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To cite this article: Zawawi Ibrahim (1983) Malay peasants and proletarian consciousness, Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars, 15:4, 39-35, DOI: [10.1080/14672715.1983.10409040](https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1983.10409040)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14672715.1983.10409040>



Published online: 05 Jul 2019.



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Malay Peasants and Proletarian Consciousness

by Zawawi Ibrahim

Introduction

The Malay peasantry and aspects of its transformation in relation to colonialism and capitalist penetration have attracted considerable attention among western and local scholars alike.¹ Despite the overconcentration on “peasants” by such scholars, hardly any systematic analysis has yet been undertaken on the issue of peasant ideology,² let

1. See for instance works by M. G. Swift, *Malay Peasant Society in Jelebu* (London: The Athlone Press, 1965); idem, “Economic Concentration and Malay Peasant Economy,” in *Social Organisation: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth*, ed., M. Freedman (London: Cass, 1967); Raymond Firth, *Malay Fisherman* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967); S. Husin Ali, “Land Concentration and Poverty among the Rural Malays,” *Nusantara*, No. 1, 1972; idem, *Malay Peasant Society and Leadership* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1975); H. M. Dahlan, “Micro-Analyses of Village Communities: A Study of Underdevelopment,” *The Nascent Malaysian Society* (Kuala Lumpur: University Malaya, 1976); G. Lee, “Commodity Production and Reproduction Amongst a Malaysian Peasantry,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 3, No. 4, 1973; W. Richards, “Underdevelopment of West Malaysia: A Survey,” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, No. 1, 1973; R. Bach, “Historical Patterns of Capitalist Penetration in Malaysia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 6, No. 4, 1976; Jomo K. S., “Class Formation in Malaya: Capital, the State and Uneven Development,” doctoral dissertation, Harvard, 1977; Lim Teck Ghee, *Peasants and Their Agricultural Economy in Colonial Malaya 1874-1941* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1977); Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, “The Development and the Underdevelopment of the Malaysian Peasantry,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1979; Lim Mah Hui, “Ethnic and Class Relations in Malaysia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 10, No. 1 & 2, 1980; Fatimah Halim, “Rural Labour Force and Industrial Conflict in West Malaysia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 1981; Shaharil Talib Robert & A. Kaur, “The Extractive-Colonial Economy and the Peasantry: Ulu Kelantan 1900-40,” *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 1981; Zawawi Ibrahim, “Perspectives on Capitalist Penetration and the Reconstitution of the Malay Peasantry,” *Jurnal Ekonomi Malaysia*, No. 5, 1982; idem, “Pembangunan Masyarakat Tani Malaysia: Satu Analisis Struktural,” *Prisma*, edisi Bahasa Indonesia, forthcoming.

2. Though the theoretical work and synthesis is far from complete, there have been some recent attempts in this direction. See Clive Kessler, *Islam and Politics in a Malay State* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978); Halim Salleh, *Bureaucrats, Petty Bourgeois and Townsmen: An Observation on Status Identification in Kota Bharu* (Monash: Centre of Southeast Asian Studies, 1981); Shaharil Talib, “Voices From The Kelantan Desa 1900-1940,” *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 17, No. 1, 1973; James Scott, “Api Kecil Dalam Pertentangan Kelas,” *Kajian Malaysia*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1983; Zawawi Ibrahim & Shaharil Talib, “Neither Rebellions Nor Revolutions:

alone on emerging forms of consciousness among peasants who have been reconstituted into proletarians or other class categories. This is surprising considering the various socio-economic changes that have been generated by the logic of capitalist development in contemporary rural Malaysia. Moreover, whatever analysis of peasant ideology has come to the fore is often posed in terms of a rigid dichotomy between ethnicity and class. And because the Malaysian “plural society” is predominantly the main frame of reference used for such an analysis, Malay peasants would appear to be forever doomed to primordialism and ethnic consciousness. Little attention and theoretical focus is thus given to the interrelationship between class and non-class (ethnic) contents to show how they are articulated at the level of a specific ideological discourse.

The considerable focus on Malays as “peasants” is quite understandable since the bulk of the Malay population is usually associated with non-capitalist commodity production (smallholding rice and cash crop production, or fishing) and by and large is still living in village society. The British colonial policy in Malaya was primarily aimed at preserving the bulk of Malays in the peasantry and in the process also favored and facilitated the earlier develop-

Everyday Resistance of the Malay Peasantry Under Capitalist Domination,” *Ilmu Masyarakat*, No. 2, 1983; Zawawi Ibrahim, “Perspectives Towards Investigating Malay Peasant Ideology and the Bases of Its Production in Contemporary Malaysia,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, Vol. 13, No. 2, 1983; idem, “Investigating Peasant Ideology in Contemporary Malaysia,” *Senri Ethnological Studies*, forthcoming.

