

Asia and Europe Should Cooperate Anew

Report >
General

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There is an urgent need and a real opportunity for closer Asian-European cooperation in international affairs in the light of the Bush administration's aggressive unilateralism since the 11 September attacks. Yet, importantly, such cooperation must not be based on one-time colonialism but, rather, on its rejection. That was the timely and important message given by professor Jomo Kwame Sundaram from the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur at the recent IAS public lecture 'Asian-European relations after September 11'.

By J. Thomas Lindblad

Jomo, arguably the foremost economist in Malaysia today, is an outspoken personality with a critical mind, which on more than one occasion has brought him into open conflict with the Mahathir government. A key theme in his Amsterdam lecture was the fate of the Asian values debate, which demonstrates how seemingly academic or intellectual arguments and concepts may – willingly or not – serve political agendas in a changing world. It is instructive to see how the very same Asian values, in particular the virtues of Confucianism, may be twisted around and used as explanations of widely different historical developments.

Slow economic growth in China was once attributed to Confucianism. The East Asian Miracle, so uncritically applauded by World Bank observers, was also ascribed to the unique Asian values of hard work and the prevalence of collective as opposed to individual interests. In the region itself, allegedly superior Asian values, as opposed to Western ones, were frequently applied to legitimize why democracy was lagging behind economic growth. Jomo wryly remarked that such reasoning is hardly convincing even when applied to relatively prosperous countries such as Singapore and Malaysia. Then came the Asian crisis. Asian values were then associated with corruption and cronyism and earmarked as the underlying cause of the collapse of several South-east and East Asian economies.

The economic recovery was hardly underway in most crisis-hit countries when the wider context changed abruptly in the wake of the 11 September attacks. According to Jomo, Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis provides a useful antidote to the 'potentially complacent triumphalism' of Fukuyama's 'end of history'. However, the Huntington thesis has above all offered 'some intellectual pretence at sophistication' for Western mobilization against its enemies. Polarization is furthered by the implied coalition between political Islamism and an economically strong East Asia and it is precisely against that background that a closer and redefined cooperation between Asia and Europe is urgently needed. At this point, Jomo also mentioned the complicating factor of resurging racism in Europe in response to recent immigration.

The lecture and subsequent discussion covered a wide range of topics of

Professor Jomo Kwame Sundaram

Professor Jomo Kwame Sundaram was born in Penang in 1952 and educated as a political scientist at Yale and Harvard. He received his PhD from Harvard University in 1978 and joined the staff of economists at the Universiti Kebangsaan in Kuala Lumpur. In 1982 he moved to the University of Malaya where he was appointed full professor twice, in 1986 in Human Development and in 1992 in the Faculty of Economics and Administration. He worked intermittently as an expert consultant for numerous international organizations, including the ILO and the World Bank. His list of publications embraces numerous monographs, including several Malay-language textbooks in economics, scores of edited works and countless academic articles.

A major monograph, first published in 1986, is entitled *A Question of Class: Capital, the State and Uneven Development in Malaya*, which encapsulates the juxtaposition of social history, economic growth and state policies that is characteristic of his academic work. The monograph *Growth and Structural Change in the Malaysian Economy*, dating from 1990, serves as the standard assessment of the New Economic Policy in Malaysia. A more recent monograph, *Malaysia's Political Economy: Politics, Patronage and Profits* (1997) offers a critical examination of the nexus between politics and economics in Mahathir's fast-growing Malaysia. In cooperation with colleagues in adjacent countries, Jomo has also contributed to strengthening a regional perspective on economic developments in Southeast Asia. The co-authored *Southeast Asia's Misunderstood Miracle: Industrial Policy and Economic Development in Thailand, Malaysia and Indonesia* (1997) is an especially important work in this vein.

Another important edited volume is *Tigers in Trouble: Financial Governance, Liberalisation and Crises in East Asia*, which already appeared within one year after the eruption of the Asian crisis. Jomo's introduction to the volume anticipated much of the subsequent literature on the causes of the Asian crisis.

jomoks@yahoo.com

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immediate interest to recent and current economic and political developments in Southeast and East Asia. Topics included the various explanations of the Asian crisis, IMF policies during the crisis, and even internal developments in Mahathir's Malaysia. Jomo's approach to these issues was one of political economy, and was not confined to the realms of political science or economics alone. This was, in particular, illustrated by his examples

of the use and abuse of a concept such as 'Asian values' for political purposes, and his emphasis on the interaction between politics and economics in understanding both the causes of the Asian crisis and the policies adopted to overcome it. ◀

Dr J. Thomas Lindblad teaches economic history at Leiden University and is an IAS fellow presently working on the transition of the Indonesian economy between the 1930s and 1960s. He is also *Insular Southeast Asia* editor for the IAS Newsletter.

j.t.lindblad@let.leidenuniv.nl

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The lecture by Jomo was organized by the IAS at the International Institute for Social History (IISG) and chaired by Patricia Spyer, newly appointed Professor in the Anthropology of Indonesia at Leiden University. Two commentators, the financial journalist Tjabel Daling and economic historian J. Thomas Lindblad, sparked off the discussion.