are automatically classified as mistakes. For the political-economic debate, such a way of phrasing the development problem is problematic because it effectively depoliticises it. Deciding upon development strategy and policy becomes an entirely 'technocratic' affair; there is nothing to choose, since alternative measures can be objectively assessed as simply being wrong. Thus, any claims by neoclassical growth theory underlying the above development concept of being 'true' automatically also imply certain strategies to be objectively right. In this sense, development can be considered a deterministic concept.

This allegation probably requires some clarification, since determinism is quite a problematic status for a concept or theory. The point made here is that any conception of development is not only informed by and reflective of a whole theoretical context, but, through this theoretical structure, also prescribes behaviour. Within a particular development concept, such as the

³ Although 'Wawasan 2020' sets a more ambitious agenda, in which developedness also includes a morally and politically developed society, in which all races can coexist and come to their full potential (Mahathir 1991).

technocratic one, there are no degrees of freedom; if one accepts neoclassical theory as valid representation of reality, one has only one possible course of action⁴.

It has to be noted that we do not maintain, as determinism sometimes is taken to imply, that no individual choice whatsoever can exist. The fact that certain actions automatically follow from certain ideas does not rule out the possibility of having different beliefs, which prescribe alternative behaviour. In general, one can say that ‘determinism’ often is taken to mean that reality has certain given structures, which can be known through theory⁵. However, one should note that this is actually a combination of two ideas rather than one. The first one is an epistemological idea: knowledge and theory are about knowing structures. Second, there is an ontological point, which argues that these structures exist in reality prior to the moment of knowing.

The epistemological point that knowledge consists of structures does not automatically lead one to conclude that there is a reality consisting of structures existing prior to knowledge of which theories are correct representations—Truth with a capital T. Maintaining that knowledge is structural merely asserts that any theory consists of a set of structural relations between concepts. This might be called—analogue to Dow’s (2002) distinction between open and closed systems on the theoretical level—determinism in an open form. According to any theory, certain structural relations obtain, which means that *within* such a theory, human behaviour is reduced to following these structures. However, there are still several theories possible. It is only when one adds an ontic determinism to this—thus denying ontological and veristic pluralism—that the idea becomes problematic in the sense of ruling out individual choice whatsoever. In that case, the structures that determine human behaviour themselves are inescapably determined. This situation we might call closed determinism. If a theory asserts that development can only be brought about by securing property rights, this binds only the actions of those people believing in that theory. In order to bring about development, they will have no choice but to secure property rights. If the theory were true—i.e. true in the sense of representing Truth—however, it would bind everyone. Dissent would be a recipe for failure and considered mad.

⁴ That is not to say that one particular development concept would rule out all variations in behaviour. The point is that a concept, through the theoretical structures by which it is defined, prescribes certain courses of action. However, this only applies to the behaviour the concept and its defining theoretical structure covers. Variations between the behaviour of various people could still exist in other fields. However, such variations are in turn determined by other concepts being defined by theoretical structures as well. Simply put, the fact that the development concept is alleged to be deterministic does not mean that the development concept determines the whole world in all its aspects.

⁵ Which implies that theory, in such a view, denotes a reproduction of the structures already present in reality.

Plurality in development: a story of ethnic struggle

As we have argued, the technocratic development concept can be considered as deterministic. However, it is not yet clear what kind of determinism is present here. In case the determinism is an epistemological matter, determinism exists within the theory. Various epistemologies could then still exist next to each other, however, making determinism open. In that case, although behavior is structurally determined, there are still other structures to follow. When structures exist in a pre-given reality, by contrast, there is but one structure to follow (the structure of Truth).

This brings up the question what kind of determinism is present here; open or closed. A first step in answering this is to investigate plurality on the level of epistemology. In order to do so, we will return to the debate about Malaysian development in the 1980s. Thus, we will establish whether the technocrat conception of development has been the sole conception, or whether alternatives might have been in place.

When one delves somewhat deeper in the accounts of the economic reforms and policies of Mahathir in the 1980s, one is immediately confronted with a confusion about what it was that happened exactly, however. Although the story told above about rationalisation and a switch to market-conform development seems rather straightforward, it is not the only history of Malaysia in the 1980s. Alternative, substitutive facts and events can be encountered. One of these is the assertion that there was no market-conform liberalisation, no reversal of policy, and no rationalisation whatsoever. What is more, these facts are often upheld by the same key players as in the technocrat story, dependent on the context—Prime Minister Mahathir himself for example. In short, what happened in Malaysia is the following; Malaysia as a nation was born as a product of British colonialism, which, besides political changes, had brought an influx of foreign immigrants. At independence, the Malaysian population existed of indigenous Malay (later to be bound together with other indigenous groups as *Bumiputera*—sons of the soil), making up around halve of the population, and Chinese and Indian immigrants. As a nation, Malaya—later Malaysia—was politically dominated by the Malays. Through the institution of traditional Malay rulers, Malay language, and Islam as the national religion, it was confirmed that Malaysia was the by birthright the land of the Malays. Chinese, and to a lesser extent Indians, dominated the economy, however. The tensions this evoked had led the government to introduce the New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, which set out to restore the balance between the various races in the economic sphere. The increasingly large role of the government in the economy in the 1970s and early 1980s is to be seen in this light, as the government tried actively to achieve the NEP objective of 20% equity in Malay hands by 1990 by taking over foreign companies, creating enterprises itself, and introducing all kinds of regulations forcing companies to accept Malay employment and shared ownership (most notorious among them the Industrial Coordination Act