3. See Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, *RMK Tujuan dan Pelaksanaannya* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa, 1977); Afifuddin Hj. Omar, *Peasants, Institutions and Development in Malaysia: The Political Economy of Development in the Muda Region*, MADA Monograph, No. 36, 1978; Kamal Salih, “Rural-Urban Transformation, Development Policy and Regional Underdevelopment,” in Kamal Salih et. al., *Rural-Urban Transformation and Regional Under Development: The Case of Malaysia* (Nagoya: UNCIRD, 1978); David Lim, “The Political Economy in the New Economic Policy in Malaysia,” paper presented to the Third Colloquium, Malaysia Society ASAA, University of Adelaide 22-24 August, 1981; Benjamin Higgins, “Development Planning,” in eds. E. K. Fisk & H. Osman-Rani, *The Political Economy of Malaysia* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1982).

ment of non-Malay immigrants as proletarians in the major commercial-capitalist mining and plantation sectors of the economy. A crucial aspect of this process is that their proletarianization had no structural links with the indigenous peasantry.

Notwithstanding the above historical factors, it would be incorrect to assume that the socio-economic changes generated by colonialism and post-colonial development (especially with the increasing thrust on rural development)³ have not also affected the peasant location of Malays in the social formation. Though still a recent process, it has been noted that "proletarianization" has "slowly affected the Malays."⁴

This paper is an attempt to capture an instance of the recent proletarianization of the Malay peasantry. An obvious but important difference from the earlier (predominantly non-Malay) proletarianization process is that these new proletarians are generated from within, and are both structurally and culturally linked to the indigenous peasantry. The main thrust of the paper is to analyze by way of an empirical case study the contents of class ideological practice among Malay peasants who have recently been affected by such proletarianization, and have since moved to work and live as wage-laborers in plantation society.

Explaining Class Ideological Practice: Theoretical Issues and Framework

The present issue arises from a theoretical concern in Marxist analysis about the relationship between class at the level of production relations and class at the level of ideological practice. Its genesis stems not from Marx *per se*⁵ but rather from a vulgar materialist conception of the reflection and mechanical determination of superstructure by the material base. Hence when a disjuncture exists at the level of consciousness or ideological practice which does not seem to conform to "some infrastructure that logically precedes it," such an ideology "thus becomes . . . imaginary, or epiphenomenal."⁶

4. S. Husin Ali, "Some Aspects of Change, Mobility and Conflict in Post-Merdeka Malaysia," *Manusia dan Masyarakat*, No. 1, 1972, p. 53. Also see Kamal Salih et. al., *Laporan Pemulihan Kampung-kampung Tradisional Dara*, Vols. 1 & 2 (Penang: Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1981); Shukur Kassim, "Land Reforms: Options and Realities," paper presented to the Seventh Convention, Malaysian Economic Association, Kuala Lumpur, Jan. 18-20, 1983; Zawawi Ibrahim, "A Malay Proletariat," doctoral dissertation, Monash, 1978; Fatimah Halim, op. cit.

5. According to Rude, Marx's "material being" vs. "superstructure" relationship "becomes an endless conundrum and has been a hotly debated theme, susceptible to varying interpretations since Marx first penned his famous phrase in the *Critique of Political Economy*. Taken literally, the formulations he then used appear to justify those 'determinists'—and critics of Marx—who have insisted that the 'superstructure' (including consciousness and ideas) must, according to Marxist theory, be a mere and a direct reflection of the base from which it emanates. Others, however, have argued that ideas and ideology, while in the first instance owing to their existence to man's material being, can at crucial moments in history, assume, temporarily at least, an independent role. While Marx's earlier 'philosophical' formulae were either ambivalent or appeared to favour the first interpretation, there seems little doubt that both Marx's and Engel's historical writing—*The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Peasant War in Germany*, for instance, lend support to the second," George Rude, *Ideology and Popular Protest* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), pp. 18–19.

