Theory, National Policy and the Management of Minority Cultures

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Our examination of the ideas shaping theory, policy and administrative approaches to majority-minority relations will emphasize the role of implicit, unrecognized Anglo-American liberal ideologies in delimiting the parameters of discussion. The theories that provide a basis for national policy are grounded in *laissez faire* ideology about the inevitable assimilation of minority cultural groups through individualism and the "natural" functioning of market forces. Policies addressing the economic, educational and political aspirations of minority cultures assume that the due process of the established social order naturally results in harmonious relations among all groups and distributes rewards to any deserving individual who exerts efforts to better himself. This ideology essentially asserts that society operates most effectively when individuals or groups are given the moral privilege of gradual adjustment and mobility. We will pursue this theme of the ideological roots of theory and policy in the next two sections of the paper by considering some general theoretical issues and by critiquing theories relevant to national policies. In the third and fourth sections we will analyze the assimilation model and aspects of national policy derived from this model, with attention to the management of. minority relations using illustrative data from Malaysia.

General Theoretical Issues

The categories "nation" and "ethnic group" are integral to any discussion of national policies and minority cultures. Both categories are historically specific social constructions. European philosophers' invention of the doctrine of nationalism at the beginning of the nineteenth century created a new context of meaning for these categories (Kedourie 1960). Nation was not a predominant category among the pre-nineteenth century Europeans who

grouped themselves along lines of language, religion and region. The formation of unified nation states in Europe took place over the course of more than a century, a process culminating in major transformations of the continent's political geography after the First and Second World Wars. Nationalist ideology convinced Europeans that the only natural and legitimate basis for government was the nation state. This claim's appearance of self-evident truth is considerably diminished when subjected to critical examination, as Ernest Gellner (1964:147-50) argues. Nationalist movements, comprised of individuals and groups pushing to promote their own interest, have created nations where they did not exist, according to Gellner.

Contrary to the expectations of nineteenth century economic liberals and Marxists, nationalism confounded their theories which postulated subordination of social patterns to the exigencies of economic activities (Banton 1978:143). Nationalism's force and legitimacy in twentieth century politics was further enhanced by Woodrow Wilson's endorsement. At the Versaille Peace Conference he emphasized nationalism and self-determination as prerequisites of legitimate government and peace. The four principles of peace that Wilson enunciated included satisfaction of "all well-defined national aspirations". However, the notion of a people struggling to attain nationhood was highly ambiguous. The claims of minority cultures within the national borders of the victors of World War I were not to be accorded recognition as "national aspirations". Nor were colonial subjects to be regarded as peoples with legitimate claims to nationhood. The scope of such claims was restricted to the subject peoples of the defeated Austro-Hungarian and Ottoman Empires. The dismemberment of these empires was a major interest of the Allies of World War I.

Despite these contradictions, the doctrine of nationalism under Wilson's sponsorship was so influential, according to Banton (1978:143), that the result of the peace negotiations appeared to be the final triumph of nationalism, along with its enshrinement in the League of Nations as the most respectable of political principles. Its application to the post-World War I European political geography provided minorities with a new basis for making claims without establishing any definite means of renegotiating borders. World War II broadened the scope of nationalism by weakening political units such as colonial empires which denied self-determination to subject peoples. The expansion of nationalism accelerated by World War II defined the goal of independence as the formation of states that would participate in the United Nations, a new international community resurrected from the defunct League of Nations. The new nations which emerged from the dismantled colonial empires found themselves heirs to the problematic ideology of nationalism with their own new minority problems.

Ethnic groups, similarly with nations, come into existence through the social construction of reality. Banton (1978:150-1) has argued that human

groups have the tendency to take objective biological differences — sex, age, physical appearance, etc. — as bases for social categories elaborated beyond what is biologically required. Biologically-based social categories or constructions are used to legitimatize the division of labour and distribution of power. Social order is thus ideologically located within the natural order and made to appear as an immutable fact of life. Gender, ethnicity and nationalism are social constructions of this type which differentially relate groups of people to resources, economic roles and political power at the household, national and international levels of organization. The resulting inequalities are defined as rooted in nature, not easily amenable to change and therefore of an enduring objective character.