of 1975). In spite of the expansion of the role of the state in the economy, the NEP was not inspired by a statist ideology, however. Rather than that, the state served as temporary trustee for Malays, who were as yet individually incapable of taking their matters in own hands.

In the influential book *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), Mahathir argued that Malays, because they have always lived in an easy and affluent environment, have not been subject “to the primitive laws that enable only the fittest to survive” (Mahathir 1970, 31) and have acquired certain cultural traits that put them at a disadvantage in the economic competition with the Chinese. Although Malays enjoy certain political privileges, they feel discriminated against, according to Mahathir. This claim of discrimination “is based not on laws but on the character and behaviour of the major racial groups in Malaysia. The Malays are spiritually inclined, tolerant and easy-going. The non-Malays and especially the Chinese are materialistic, aggressive and have an appetite for work.” (Mahathir 1970, 97) For these reasons, since Malays would go under in direct competition with the Chinese, they needed “constructive protection” (Mahathir 1970, 31) and support from the state. This “protection was meant to breed a stratum of Malay capitalists who would be capable of standing on their own feet” (Khoo Kay Jin 1992, 59). In other words, “the state-as-entrepreneur policy under the NEP was to be an interim measure to usher in the growth of an entrepreneurial class” (Rahman Embong 1998, 86) and “public enterprises should only serve as a temporary vehicle for creating a Bumiputera property-owning class” (Gomez and Jomo K.S. 1999, 80). In so far as the NEP increased the state’s role in the economy, it was as part of a kind of ethnic infant industry strategy. Moreover, such a role of the state was in line with the ‘feudal’ relationship between Malay ruler and subjects, in which the former was responsible for the protection of the latter, receiving submission in return. In other words, it was fuelled by Malay traditions rather than a statist development perspective.

From this perspective, the so-called reforms of the 1980s were mere continuation of policy. Compromising the Malay cause was not in question. Rather, privatisation meant that “asset accumulation by the government on behalf of the Bumiputeras is redistributed to individual Bumiputeras and Bumiputera institutions” (Adam and Cavendish 1995, 129). In this light, privatisation can be described as the “extension (*of the NEP, auth.*) within the logic of capital accumulation, wealth concentration and consolidation of this (i.e. the Bumiputera commercial and industrial community) class. It is still part of the NEP’s restructuring exercise to transfer some of the state’s companies to Malay capitalists who are regarded as ‘having arrived’ in order to expand and consolidate the Bumiputera commercial and industrial community” (Rahman Embong 1998, 86). Indeed, at the time of the ‘reforms’, Mahathir took pains to dismiss claims that was squandering Malay interest. Instead, he positioned himself as champion of the Malay cause, who would not succumb to Chinese or foreign interests. The creation of a successful (rich) Malay business-class, and along that, the propagation of Islam and the Malay language in public life and

the support of large industrial and infrastructural projects were all meant to propel Malays and Malay culture forward.

This reveals not only a different history of Malaysian reform and development, but also a different conception of what constitutes development. In this history, development is defined as the promotion of Malays and their culture. This definition is inextricably bound up with the interpretation of social reality in terms of ethnic struggle; a ‘survival of the fittest’, in Mahathir’s words. More fundamentally, it conceptualises history as Malay history; and as such, historic progression is defined in terms of a ‘fall from grace’ for the Malay race, rather than a progressive process towards a better future. Development is thus set by the nature and historical character of the Malays; it is driven by the past. The contrast with the technocratic conception of development in terms of economic growth and allocative efficiency is obvious. Here, all is about relative power and status of the ethnic group, and propagation of its ethnic identity. Consumption is only important in so far as it allows a handful of affluent businessmen to portray their race’s economic capabilities. What is more, instead of allocative efficiency, development is constituted as an ethnic zero-sum game; the goal is to be able to compete and eventually surpass the other races.

Development in Malaysia: Plurality or Pluralism?

The above story, which might be called the ethnicist history of Malaysian reforms and development, shows that the technocrat conception of development went by no means unchallenged. In other words, one could speak of plurality in development. Plurality, however, as Mäki (2002) has pointed out, does not yet make pluralism. While plurality merely points at a situation of ‘more than one’, pluralism is “a theory or principle that justifies or legitimizes or prescribes plurality” (Mäki 2002, 125). If we want to establish the nature of determinism present in the development concept, the question to be asked at this point is whether the situation of plurality as existent in Malaysia was considered to be a desirable situation.