6. Joel Kahn, "Explaining Ethnicity," *Critique of Anthropology*, Vol. 4, No. 16, 1981, p. 49.

Kahn suggests that such an approach must be abandoned, "because economic and political structures are not directly perceivable and because ideological systems are themselves semi-autonomous—the product of their own internal properties as much as of economic and political constraints."⁷ In his reformulation of the problem, Laclau questions the assumption of a necessary correlation between class existence at the structural and the superstructural level: "Classes are poles of antagonistic production relations which have no necessary form of existence at the ideological and political levels."⁸ Thus the disjuncture is not essentially at the level of concrete experience but of theory itself, as has been neatly put by Norton: "Theory of the nature of inequalities in relations of production is not ipso facto a theory of consciousness and action. . . . Consciousness is a distinct domain of social reality determined partly by material interests, but in ways not necessarily complying with a logic deduced by an analyst of class."⁹

At the level of subjective understanding, there was a dominant proletarian ethos which drew its sources from the fact of selling labor-power. The Malay term *tenaga*, literally meaning "strength," handles the concept of labor-power, and this common role "we are all selling labor-power" (*kita sama-sama jual tenaga*) was then perceived to define their daily existence and the basis of their relations with those above them and among themselves.

Most of these above authors recognize the flexibility of consciousness and action in relation to class determinations. Thus while the ability of human beings to act as "subject-incumbents of specific class positions" is still premised on their formation "as class subjects by class ideologies" which are analytically defined on the basis of production relations, these "class ideologies," however, "exist in various kinds of articulation with non-class ideologies."¹⁰ In other words, at this level of operation, there may be no necessary logic why non-class values or contents should be *totally* displaced by class elements.

Laclau, in his work on ideology, distinguishes two central contradictions in the social formation—class contradiction and the "power-bloc vs people" contradiction (giving rise to "class interpellation" and "popular democratic interpellation" respectively)—and on this basis, as

7. Joel Kahn, "Ideology and Social Structure in Indonesia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 20, 1978, p. 104.

8. Ernesto Laclau, *Politics and Ideology in Marxist Thought* (Norfolk: Lowe & Brydone, 1977), p. 159.

9. R. Norton, "Ethnicity and Class in the Politics of Post-Colonial Societies," paper presented to the "Ethnicity and Class Conference," Wollongong, Victoria, August, 1981, pp. 4-5.

10. Goran Therborn, *The Ideology of Power and the Power of Ideology* (London: Verso Press, 1980), p. 72.

serts that the ideological sphere cannot be reduced to a direct expression of class interests. What may occur is that these popular-democratic (or non-class) ideologies (interpellations) are articulated with class ideological discourses, which then becomes the basis of political action promoting class objectives. As Laclau states it:

*Every class struggles at the ideological level simultaneously as class and as the people, or rather, tries to give coherence to its ideological discourse by presenting its class objectives as the consummation of popular objectives.*¹¹

Classes exist at the level of the ideological and political in a process of articulation and not of reduction. . . . Articulation requires, therefore, the existence of non-class contents—interpellations and contradictions—which constitute the raw material on which class ideological practices operate.¹²

The above reformulation, hinging on the process of articulation, is not only a more useful theoretical pursuit than the rather purist search for some idealized notion of class consciousness¹³ or a resort to a false consciousness type of explanation, but is also an approach which lends itself more readily to operationalization at the level of empirical inquiry and investigation. It gives cognizance to the fact that at the level of concrete experience, class subjects are also people,¹⁴ and that as people they also have other non-class ideational resources (universal, cultural or ethnic) with which class ideology can exist in various forms of articulation.

With regard to the theoretical analysis of peripheral capitalist formations, the application of the concept of articulation at the level of ideological discourse seems a logical development of a concept whose theoretical usefulness has hitherto been confined mainly at the level of structural analysis. Its theoretical application at this level has drawn attention to the various ways in which pre/non-capitalist modes are articulated with the dominant capitalist mode of the social formation,¹⁵ and has generated a more

satisfying answer than the Frankian assertion to the problematics posed by the “conservation-dissolution” effects of capitalism.¹⁶ The extension of this concept and its usefulness beyond its normal structural terrain, however, has yet to be developed more systematically.

Strikes, though, infrequent, were not an uncommon form of protest among this lower class community. What is interesting to note is that the period before rather than after the union was officially recognized saw more of these strikes on the plantation. The official union line is not to encourage strikes amongst its members, but to pursue a gradualistic approach to the problems of industrial relations, based on negotiation and collective bargaining.