Extending this discussion of the social construction of categories as "natural" facts, we can view ethnic groups and nations as segmentary descent groups based on the principle of actual or putative lineage. These groups are mobilized in the course of opposition to outside groups. Ethnicity and nationalism presuppose contact with alien others. In this way, ethnic groups and nations are created through social interaction. Their reality is asserted and maintained through the formulation of ideologies and the mobilization of political power. Ethnic groups and nations acquire the appearance of enduring natural givens by the power of interest groups to impose their definition of social reality. These categories are objectified in public policy. The theories and national policies to be discussed next are based on the reification of these categories, ethnic group and nation.

Theories Relevant to National Policies

The various national policies concerning minorities in the countries around the world all presuppose particular ideologies about the nature of state and society. The notion of value consensus and the desirability of assimilating minorities are common to each of these national policies. The assimilation model which is the basis for much theory regarded by governments as relevant to public policy comprises three broad approaches: the race relations cycle, functionalism, and the psychological study of attitudes. The race relations cycle approach described by Robert E. Park (1921) proposes that relations move through the stages of contact, competition, conflict, accommodation and assimilation. The conflict that takes place over resources recedes as new distinctions based on achieved rather than ascribed status emerge. As groups accommodate and assimilate, according to this approach, class becomes more salient than minority group membership. Stanfield (1985) has raised a major criticism to this approach. Race relations cyclists fail to realize, as seen in minorities' experience of exclusion from influential decision-making positions in desegregated middle-class settings, that minority adoption of the dominant

group's culture alone does not render racism obsolete. Assimilation does not necessarily result in significant power sharing or entre to crucial social spheres.

Stanfield (1985) argues that conflict is presented with the race relations cycle approach only as a feature of collective behaviour without mention of the way conflicts are structured or individually coerced. Park describes the unity of the social group in terms of shared social traditions without reference to external oppositions. The race relations cycle approach is devoid of a conception of power. Issues such as the inheritance of social inequalities are overlooked. Park's neglect of the significance of political and economic power in social interaction is a particularly serious defect in this approach.

Functionalism also stresses shared values and emphasizes the common concerns that unify societies and the ways in which the concerns are manifested. This approach has only to a limited extent explored the material origins and dynamics of ethnicity and its role in creating stratification and differentiation in intergroup relations. Dollar's book, *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937), Powdermaker's *After Freedom: A Cultural Study on the Deep South* (1939), Myrdal's *An American Dilemma* (1944) are influential studies offering functionalist explanations of majority-minority relations in the United States. These studies depict the social system as a self-sustaining whole and explain discrimination in terms of its functions without addressing the problem of the origins and causes of racism.

The psychological study of attitudes directs attention away from conflicts of interest inherent within the social structure to an even greater degree than do the race relations cycle and functionalist approaches. *Laissez faire* liberal ideology is most fully expressed in psychological explanations of racism emphasizing the individual with prejudiced attitudes as the cause of discrimination (Hraba and Hoiberg 1983:384). The psychological approach is concerned with the effect of attitudes on behaviour and the measurement of attitude change. W. I. Thomas, who worked closely with Robert Park, proposed that positive attitude change would occur through increased interethnic association (Hraba and Hoiberg 1983:384). The contact hypothesis, as his idea came to be known, has been enthusiastically accepted by policy makers involved with the management of minority relations. The influence of the contact hypothesis on national policy will be discussed in further detail later as an aspect of the "race relations industry".