The plurality portrayed in the two stories above is an epistemological plurality. We have two rival accounts of the events occurring in the 1980s in Malaysia, each one effectively denying the version of history of the other. If the economic development and reforms of Malaysia in the 1980s are interpreted as traditional policy, it is hard to see Mahathir as pragmatic, goal-oriented modernizer. If total allocative efficiency is what mattered in the end, privatisation would have companies ending up in the hands of the highest bidders, regardless of race or connections. All in all, the stories presented here amount to, in the words of Mäki (2002) a plurality of substitutes rather than complements. The theories compete with each other, and do so by making Truth-claims. If one can lay claim to the Truth, the other cannot be maintained.

In spite of this epistemological plurality, both accounts adhere to what Mäki calls the ‘one world principle’. Various interpretations might exist, but these are interpretations about one and the same world. As a consequence, only one interpretation can be correct, so that its substitute is automatically wrong. Given this principle, genuine epistemological or even theoretical pluralism is ruled out.

Consider a situation in which the ‘one world principle’ holds. In that case, it is still possible that various knowledges emerge about this world. However, each of these Truth-claims might be assessed on their merit; after all, one theory is simply truer than the other. If there is but one Truth, epistemological pluralism could only be defended by arguing that we do not know which interpretation is the Truer one, and we cling on to a plurality of interpretations because we are willing to be on the safe side. That presumes, however, that we are not capable to assess which interpretation corresponds to reality. If we are, such as in the case of the Islamisation campaign which is based on the true teachings of the Prophet, epistemological pluralism makes no sense. Denying that interpretations can be assessed on their Truthfulness in principle, however, would amount to saying that reality does not reveal itself in any way, which would make it completely irrelevant. In other words, as long as reality is unique and relevant, Truth-claims can be assessed. Plurality can still exist in that case, but it is only an undesirable state that needs to be overcome as soon as possible; it is no pluralism. Inevitably, one interpretation, being truer than the others, would eventually acquire a dominant position and close off discussion, reducing all actions and interpretations to following the structures of this theory. For this reason, genuine epistemological pluralism can only be grounded in ontological plurality or pluralism. If we want debates to be open, therefore, we need to abandon the one world principle.

The epistemological plurality we encountered in the Malaysian debate does not amount to such an epistemological pluralism leading to open debate, since it denies an ontological plurality in which it is based. Such denials can be repeatedly encountered in the Malaysian context, in which almost everything, from history, social structures, basic economic policies, up to national culture has been defined and placed beyond discussion and adjustment. Social relations were fixed in 1970 with the proclamation of the *Rukunegara*, the National Ideology, defining Malaysian society in terms of ethnic struggle. Culture has been defined with the formulation of a National Cultural Policy, as basically an immutable conception of Malay culture with some appropriate elements from other cultures added. What is more, the “Sensitive Issues” Bill, adopted in 1971, prohibited all public discussion over such issues. In addition, the Islamisation campaign launched by Mahathir, aimed at enhancing the role of what the government deemed to be ‘True’ Islam in public life, also tended to reduce public behaviour and policies to submission to objective Truths. With Mahathir’s rule increasingly challenged by the Islamist opposition, the control over the interpretation of Islam was drawn towards the government, promulgating True, progressive Islam

(Khoo Boo Teik 1997). The message is clear; there is but one Truth, so there is no room for different interpretations.

The prize of making a successful claim to Truth lies in the immediate political implications of the rival theories. As we have seen, if one adheres to the technocratic conception of development, one cannot escape the necessity of certain policies. Liberalisation, privatisation, reduction of government expenditures, all automatically follow from the structures the theory propagates. With regard to the ethnicist history, we can witness something similar. The interpretation of history and society, the meaning of development, and the actions and identities of the people involved are all inextricably bound together. When one interprets the world in terms of ethnic struggle, the conceptualisation of development as zero-sum promotion of the ethnic cause becomes unavoidable. In turn, this determines specific actions. From the privatisation project, the Islamisation campaign, the way political battles were fought, right down to the clothes Mahathir used to wear; all of that followed logically and inevitably from the constitution of society in terms of ethnic strife. To dismiss economic restructuring and redistribution, or to not pay any attention to ethnicity when seeking economic growth is not an option within this history. Such actions would require a different conceptualisation of reality first.

In Mäki's one world, Truth becomes an important weapon in the political debate about economic policies. If a theory can claim Truth, it not only dismisses the other one, but it also makes certain courses of action necessary beyond question. In this sense, Truth-claims close-off the debate and destroy pluralism. In the competition for dominance of a theory, and thus of certain policies and actions, the argument that one is objectively right is of decisive importance. As we will see, Mahathir managed to consolidate his position significantly by changing and monopolising discourse in the 1990s, altering and limiting the accepted truth about Malaysian development and society more in the direction of technocratic conceptions. One world, in this sense, also means one option.