Apart from Laclau, whose contribution has already been examined above, Taylor¹⁷ is one of the few who have come closest in attempting to grapple with the problem of articulation at the ideological level of the peripheral formation. In the context of the “restricted and uneven development” of capitalism in such a formation, Taylor recognizes that the conservation-dissolution effects of capitalism occur at both the economic as well as the ideological level. What can be implied here is that at *both levels* of the formation, there is a process of articulation of modes of production (capitalist and non-capitalist) at work. At the ideological level, Taylor, for instance, draws attention to the elements of “co-existence” and “inter-penetration” of ideologies generated from the different modes of production.¹⁸

In this case study, the views by Laclau and Taylor are taken as complementary to one another, and should be combined into a single framework. The analysis herein points to the limitations of a theoretical perspective which attempts to reduce the emerging proletarian ideology simply to a reflection of the material base. It is therefore suggested, following Laclau, that the synthesis at the ideological level should not be seen as one in which class has displaced *all* other non-class values. Rather the existence of class at this level must be conceptualized as being in a process of articulation which requires the existence of non-class contents. In the context of the restricted and uneven development of peripheral capitalist formation it is also essential, as is evident in Taylor’s work, to view this process as one which is also integrally related to the articulation of

11. Laclau, op. cit., p. 109.

12. Ibid, p. 161.

13. As Shivji remarks: “In fact classes hardly become fully class conscious except in situations of intense political struggle. Class consciousness does not fully draw upon individuals until they are locked in political battles Actually such conclusions are not only too easy to arrive at by interviewing a few hundred workers in non-revolutionary situations and by computing unfavorably answers as evidence that workers are not class conscious,” Issa Shivji, *Class Struggles in Tanzania* (London: Heinemann, 1976), p. 8.

14. According to Rude, Gramsci has, for instance, already argued that “attention must also be paid to the simpler and less structured ideas circulating among the common people, often ‘contradictory’ and confused and compounded of folklore, myth and day-to-day popular experience. So ideology and consciousness, in his view . . . are extended to embrace the ‘traditional’ classes, including the common people other than those engaged in industrial production, as well.” George Rude, op. cit. p. 9.

15. See Ernesto Laclau, “Feudalism and Capitalism in Latin America,” *The New Left Review*, No. 61, 1971; H. Wolpe, “Capital and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid,” *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 4, 1972; C. Meillassoux, “From Reproduction to Production,” *Economy and Society*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1972; idem, “The Social Organisation of the Peasantry: The Economic Basis of Kinship Relations,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1973; G. Dupre & P. Rey, “Reflections on the Pertinence of A Theory of the History of Exchange,”

Economy and Society, Vol. 2, No. 2, 1973; Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976); A. Foster-Carter, “The Mode of Production Controversy,” *The New Left Review*, No. 107, 1978.

16. C. Bettleheim, “Theoretical Comments,” in A. Emmanuel, *Unequal Exchange: A Study of Imperialism of Trade* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), Appendix 1, p. 298; John Taylor, *From Modernisation to Modes of Production* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid.

modes of production, albeit at the ideological level.¹⁹ Hence, the entry of peasant actors into a new (capitalist) set of production relations may not only generate a proletarian-class ideology which exists in a process of articulation with non-class ideologies, but that this process is *simultaneously* one in which capitalist ideological forms are also articulated with certain pre-capitalist/non-capitalist ideologies drawn from other modes.

This factory does not want people who have moral etiquette (*budi bahasa*). They only want people who can eat people! Workers have always told me that if they were to follow their emotions, they would have thrown him (a *pegawai*) into the boiler, so that he would turn to ashes.

A Brief Background to the Study

Research was focused on a community of Malay wage-laborers who were working and living on an oil-palm plantation in the southern district of Trengganu, Peninsular Malaysia. The whole plantation, being 30,000 acres in size and divided into five separate estates, had a predominantly Malay labor force of about 3,000, drawn mainly from different villages from the largely Malay populated east coast states (especially Trengganu and Kelantan) of the country. Altogether a period of one year was spent in the field (spread between 1972 and 1975), with the fieldwork being concentrated on the community residing in the main workers' compound (*kongsi*) of the central administrative area of the whole plantation complex. At the time of research, the compound had an estimated population of 1,500 residents, consisting mainly of unskilled field (both contract and check-roll/or direct) and factory workers (for the oil palm mill).

The picture during the initial period of research in 1972, six years after the inception of the plantation, was a laboring force of relative instability. Since 1967 the company had been developing the plantation in a series of phases until it finally completed its expansion by the end of 1973. Most of its capital outlay was poured into this sector leaving the labor force to exist only on a minimal subsistence, but even during this period some stabilizing trend was already apparent amongst a small segment of the laboring populace. By 1972, a trade union plantation branch (under the aegis of the National Union of Plantation Workers or NUPW) was formed, though as yet unofficially recognized by the company. By the end of 1973, this body was finally elevated to full official status, initiating a new phase in the political development of the laboring community and at the same time also creating a more stabilizing influence on the existing labor force.