Conflict theories present an alternative approach to assimilation theories. This literature focuses on class-related issues such as the conditions associated with the formation of classes, the nature of elite ideologies and the relationship between elite and state interests. In this literature majority-minority relations are equated with class relations. Conflict theories have not been influential within the sphere of public policy. Structurally opposed interests are generally not recognized in the formulation of policy. Cox (1948), Rex (1970), Bash (1979) and others regard majority-minority relations as a special case of

stratification theory rather than as a separate field of study. Stanfield (1985) also suggests that a perspective drawing attention to inequality as an entrenched feature of industrial society would deflect attention away from the assimilation model.

The most provocative studies based on conflict theories have examined cultural pluralism, resource competition and ethnic polarization in Third World nation-states. Researchers have been more willing to use pluralistic and polarization models to explain majority-minority relations in the Third World than in advanced industrial nation-states. Stanfield (1985) speculates about the possibility that researchers unconsciously assume that because of the legacy of colonialism and neo-colonialism, minority-majority relations continue to influence the opportunity structures of the Third World but not those of mature industrial societies. This is an evolutionary assumption since it implies that Third World societies are at lower stages of development where ascribed characteristics determine opportunities for mobility. In advanced industrial states it is implied that ascribed status becomes obsolete and class eventually prevails.

Three Aspects of Assimilation Policy

The exploitative aspect of assimilation policy is a strong theme in various national policies towards minorities. For instance, Chinese policies towards the Muslim Turkic tribes of Xinjiang appear to be motivated by the intention of dominant groups to appropriate resources controlled by minority groups rather than eliminate social inequalities. In some cases, even the aesthetic cultures — crafts, costumes, performing arts — of the minority groups are treated as resources to be appropriated by the dominant group. When minority group aesthetic cultures are commoditized as income generating tourist attractions, cultures are appropriated as an economic resource. The "culture palaces" in Hainan and the minority culture center planned by the Taiwan government are cases in point. Through a policy of assimilation with preservation of selected aspects of minority cultures, the majority can commoditize the cultures of minority groups.

Another aspect of assimilation policy that has been employed by various governments relates to the practice of positive discrimination. This policy is usually implemented with the intention of sponsoring the social mobility of minority groups whose members are given a headstart in the professions and higher education through a quota system. Positive discrimination in the United States, known as affirmative action, has institutionalized quotas in university admissions and employment. Public debate over affirmative action's implications for "reverse discrimination" against the dominant group — White Anglo-Saxon males — reflects widespread uneasiness with the principle of

legally entrenching a quota system. The oppositing positions of Takaki (1982) and Glazer (1982) on affirmative action exemplify the contentiousness of this issue among American academics. Positive discrimination policies based on quotas have been pursued in Malaysia on a far broader scale than in the United States. The purpose of these quotas is to correct the under-representation of the Malay majority in education, the professions and business. The Chinese and Indian minorities perceive these quotas as racist discrimination and as full scale attack on the economic position of their communities. Although these quotas have generated intense resentment among the non-Malay minorities, there has been no academic debate whatsoever on this issue on Malaysia. In fact, public questioning of these quotas is legally defined as sedition and is a serious criminal offense. Suppression of all public debate is built into the implementation of these quotas.

A third aspect of assimilation policy concerns the actual management of ethnic interaction as it relates to the promotion of intergroup harmony and the reduction of intergroup tensions. In many ethnically heterogeneous countries, various government-appointed and voluntary bodies have been established to monitor changing levels of interethnic tension and to defuse local level conflicts on an ad hoc basis. These organizations have been conceptualized by Killian (1979) as the "race relations industry". In his comparison of the "industry" in Britain and the United States, Killian argues that the bureaucratization of race reforms poses new problems that may be counter-productive to the amelioration of majority-minority relations. He points out that the "race relations industry" is not a significant political force, thus suggesting that it is merely an instrument of government policies. Even though these agencies are not explicitly involved in the formulation of policy, they nevertheless are expected to be seen working towards the solution of racial and ethnic problems. Despite the various political and organizational constraints under which they work, the members of the "race relations industry" often project their image as indispensable experts in the settlement of racial crises. The maintenance of this image requires their understanding of, naive or otherwise, and the ability to put into practice various race relations theories related to assimilation and integration. It is in this context that the contact hypothesis is explicitly or implicitly used by these "experts" as guiding principle in the management of ethnic relations. We will now describe the public management of ethnic problems in Malaysia as an illustration of how government agencies translate social science theories into practical policies.