The Grounds for One World

As we have seen, the epistemological plurality we encountered in the debate about Malaysian development was not informed by any epistemological pluralism. In fact, as each story tried to claim itself representing Truth, the debate was constantly under threat of being closed-off, provoking a closed determinism. The main reason for this was adherence to the 'one world principle'. Since one world basically rules out genuine pluralism, an investigation of the possibilities of such pluralism—and of an open determinism—warrants a discussion of the reasons for this principle.

Mäki (2002) motivates the ‘one world principle’ by arguing that, whereas there might be many theories, interpretations, and perspectives, all these are ultimately about the one world. Underlying is the idea that this ‘one world’ is a given fact, and prior to the act of knowing. Different theories do not create different worlds, but “illuminate features of the one and only world” (Mäki 2002, 127).

This rejection of ontological plurality is problematic, as we will argue. According to Dow (2002, 138), pure ontological pluralism amounts to denial of existence of unifying forces in nature. It thus leaves no room for general theorising, nor for methodology. However, she continues, such a pure ontological pluralism, which is typical of postmodernism, consists itself of a set of general statements, theories and methodologies. Therefore, it is self-contradictory and untenable. Instead of such pure pluralism, Dow advocates a modified ontological pluralism, which maintains that “there are regularities in nature which science should aim to identify, but that these regularities are of process rather than events; they cannot be isolated from evolutionary or other irregularities. The economy, like knowledge, is therefore best understood as an open system” (Dow 2002, 138). Indeed, this position represents no pure ontological pluralism anymore; however, it does so because it is not purely ontological rather than no pure pluralism. Unless one is prepared to maintain that irregularities ‘are’ to a lesser extent than regularities, the statement is about making distinctions when interpreting the world—epistemology—at least much as about ontological pluralism. Terms like ‘process’, ‘events’, ‘regularities’ or even ‘evolutionary’ have no ontological but an epistemological character.

This highlights that even within pure methodological debate, the separation of epistemology and ontology is problematic. Fundamentally, the problem is that any ontology is not being itself, but a *theory* about being, and as such has an epistemological character. For this reason, any epistemological pluralism automatically implies an ontological pluralism and vice versa, rendering a position like Mäki’s untenable. Moreover, it invalidates Dow’s reading of pure ontological pluralism as denying the possibility of theorising or methodology. If ontology is epistemology, it follows that reality is not prior to knowledge. That does not mean that reality does not exist; it only means that it does not exist “in nature”, waiting to be discovered, before agents construct theories of it.

With regard to the concept of development, this point is quite clear. ‘Development’, however it is understood, is a concept denoting certain processes, linking events, actions and outcomes, and interpreting them in terms of goals. In other words, it is not just an observable phenomenon, but is a theory about structural relationships between events, actions and goals. What is more, ‘development’ does not mean anything outside such a theory, does not exist even. Prior to the act of knowing, in which theoretical structuration of the world takes place, there can be nothing what could be called development. Ideas of desirable objectives (e.g. growth), certain relations between

actions, past situations and future states (e.g. tradition), time progression (history as fall from grace vs. history as progress), and socio-spatial considerations (development is usually interpreted as national development) make up the concept. What is more, this development only has a meaning within the context of consumption, money, production, market allocation, and identity, which all themselves point at structural relations⁶.

It might be noted that this is exactly what made the development concept deterministic. When a concept is made up of structural relations, it follows that the concept itself brings with it inescapable social mechanisms and social laws. Development fundamentally refers to the way past experiences and future goals are related through present action. In that sense, an interpretation of what constitutes development automatically and unavoidably constitutes a commitment to certain action.

More important at this point, however, is the fact that a concept like ‘development’, since it consists of the structural mechanisms and relations we think, is made of theory rather than something ontologically prior to theorising. Development—like all social phenomena—is something created by humankind, and therefore not existent in nature before human interpretation. This has important consequences. For one thing, if we were to switch to a different theory, the ‘reality’ of what development is would change with it. Development really does mean something else in the ethnicist conception than in the technocratic one. In this sense, reality is plural or at least potentially so. Secondly, any of such different realities would be true within their own perspective. A Truth external to theory, which could serve as a benchmark for theories, is not available. Defining Malaysian society in terms of ethnic contest in itself makes ethnicity a relevant concept, for ethnicity is what one will see when observing society. Moreover, people will act upon their specific realities; Chinese will team up with other Chinese, forming a common front against the threat of other races, thus confirming the initial world view. In other words, any such different reality to a large extent is self-validating.

When each interpretation brings along a different social reality, there is at least the possibility of ontological plurality in which epistemological pluralism can be grounded. The relevant question then is whether such pluralism is desirable. In absence of external Truth as a criterion to answer that question, we will need to look at the implications of plurality or lack thereof. This we will do by discussing the consequences of when one development concepts is successful in closing-off its position, monopolising the debate. Malaysia in the 1990s provides an excellent example of such a demise of plurality.