19. The above does not imply that in an advanced or central capitalist mode the other cultural or non-capitalist forms of consciousness will also disappear. It merely shows the problematics involved in assuming the correspondence between the material base and the superstructure; some non-capitalist ideological forms will continue to persist regardless of changing relations of production and in the context of any social formation.

Many of the workers could be traced back to past peasant economic activities, especially rice-growing, some rubber smallholding or tapping, fishing or a combination of any of these. The proletarianization of these workers could be attributed to the combination of several factors.

Firstly, capitalist penetration in Malaysian rural society had created the conditions for the "first freedom" to emerge, that is the separation of the producers from the ownership of or access to the means of production, land.²⁰ This was also combined with the problems of actualizing simple household reproduction in the context of a peasant economy under capitalist domination already beset by many inter-related factors of underdevelopment.²¹ What this essentially means is that capital determines the conditions of production and reproduction of the peasantry by making commoditization a crucial component in its reproduction cycle.²² Household units are put under pressure to find ways and means to produce exchange-values so as to underwrite both their personal and productive consumption (plus "ceremonial funds" and "rent"), the level of attainment being dependent on their class positioning in the rural stratification system. Under these circumstances (especially punctuated by instances of "reproduction squeeze"), "poor"/landless and even the "middle" peasantry (owner-operators) may be forced to evolve different accommodative strategies, or to reconstitute the existing household division of labor, to allow different forms of labor mobility, including wage-laboring.

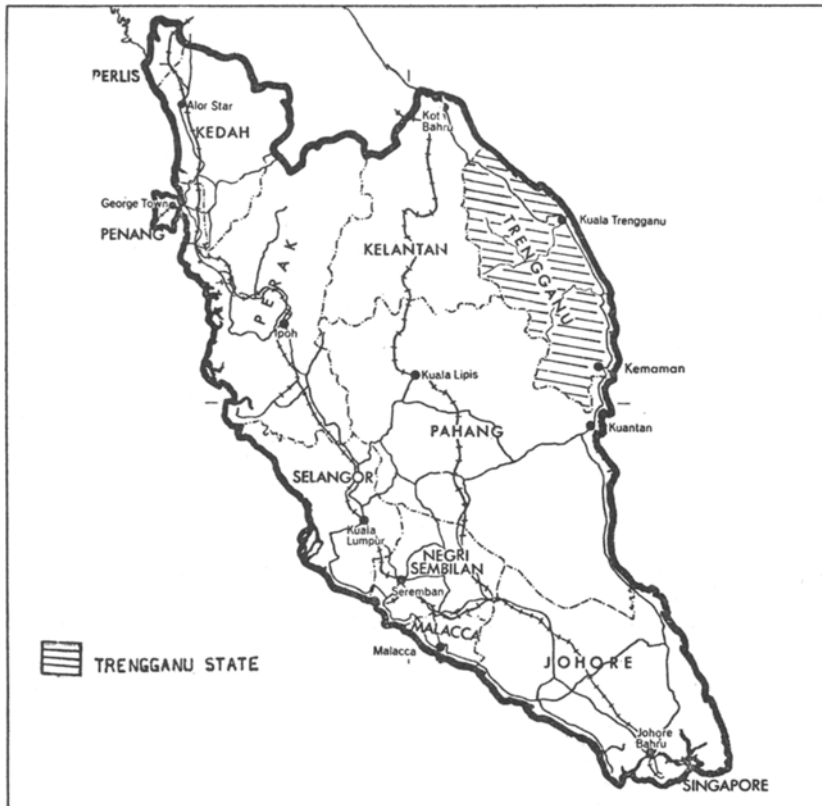
The plantation data reveals that most of the workers are from the poor or middle peasantry. At least over half of them (60 percent) are landless, while only 12 percent have their own land (*tanah sendiri*) and the rest (28 percent), though landless, have access to family land through their fathers who still own and work on the land. In order to come to grips with the problems of actualizing simple reproduction, many of them had already evolved certain strategies in the past. These include combining *padi* farming (mainly for consumption) with other cash-earning peasant or proletarian activities (this means that some of them were already "peasant-workers" or "semi-proletarians" before coming to the plantation). Where the data indicates that those from the middle peasantry had combined work on their own land or family land with work as tenant-operators, it clearly shows that poor or landless peasants are not the only class affected by the difficulties of actualizing simple reproduction. Only 18 percent of the total workers felt that they still had to maintain some form of economic obligation with their former peasant activities from their present occupation. This is an indicator of the non-

20. See Firth, op. cit.; Swift, 1967, op. cit.; S. Husin Ali, "Land Concentration . . .," op. cit.; Dahlan, op. cit.; Jomo, op. cit.; Zawawi, 1982, op. cit.

