

The Politics of Multiculturalism

Review >
Southeast Asia

Pluralism means a belief in more than one entity or a tendency to be, hold, or do more than one thing. This literal meaning is common to all the political and social applications of the concept of pluralism but has been applied in contexts so varied that, in practice, pluralism can be seen as having a multitude of separate meanings. Nonetheless, each of these ways of interpreting pluralism has had at least some influence on its primary contemporary meaning: that the pluralist model of society is one in which the presence of groups is of the political essence.

By Marie-Aimée Tourres

There are perhaps no better examples than Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore to illustrate this concept of pluralism and open the debate. However, despite this, most writers take Western industrialized societies as the exclusive point of departure for their discussion. Thus by compiling the work of fourteen specialists, all Asian and based in Asia, Robert Hefner has attempted to challenge this approach in his book, entitled *The politics of multiculturalism. Pluralism and citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*,

which results from study conducted in the region between 1998 and 2000. The book aims to answer the question of how to achieve civility and inclusive citizenship in deeply plural societies. In examining the discourse and practice of pluralism across different spheres, and by trying to understand the conditions that facilitate its resolution, Hefner (both editor and contributor) hopes to address the serious shortcomings in current literature on citizenship and civic participation. The issue tackled is not an easy one and the concepts discussed far from static. Using a comparative knowledge approach, the new faces of pluralism

are examined from the point of view of politics, gender, markets, and religion. Most of the contributors base their analysis on J.S. Furnivall's general approach and works. This British administrator and political writer introduced Western readers to the idea of plural society, which he describes as a society that comprises 'two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit'. Certain distinctive characteristics in the political and economic spheres of life in plural societies distinguish them from more homogeneous societies. The most fundamental difference is 'the lack of common social

will', which has two far-reaching consequences: it leads to an emphasis on economic production, and to a fragmentation of social demand (the rationale for organizing consumption). According to Furnivall, the ethnic and religious 'sections' making up society are so different from one another that they have little in common apart from their market exchange. Consequently, he could not envisage a political structure capable of ensuring stability within a plural society because he regarded the constituent societies as being, by their very nature, unable to cope with the problem of piecing their societal puzzle into a unified whole.

Against this background, the various contributors help to demonstrate why today's Indonesia, Malaysia, and even more Singapore would, unquestionably, have stunned Furnivall. Analysed from a historical-structural perspective, and theory led, the book has a predominantly academic approach, which may

discourage some readers. Nevertheless, the fact that the contextualized approach is complemented by longitudinal perspective works in the book's favour. As an ancient Asian proverb says, 'to understand the present, one should scrutinize the past; without the past, the present would not be what it is'.

Indeed, the impact of European colonialism on Southeast Asian heritage was the exacerbation and consolidation of ethno-religious differences. With influx of Chinese and Indian migrants into the Malay peninsula, during the nineteenth century, at a time when Britain was consolidating its colonial rule, administrative apparatus was introduced to facilitate socio-political rationalization and segregation of what was, and still is, a highly heterogeneous and polyglot population. Different groups were formally categorized according to ethnicity; a classification that post-colonial Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have retained. The con-

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mentation on the issue, the underlying reason is that the rigidly oppositional identities along ethnic lines, characteristic of plural societies and, in this particular case, created by the Europeans were left intact. As the lack of common ground and will among the different groups served the political and economic interests of the European colonizers, nothing was done to encourage the abolishment of this man-made rigidity.

The notion of citizenship, which usually refers to a status conferred by law, came to be of vital importance in a context in which ethnicity differentiated citizenship. There may be an ambiguous relationship between the idea of ethnic membership and that of citizenship, but Malaysia and Singapore's history shows how membership of a community can be advanced as a qualification for citizenship.

Although religion never acts purely as a substitute for economic forces, the

upsurge of Islamic consciousness at the end of the twentieth century has acquired a momentum of its own, promoting a rise in national sentiments and forcing serious contemplation of some identity-politics, resulting in the progress achieved in the socio-economic field being compromised. Hefner mentions recent examples illustrating this phenomenon: 'At the beginning of the Asian economic crisis in 1997-1998, Mahathir appealed to Malaysian Chinese to purchase shares in Malay-owned business threatened with bankruptcy.' The contrast with Suharto of Indonesia could not be more striking. In the final months of 1997 and early 1998, Suharto and his children responded to the growing economic crisis by accusing Chinese Indonesians of having masterminded the economic crisis so as to bring Suharto down. They did so, this propaganda claimed, because Suharto is a Muslim and because "these enemies

of Islam" do not want a majority-Muslim country to become strong' (p.33).

But Hefner remains optimistic. As economies grow and societies differentiate, there follows a proliferation of new societal organizations and relationships. Rather than opposing civil forces in society, the state must work with them. It is on this last point that Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore have the most to teach us.

Does the book have shortcomings? The excellent editor's introduction is the longest essay in the book, running to no less than fifty-seven pages. The reader would have benefited from an introduction simply explaining the organization of the book and the logic of its presentation. As it is now, it is not easy for the reader to see what links individual chapters, despite the umbrella-theme of multiculturalism. Essentially this volume offers a compilation of good academic contributions, but one which lacks a coherent voice. <

- Hefner, Robert W. (ed.), *The Politics of Multiculturalism, Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press (2001), pp. 312, ISBN 0 8248 2487 3

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