⁶ It might be noted that the analysis presented here draws heavily on the work of Giddens (1997), the designer of structuration theory, and Haugaard (2002; 2003), integrating structuration theory with ideas such as post-modernism and the work of Foucault. It is beyond the scope of this article to delve into the theoretical arguments in full detail, however.

2. The Case for Pluralism in Development

An Asian Model with Islamic Values: From Various Determinisms To One

The economic successes of the late 1980s and early 1990s not only brought changes in prosperity in Malaysia, but also profound changes in society and thinking about it. Whereas Malaysia until then had been described mostly in terms of contest between races, mutually exclusive ethnicity came to be de-emphasised as making up public life. Eventually, a new accepted ideology, interpretation of society, and set of policies came about, which have best been described by Francis Loh Kok Wah (2002) as ‘developmentalism’. ‘Developmentalism’ according to Loh “valorizes rapid growth, rising living standards and the resultant consumerist habits, and the political stability offered by Barisan Nasional rule, even when authoritarian means are resorted to” (Loh Kok Wah 2002, 21). Economic growth was what politicians had to deliver in this culture. This focus on growth must be seen in the light of Malaysia trying to emancipate itself internationally, after centuries of colonisation and domination by Western powers. Rallied behind the battle cry “Malaysia Boleh!” (Malaysia Can!), Malaysia sought to prove the world that it could ‘stand as tall and sit as low as any other’. Thus, although economic growth was put central, it was not growth for its own sake. Instead, “the ideals of Malaysian economic development had become statements of political nationalism, with Mahathir’s own charismatic leadership and unifying message providing the focal point for a rising mood of national euphoria” (Hilley 2001, 131). Malaysia’s economic successes were meant in the first place to prove the nation could compete. The actual increase in welfare and certainly poverty reduction came second to that.

A second observation about developmentalist slogans like ‘Malaysia Boleh!’ is that they reveal a shift in identity from ethnic towards ‘Malaysian’. In the following years, ethnicity came to be downplayed as basis for identity in the political arena⁷. Loh Kok Wah (2002) depicts this phenomenon as a process of cultural liberalisation, in which identity has been ‘privatised’. Individuals could pursue their freedom, individual achievements, and identity in private, mainly through consumerism, so that the questions of identity, freedom and ethnicity were taken out of the public sphere; publicly, however, “the tolerance level for political expression in the Malaysian political system became increasingly limited, despite the cultural liberalization of the 1990s” (In Won-Hwang 2003, 210). In a related process, the issue of the national culture, which had been

⁷ A process even Lim Kit Siang had to acknowledge, saying that there has been “a minor liberalisation on government policies on the primordial issues of language, education and culture and a greater acceptance and recognition of Malaysia as a plural society” in the 1990s (Lim Kit Siang 2000). The interpretation of Lim seems to differ slightly from the government line, however. Whereas the former sees developments as increasing recognition of primordial diversity, the latter was trying to move towards a new form of uniformity, at least in public life. Compare Lim’s statement for example with the “One Heart, One Vision” campaign, launched by MCA leader Ling Liong Sik in 1993 to encourage Malaysian Chinese to be more multi-culturally oriented. Ling argues that races have not become “less Malay, less Indian, or less Chinese but all have become more Malaysian” (Malaysian Chinese Association, Secretary-General’s Report 1993, 9).

highly politicised previously leading even to its formal definition in the National Cultural Policy, came to attract less attention. Ethnic culture was taken out of the public sphere as well, and reduced to something to be pursued in private or as an asset for tourism⁸. In the public sphere it was replaced by a suddenly discovered longstanding tradition of multi-culturalism or by the recently invented Asian Values. On an academic level too, this multi-ethnic, inclusive image came to be stressed at the expense of the previous paradigm of a historical Malayness of Malaysia and inherent conflict between various ethnic groups. For example, sociologist Rahman Embong (regardless of whether he is right or wrong) is certainly rewriting history books as he writes: “It should be acknowledged that Malaysia has a long history of cosmopolitanism, and that pluralism in Malaysia is ancient, predating colonialism. Having its sources in major Asian civilisations and great world religions that had interacted with each other since the beginning of history in the Malay Archipelago, Malaysian pluralism has also been a source of the country’s strength, vitality and uniqueness, which contributes towards the evolution of multi-ethnic understanding and co-operation” (Rahman Embong 2000, 10).