21. See Henry Bernstein, "Notes on Capital and Peasantry," *Review of African Political Economy*, Vol. 6, 1976. Also Dahlan op. cit.; Shamsul Amri Baharuddin, 1979, op. cit.; Hamid Abdullah, "Some Aspects of Rural Development in Trengganu, West Malaysia 1957-1969," M.A. dissertation, Universiti of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 1971; Yap Kim Lian & J. A. Dixon, *Socio-Economic Study of Padi Farmers in Besut Project Area of Trengganu* (Trengganu: Pejabat Daerah Besut, 1972).

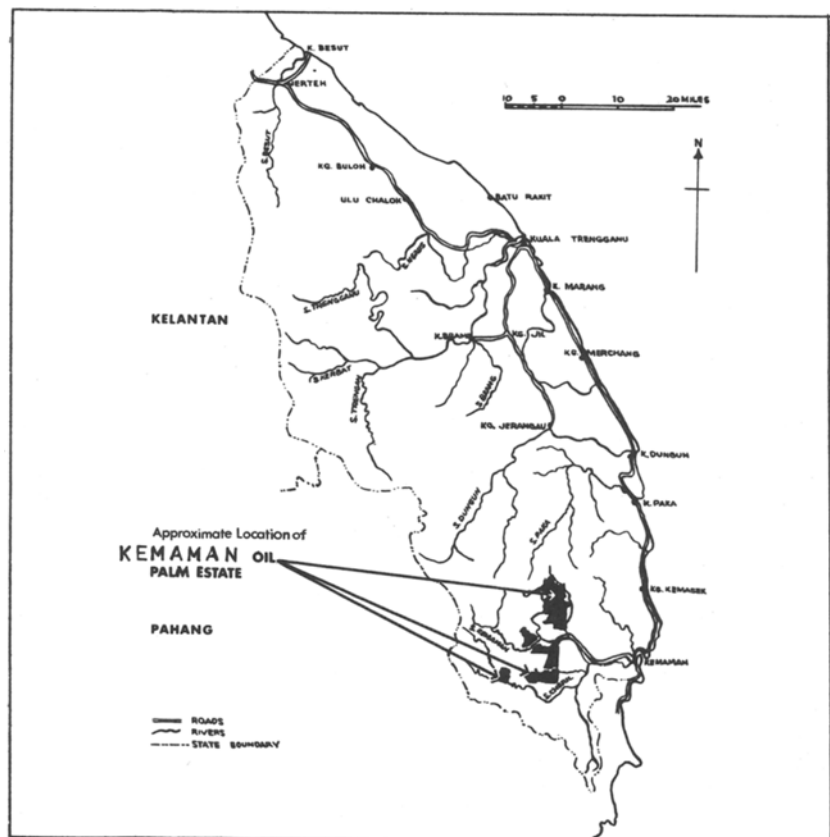
22. Bernstein, op. cit.; Zawawi, 1982, op. cit.

**Map of West Malaysia;
States, main towns, roads, rivers and railways**



Graphics courtesy of I. Zawawi

TRENGGANU STATE and the LOCATION of the KEMAMAN PLANTATION



viability of their past political economy²³ and may quicken the process towards their proletarianization.²⁴ Those who did not feel committed to maintain any form of economic obligation with the village economy felt that there were already enough people—siblings, parents or close relatives—on the land or in the village. Problems of the rural economy were characterized by the workers as “pressing” (*terdesak*), indicating features of poverty and underdevelopment in their old society, such as “no wealth,” “no land,” “no property,” “nothing in the village,” “not enough to eat in the village,” “low income,” “no work,” “poor,” and a general overall existence of “hardship” (*susah*).

The second factor which relates to proletarianization is the emergence under the post-colonial state of new development processes which create the conditions for the “second freedom”²⁵ to emerge, that is opportunities for the utilization of peasant labor as wage labor. In the colonial period, these outlets, though available, became primarily identified with non-Malay immigrant labor rather than the indigenous peasantry. Given the worsening conditions of the peasantry and the situation in Malaysia where the post-colonial state has embarked on a role which not only mediates but also organizes productive capital in land development projects,²⁶ those peasants who have been affected most by capitalist penetration will increasingly be drawn into the proletarian avenues being created.