The Public Management of Race Relations: Malaysia

Malaysia is a multiethnic Southeast Asian nation comprising a peninsula

(known as West or Peninsular Malaysia) and two states — Sabah and Sarawak — on the island of Borneo (East Malaysia). On the peninsula, the politically dominant Malays are about 52 percent of the population, the Chinese about 36 percent, and the Indians about 11 percent. Aborigines, Eurasians and some Europeans make up the remaining 1 percent. In East Malaysia, the Kadazans are the majority in Sabah and the Ibans form the largest ethnic group in Sarawak. Both states are also populated by various ethnic minorities and large Chinese communities. Malaysia is governed by a coalition of ethnically based parties dominated by the United Malay National Organization (UMNO). Ethnic relations and politics in Malaysia have been widely documented and discussed by various researchers (e.g. Ratnam 1965, Means 1976, Nagata 1979). Our discussion will focus mainly on the management of ethnic problems in Peninsular Malaysia.

Since Malaysia attained independence from Britain in 1957, problems between the Malays and non-Malays centering on issues such as power sharing and ethnic privileges have been resolved through compromises made at the elite level. It was not until 1969 — the year when serious racial riots occurred in Kuala Lumpur — that the government decided to establish an agency responsible for improving ethnic relations. This was the Department of National Unity, (DNU Jabatan Perpaduan Negara) which was merged in 1972 with the Office of National Harmony (Pejabat Muhibah Negara) to become the Ministry of National Unity headed by the late Tun V. T. Sambanthan, a Cabinet Minister of Tamil ancestry. In 1969 when parliament was suspended, the DNU was directly under the control of the National Operations Council, the all powerful political body that governed the country under emergency regulations. The DNU's primary function during that period was to foster goodwill and cooperation among the various ethnic groups at the grassroots level in order to restore a semblance of understanding as an antidote to the bitterness engendered by the rioting and violence. Despite the tense situation, the DNU managed to organize some get-togethers, lectures and various intergroup activities in an effort to treat the symptoms of the larger conflict. When parliamentary democracy was officially restored in 1972, the DNU was raised to the level of a ministry to suggest its importance as a body concerned with the welfare of ethnic groups and their relationship with each other. In a sense, this ministry also performed a watch-dog function of overseeing the state of ethnic relations in the country as it was intricately linked to the problem of national security.

After two years its status was reduced to that of a board, since the government felt that the improved situation in the country no longer warranted the high cost of administering race relations programs at a ministerial level. As a board comprising a mixture of professionals, religious functionaries and some political dignitaries, its profile was visibly reduced to that of a minor arm of the Prime Minister's Department. In 1980 the Board of

National Unity was merged with the Secretariat of Neighbourly Principles (Urusetia Rukun Tetangga, URT) to be renamed the Department of National Unity but still under the direction of the Prime Minister's Department. URT was originally established in the early 1970s as a vigilante-like organization concerned with maintaining neighbourhood security. Residents in urban and suburban areas throughout the country were required by law to register with grassroots security units and to participate regularly in night patrols around neighbourhoods. By 1980 the government had recognized the deficiencies of this scheme and the poor response of the general public towards it. Instead of terminating URT, the government decided to redefine its role as part of the race relations program. It now exists as a division in the Department of National Policy.