These newly found Asian-ness fitted in a discourse that went beyond Malaysian borders (Hitchcock 1994; Mahathir 1996; see Hill 2000 for a critical discussion). According to this set of ideas, Asians had a cultural tendency towards obedience and reverence to leaders, towards giving priority to collective interests above individual rights and to long term goals rather than short-term gain. An orderly society, societal harmony and respect for authority were deemed more important than in the West. This, in the end, was the reason for Malaysia’s economic success. The idea of such Asian cultural values as having something to do with the superior economic management and performance of Malaysia can be traced back to the early 1980s, when Mahathir launched the Look East campaign. One element of this campaign was the cultivation of an Eastern work ethic, which had brought countries like Korea and Japan progress. Another buzzword of this period, ‘Malaysia Inc.’, was also an attempt to adopt social and economic characteristics that were specifically Japanese and Korean. Whereas in the context of economic difficulties of the early 1980s, such traits were mostly brought to the attention as things to be fostered by Malaysians, during the economic boom of the second half of the 1980s and the 1990s, the idea shifted towards the argument that such values already existed in Malaysia, as it was an Asian country itself. Thus, Asian values transformed from goals into explanations—even legitimation. Even though the values originally referred to were mostly Japanese in origin—as exemplified by the term Look East—in Mahathir’s eyes, they were also present in Islam, and thus part of the Malaysian heritage. In this way, the tension between Asian Values as something already present and something to be achieved was resolved. The values were there; they were just

⁸ As Loh notes, cultural affairs now fall under the department of culture, arts, and tourism (Loh Kok Wah 2002, 31).

hidden underneath misconceptions and ignorance about Islam. This was one of the reasons for the Islamisation campaign that had been started by Mahathir soon after his inauguration.

Apart from enhancing the role of Islam in public life, the Islamisation campaign was aimed at increasing control over the interpretation of Islam, and disseminating a 'true', progressive version. Over the years, the government created an International Islamic University, an Islamic Bank and drew all kinds of powers of Islamic interpretation towards the office of PM. These efforts to increase control over Islam's interpretation were necessary for "the struggle to change the attitude of the Malays in line with requirements of Islam in this modern age" (Mahathir 1982). The kind of Islam Mahathir sought to promote could be classified as a "highly Protestantized form of Islam" (Lee and Ackerman 1997, 36). Islamisation was interpreted almost solely as a dissemination of certain values deemed Islamic, leaving the more constitutive elements of religion aside. Mahathir argued that the pursuit of knowledge, thrift, and hard work were basically Islamic values, which made Islam very compatible with economic growth. In his view, the Islamic resurgence ought not to be concerned only with the spiritual, dismissing the mundane, but, on the contrary, should primarily seek to empower the Muslim world, thus creating a second golden age of Islam. Although Mahathir criticised the Western world for being decadent, he realised that to strengthen the position of Muslims (and Malays) in the world, 'Western' science and investment was much needed. The right interpretation of Islam therefore was one in which one "retain(ed) a balance of values, accepting what was good from the West but continuing to hold firmly to Islamic values" (Mohd. Nor Samsudin 'Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Kembilakan Kegemilangan Dunia Islam' quoted in Khoo Boo Teik 1995, 176). Just like the emerging Asian Values concept, Islamisation was thus a large extent about a set of values instrumental to capitalist development, necessary for the emancipation of the community vis-à-vis the West. The Islam propagated by Mahathir has been described "as a set of arguments for building a class of entrepreneurs and shoring up support for unfettered capitalism" (Amrita Malhi 2003, 258). It had little to do with the Islam that had been indispensable part of Malay identity in the ethnicist discourse.

Thus, the new developmentalist interpretation went to create its own history, its own Islam, its own definition of development, and its own constitution of society, thereby substituting others. The ethnic zero-sum game of the ethnicist discourse was replaced by the struggle of Asia versus the West, with development reduced to 'beating the West' in economic terms. The importance of the new discourse lies perhaps not so much in its precise content, but in the way it monopolised—not to say stifled—debate. Loh Kok Wah (2002) asserts that developmentalism has redefined politics, as the main political question came to be whether you can deliver visible economic growth; democracy, civil rights etc. were not important to that end. Political discourse came to be purely consequentialist; all means are deemed acceptable, as long as it results in growth and the

prestige of Malaysia. Free-market policies of which the gains were channelled to prestige projects such as the Petronas Towers were the way to achieve this. The fact that the Petronas Towers had been built by foreign firms did not matter. Malaysia was able to pay for it, which was enough already.

In many ways, the developmentalist discourse, and the Asian Values that came with it, successfully amalgamates the ethnicist development concept with the technocrat's interpretation. It reveals the same consequentialist obsession with economic growth and consumption, and the same belief in economic competition and free markets. However, it is explicitly defined in terms of culture and nationalism, valuing national pride and prestige above poverty reduction or even income gains of the average Malaysian. As a consequence, the previous plurality of development concepts—perhaps best seen as a temporary state of transition—was reduced to a single one. Thus, critical debate about Malaysian society, government and the course of economic policies vanished rapidly in the 1990s. That is not to say that there were not critical academics or other critics. The likes of Jomo K.S., Terence Gomez, Francis Loh, Shamsul A.B. and Johan Saranavamutta continued to publish their readings of affairs. NGO's like Aliran persisted in their activities, and the Islamist PAS remained active in the opposition business. However, the 1990s were characterised by an increasing monopolisation and reduction of public debate, in which all these dissent voices were increasingly marginalised. A combination of 'mild' government oppression and media monopoly on the one hand, and apparent indifference among the public about anything else than consumption growth on the other did the trick. It is in this latter sense that plurality disappeared; alternative versions of history could still be found, but they were up against a position that had become so dominant and pervasive that meaningful, widespread debate was not in question anymore. Perhaps, national euphoria requires a nation to be blinkered.