The plantation studies herein emerged as a result of the state’s attempt (in this particular case, Trengganu) to re-organize its land resources for large-scale commercial agriculture in order to bring in revenue for its lagging economy. Under colonialism Trengganu suffered from uneven development and was initially insulated from the mainstream “modernization” processes because it lacked tin and rubber, the two major revenue-making raw materials characteristic of the richer Malaysian states. By 1921, iron ore had become an important source of state revenue, but by 1964 its production began to drop. Faced with the eventual closing down of its iron-ore mine in Dungun, the state had to turn to developing its expanse of untapped land resources which had been found to be suitable for the growing of an export crop, oil palm.

23. For further facts and details on the socio-economic conditions of the Trengganu peasantry, see E. Fisk, *The Economics of Handloom Industry in the East Coast of Malaya*, monographs of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, 32, 1959; *1960 Agricultural Census*. (Malaya: Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives); Firth, op. cit.; Hamid Abdullah, op. cit.; Yap & Dixon, op. cit.; Zawawi, 1978, op. cit.

24. G. Arrighi, “International Corporation, Labour Aristocracies, and Economic Development in Tropical Africa,” in ed. R. Rhodes, *Imperialism and Underdevelopment* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), p. 233.

25. In the classical usage, “second freedom” refers to a situation where producers freed from their means of production (i.e. the first freedom) are no longer tied either as slaves, serfs, etc. But such a situation also implies the emergence and development of conditions in society which can utilize and realize the initially “free” labor (e.g. the landless) as wage-labor rather than being tied to the land as tenants or share-croppers.

26. Hamid Abdullah, “The Trengganu State Economic Development Corporation: A Study of Its Role in Land Development,” *Nusantara*, Vol. 4, No. 4, 1973; D. Guyot, “The Politics of Land: Comparative Development in Two States of Malaysia,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 44, No. 3, 1971; Kamal Salih, et. al., 1981, op. cit.; Higgins, op. cit.

In 1965, a bureaucratic apparatus of the state, the State Economic Development corporation (SEDC), was formed to centralize operations. But, emerging in relatively poor Malaysia, SEDC became heavily reliant on capital from outside. In developing the state’s land resources, the Corporation opted for a capitalist style of land development, as was already evident from its own profit-making Sungai Tong Oil Palm Plantation venture.²⁷ The plantation under study represents a similar style of land development; this time the SEDC merely acted as a “landlord” who subleased the land which was to be developed by Chinese capital from the metropolitan neo-colonial centers of Singapore and Kuala Lumpur. Shares in the “ownership” of the planted acreage were later fanned out to the “public,” but only members of the private sector, the salariat and other professional occupational groups who could afford the high financial cost of investment have been the main beneficiaries. The peasantry, on the other hand, have been relegated to being merely sellers of labor power.²⁸ Thus even the initial conditions for the creation of the “second freedom” were at the expense of the peasantry.

The Structural Context of Ideological Production

A pre-requisite for any analysis of ideology must first come to terms with the structural context in which such an ideology is produced. In this respect, the plantation must essentially be seen as “a class-structured system of organisation”²⁹ in which “the basic distinction between owners and workers are supported by a complex system of political and legal sanctions.”³⁰ And since

*Authority and control are inherent in the plantation system. . . , the authority structure that characterises the pattern of economic organisation extends to social relationships. So we find that the plantation community is one with an inherently rigid system of social stratification.*³¹

In short, the plantation is an economic organization which is organized around the control of its labor force for the appropriation of surplus value in the productive process. It entails a rigid demarcation between those who own the means of production (or those who control labor) and those who sell their labor-power. In modern plantations (such as the one in this case study), the class of owners may be absent from the immediate stratification system, and their control may be mediated by an administrative bureaucracy with its own hierarchy which permeates almost all aspects of social relations on the plantation. It is only by this mode of authority structure that labor can be controlled and organized for production.

For the Malay workers, this class basis of organization defined their role and status position in relation to the

27. Guyot, op. cit.; Hamid, 1973, op. cit.

28. For further details, see Zawawi, 1978, op. cit.

29. Eric Wolf, “Specific Aspects of Plantations Systems in the World: Community Subcultures and Social Classes,” in ed. Horowitz, *Peoples and Cultures of the Caribbean* (New York: Natural History Press, 1971), p. 29.

30. *Ibid*, p. 163.