The Department of National Unity is now a permanent feature of the government-sponsored "race relations industry" in Malaysia. It is headed by a director (presently, an Indian) who is advised by a special panel of professionals, government officials and local notables. In 1984 the Department was staffed by a multiethnic group of 452 Malaysians, 314 of whom were based in 14 state-level offices and 32 district-level offices. Its annual budget amounts to an astounding figure of M$15 million, two-thirds of which are spent on research and promoting goodwill among the various ethnic groups in Malaysia (Department's Annual Report 1984:6-15). The Department is organized into three divisions — Planning and Research, Community Relations, Administration and Finance. The planners and researchers in the Department perform vast functions ranging from policy related research to publications. Policy related research is either conducted by Department members or contracted to social scientists from local universities. The data collected on racial trends, such as organization memberships, interethnic marriages, etc., are used as social indicators for informing government decisions on race relations programs. In 1985 the Research Division began a nationwide Social Relations Monitoring System (SRMS) to study overall patterns of ethnic relations in the country. Department officials at the state level are required to submit monthly reports on local ethnic relations. These data are used by SRMS researchers to detect potential problem areas and to suggest solutions. This division also serves as an intermediary between ethnic groups with conflicting claims. In addition, it publishes a bimonthly newsletter and an occasional magazine in Bahasa Malaysia, and a biannual journal in English and Bahasa Malaysia.

The Community Relations Division is the implementational arm of the Department. It is further divided into two branches — Neighbourly Relations and Education. The former is the reorganized URT mentioned above, and its role is concerned with not only organizing neighbourhood security programs but also arranging sports meets, welfare activities, tea parties and festival celebrations to promote interracial harmony. The main tasks of the Education Branch concern the teaching of Bahasa Malaysia to non-Malays in the private

sector and conducting courses on the principles of neighbourliness, civics and citizenship rights to Malay and non-Malay adults. Department statistics showed that this branch had held more than 800 classes attended by more than 25,000 people in 1984. In addition, 304 preschool classes had been organized in 1984.

The Division of Administration and Finance is largely an internal servicing and auditing branch of the Department. Although its main function concerns systematic filing, public relations, appointments and finance, it is also involved to some extent in the training of teachers for preschool and adult classes.

The activities of the Department over the last 15 years, despite several changes in official status, suggest that the Malaysian government feels a vital need to monitor continuously the state of ethnic relations in the country. The surveillance activities of the Department obviously are related closely to the maintenance of national security, since occurrence of racial conflicts if left unchecked could easily develop into nationwide rioting that might result in political instability. It is in the implementation of neighbourhood and education programs that we see the implicit utilization of assimilation theory in the management of race relations. These programs are designed with the belief that close interaction between ethnic groups under pleasant circumstances will eradicate negative racial attitudes. An official from the Department has even commented that the spread of ethnic prejudices could be successfully controlled by early education in racial understanding, hence the Department's commitment to preschool programs. Although some critics have described these programs as mere cosmetic treatment of a larger program rooted in the unequal distribution of privileges, their impact on race relations in Malaysia has not been fully determined. It is clear, however, that these programs will continue to function as part of an established "race relations industry" that is decontextualized from the more sensitive concerns and volatile aspects of Malaysian ethnic politics.

Conclusion

There are few countries in the world today that do not have problems with minority ethnic groups. Indeed, from the small nation-state of Singapore to the large republic of the Soviet Union, these problems have promoted government officials to formulate explicit policies on the management of ethnic minorities. These policies have ranged from complete subjugation to benign neglect. In the years following World War II, the rapid professionalization of the social sciences has contributed to the receptivity of policy-makers towards sociological theories of assimilation and integration. In other words, social science approaches are sometimes suffused with ideologies that are

somewhat consonant with the policy perspectives of government officials. In some cases, government policymakers are individuals with advanced training in the social sciences. An analysis of the origins of minority group policies, their implementation, and their impact on the wider society must include not only the historical context but also the contemporary role of the social sciences in social reforms. Social policies towards minority groups in the modern world represent a juncture of common-sense thinking, political ideology and sociological theories. To understand their evolution therefore requires a sensitivity towards these three levels of thought and action.

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142

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