The political costs of consensus

When undertaking research about the economic success of Malaysia in the 1990s, the notion that the success could be attributed to the good governance of the Malaysian government is hardly escapable. Whatever plurality still existed in the 1980s seemed to have been crowded out by the large flows of foreign investment into the country. When the neoliberal reading of development began to be more comprehensive in highlighting institutional quality and cultural propensities to save (e.g. Worldbank 1993), the last remnants of (complementary) plurality disappeared as well. Thus, the literature about Malaysian development in the 1990s is full of eulogies about the economy and cultural values allegedly underpinning it⁹.

⁹ That is, up to the 1997 financial crisis of course, after which the same institutional system that had been lauded so much for its ability to bring growth came to be blamed for everything that went wrong.

By now, it is clear that taking such work, or even the statistical data supporting it¹⁰, as primary source in research bears the danger of reproducing a system of dominance with profound political consequences. The researcher is not confronted with simple data; she is always confronted with theory-laden texts with political implications. The Asian Values dictating that a true Malaysian (i.e. Asian) is someone favouring collective interest above individual rights, obedient to authority, balanced materialistic and hard-working, have been exposed as mostly government propaganda by the likes of Mahathir and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore (Khoo 2002; Hill 2000; Hilley 2001). It is safe to say that academic and semi-academic work supporting the Asian Model and Asian Values theses (Bruton 1992; Hitchcock 1994; Sie Kok Hwa 1997 for example), with hindsight, contributed to this propaganda.

This points out the danger of consensus in debate. Whereas academic and societal consensus might be tempting because it reeks of objective or at least inter-subjective Truth, it obviously does not serve plurality. This in itself might be considered problematic for its propensity to stifle debate. After all, the self-validating character of knowledge implies that dissenting voices become increasingly marginalised the more voices subscribe to the dominant reading. Moreover, attempts to close-off the reading by Truth-claims are supported by the many observers and researchers reproducing the discourse. Academic researchers, to whom a status and propensity to 'discover Truth' has been ascribed in society, are especially susceptible to this problem. The result is that genuine open debate on an equal footing becomes more and more impossible. A dissenter is a maverick clinging on to views that are simply wrong.

Since theory is basically self-validating, external Truth offers no criterion for countering such processes. That does not mean that nothing can be said, however. Any theory has real implications, and these implications might be held to dismiss or support the theory. However, claiming that a theory is wrong means that the implications of a theory are at odds with one's interpretation. For example, the claim that liberalisation leads to development is clearly wrong when one adheres to the ethnicist conception of development. Thus, such discussions are about relative dominance of various rival theories. In the end, then, competition between theories will occur on political grounds. The more marginalised the criticaster and his or her reading, the less open debate will occur.

This might be considered a problem in itself already, if we value debate on the level of theory and basic conceptions. However, the political implications of a lack of plurality go significantly

¹⁰ Growth figures themselves contribute to a perception of development as growth, for example. Foreign investment flows are a prime example the way knowledge can work self-validating, as the sudden reversal in 1997 made all the more clear. In general, data have been collected and constructed by statistical agencies in order to reveal messages and are therefore social constructions themselves, no matter how trustworthy they might be (whatever that may mean). The way they are constructed contain certain biases, if only in the things that are not said. For example, Malaysian economic growth and government finances to an unknown extent rely on Petronas, the national oil company, in all kinds of direct and indirect ways.

beyond that. Since any theory/structuration is deterministic with regard to behaviour, dominance of a theory translates in dominance of some actions over others, and of some individuals over others. This has been quite obviously the case in the developmentalist, Asian Values debate. Societal consensus about values stressing the collective interest, obedience, consumerism and hard work are clearly strengthening the position of a government. In the name of Asian Values and Asian Democracy, the benevolent state was able to suppress all kinds of growth-obstructing western-imperialist nuisances like individual rights, opposition, and other-worldliness. Indeed, Malaysia under Mahathir made a decisively authoritarian turn, especially after 1987 (Khoo 1997). It is not far-fetched to say that non-pluralist economic and social science contributed actively to this process.

The political benefits of consensus

From this perspective, one might tend towards the position that social research is to break down dominant discourses. In order to foster open debate, it is important to counter attempts at closing-off discourses by claims of Truth or inter-subjective consensus. Thus, emancipation can be achieved in terms of awarding rival readings an equal footing on which to enter dialogue.

However, it should be noted that the consensus and national euphoria of the early 1990s, although it certainly contributed to the growing authoritarianism of the Mahathir administration, was not entirely negative. For one thing, development—albeit defined as within the discourse—occurred on an unprecedented level. For all the questionability of the objectives and the projects undertaken during the 1990s in Malaysia, this was a country making enormous strides towards those objectives. The very effective and—in ethnic terms—relatively inclusive constitution of social-economic mechanisms and power contributed significantly to that. The self-validating focus on the collective interest, the nationalism and the willingness to work together for the sake of increased consumption did pay off in terms of a specific kind of development. Moreover, Malaysia—and Asia in general—indeed emancipated, because the economic success did bring the kind of new equality in the global arena described by Deputy PM Anwar Ibrahim as the Asian Renaissance (Anwar 1996). In other words, although the increased uniformity of structuration and discourse brought authoritarianism and little room for dissent, it was effective in constituting social power in the first place. There was a truth for people on which to act.

The answer to the absence of plurality, therefore, ought not to be sought in the direction of post-modernism. Stripping down all texts of its external claim to authority and promoting ‘paralogy’, as Lyotard (1984) wants it, is not a way of stimulating emancipation and plurality. On the one hand, such a strategy of creating dissensus in which the small, local, contradictory voices are heard, undermining the unified systems of thought would contribute to knocking dominant

discourses from their pedestal (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000, 152-162). However, since this is mainly a destructive strategy, it does not amount to the bringing about of a plurality of truths. Rather than that, simply denying and undermining each and every truth claim will not create a dialogue between differing discourses, but will eventually lead to an anarchy in which no discourse exists. Determinism is about the idea and constitution of structures that prescribe human actions. A plurality of determinisms means a plurality of actions are possible; an absence of determinisms means no action is possible whatsoever. As Haugaard notes, countering attempts at destabilising discourse “performs an important functional need in preventing praxiological chaos, hence meaninglessness and the disintegration of the possibility of social power at the first level. However, this occurs at the expense of freedom” (Haugaard 2003, 94).

It is this that makes post-modernism objectionable to many methodologists; the prioritising of such freedom above emancipation and the existence of social power in the first place, which, moreover, is itself a questionable, political principle (e.g. Dow 2002). In the case of Malaysia, an absence of agreed objectives, social categories, instances of national, ethnic, or other kind of identity, or social structures such as government authority would perhaps contribute to more equality. It would bring about neither development in whatever definition possible, however, nor a genuinely open debate. In this sense, what post-modernism advocates amounts to distributing the presidential palace among the people, so that everyone ends up with some rubble of stone. Pluralism, by contrast, is about building several smaller palaces next to each other.

Such pluralism could be interpreted as positioning an alternative, consensual counter-methodology next to the epistemological violence of post-modernism, so that the two hold each other in balance. In this respect, pluralism could be motivated by the principles of freedom, emancipation and even dissensus on the epistemological-ontological level. If the post-modern position can be accused of self-contradiction, being a methodology rejecting methodology (Dow 2002, 138), the pluralism advocated here can thus serve as a remedy for that ill. Academic research can contribute to pluralism by reflection upon its research material in terms of social and political meanings rather than in terms of it being true or not. While the developmentalist ideology and the Asian Values that came with it might have ‘truly’ existed in Malaysia, if seen from within the discourse, they were not all there was nor could have been. It is the task of social science to reflect upon what is presented as fact, exposing its political implications, and positioning rival facts against it in order to foster dialogue. Neither blindly subscribing to a dominant view, such as the Asian Values-authors have done, nor tearing down all attempts to say anything is the way to do so.

Conclusion

This paper has retraced the development of the development debate in Malaysia in the 1980s and 1990s. It has been shown that the plurality that characterised this debate in the 1980s has largely gone lost in the 1990s. One dominant discourse came about suppressing all others and stifling debate.

The implications of such a loss of plurality are profound. We have argued that social concepts, such as development, have no existence prior to the moment of knowing. For that reason, such concepts derive their meaning from the theoretical structures in which they are known and created. That makes a concept like development deterministic in that it implies and prescribes certain structures in social behaviour. The constitution of such structures is essentially contingent in the sense that other ways of structuration had been possible as well. In this sense, a loss of epistemological plurality means a loss of ontological plurality; if there is only one accepted knowledge, then no other worlds, objectives and courses of action are possible. Social reality is determined by this knowledge.

Discussing the development of the debate in Malaysia, we have argued that a decline in pluralism indeed translates in a decline in political choice. Such dominance occurs not only in terms of suppressing rival points of view, beliefs and ideology, but it also occurs on the level of direct political interests. Determinism, in the sense that action follows structures within a given epistemology, turns into a negation of free choice once there is only one determinism available. Indeed, authoritarian monopolisation of truth and power has coincided with and built upon the rising dominance of the developmentalist discourse in Malaysia. Moreover, academic work has actively contributed to this by subscribing to the then prevailing consensus of Asian Values and Asian Models.

A pluralism of determinisms is therefore to be advocated, on political grounds. However, it should be noted that such a pluralism is to be taken literally. Pluralism aims at promoting plurality. It does not advocated an anarchic attitude, in which any position is immediately undermined in the name of freedom and paralogy. Academists can and need to contribute to this by performing reflective research, setting the stage for equal dialogue. Thus, and only thus, development may mean the most to the greatest number of people.

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