31. George Beckford, *Persistent Poverty: Underdevelopment in Plantation Economies in the Third World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 53–55.

non-producers—the owners or those with capital (*pemodal*), employers (*majikan*) and the supervisors—as those whose primary task was “work selling labor-power” (*kerja jual tenaga*) and whose position in the hierarchy was without access to either authority (*kuasa*) or control in the system. Even outside the workplace this class-status dichotomy was equally determining. Socially and spatially the laborers constituted a distinct community of their own: they resided together in a separate living compound typified by *kongsi* houses, away from the rest of the plantation community, but were yet unfree from the jurisdiction of the plantation authority system.

Notwithstanding the above factors, the stratification of the plantation also duplicated some of the features usually associated with the wider “plural society” of Peninsular Malaysia.³² Division of labor to a large extent also converged with ethnicity. Almost all the workers were Malays whilst the higher echelons of the administrative hierarchy were dominated by non-Malays, especially Chinese. Only at the lower supervisory level was there some equality of representation among the different ethnic groups, Malays, Indians and Chinese.³³

A few complications arise from this. Firstly, at the level of subjective understanding, there was a dominant proletarian ethos which drew its sources from the fact of selling labor-power. The Malay term *tenaga*, literally meaning “strength,” handles the concept of labor-power, and this common role “we are all selling labor-power” (*kita sama-sama jual tenaga*) was then perceived to define their daily existence and the basis of their relations with those above them and among themselves. Such an ethos was constantly evoked to emphasize a sense of equality in terms

of a similar status (*sama taraf*) or fate (*nasib*). Idealizing a similar past hardship and sharing of a common biography further reinforced this sense of egalitarianism among members of the same class.

Given the “minority” status of the Malays on the plantation, the notion “we” (*kita*) as used by the workers carried both a class and ethnic dimension. At the ideological level, the similar ethnic background of the workers gave rise to an ethnic “we” perception which was synonymous with a class “we” emphasis. Logically too, when the former was used, it *may* at times also make room to incorporate into the “insider” schema the *pegawai* (employees in the hierarchy of officials/managers) Malays who were essentially “outsiders” to the laboring class.

The congruence between ethnicity and class could also create both ethnic and class solidarity structures, with the former also possibly recruiting its members from the Malays located above the workers in the plantation hierarchy. How were these ambiguities initially resolved?

Ethnic and Class Alignments in the Formation of a Political Community

The inter-relationship between ethnicity and class and the complications introduced by ethnicity in the context of what is essentially a class-based social and economic organization can perhaps be initially resolved by tracing the development leading to the formation of a political community among the laborers on the plantation. An understanding of the basis of this political community is essential since the term implies the emergence of at least some common interest being organized for pursuing certain goals and forms of action as a collective.

At this level of development, the laboring community went through two distinct social phases, the cultural and the political. The cultural phase coincided with the early years of the plantation when the laboring community was still in its pioneering stage, in the context of an administrative structure that had yet to develop into a full-fledged “rational-legal” system. Life in these initial years on the plantation was often described as akin to that of a *kampung* (village) where, owing to the shared hardship of a frontier society and a relatively undeveloped infrastructure, a social system based on a rigid class system of control and administration was rather difficult to erect. Instead a familiar and personalized relationship was fostered between those who controlled labor and the workers. Workers and their *pegawai* lived side by side with one another, the latter being incorporated closely into the social life of the former. Apart from having to work together in a rather harsh environment, both had to also be closely interdependent and share a sense of community strong enough to overcome common problems and issues.

To this end, the concern of the community was to continue in the new environment some of the traditional social and cultural bases of “living together in a community” (*hidup bermasyarakat*) as in their former village society. Informal leaders among the workers consisting of a few recognized elders (*orang tua*) who were knowledgeable in custom (*adat*) or religion took the lead, soon to be joined by the existing Malay *pegawai*. Aspects of social control of the community were worked out through the co-operation of

32. M. Freedman, “The Growth of a Plural Society in Malaya,” *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 33, 1960.

33. The preponderance of Malays in the labor force is understandable since the east coast states such as Trengganu and Kelantan are dominated by Malays. The predominance of the non-Malays (especially the Chinese) is most apparent in the executive echelons of the plantation class-status system. For instance, in the 1972–73 period, it was observed that of the sixteen executives in the part of the plantation studied, two were Europeans, two were Indians, and three were Malays (mainly lower executives) and the remaining nine were Chinese. Most of these non-Malays were drawn from the west coast states where the plantation industry was first established on a large-scale. It is obvious that historically the managerial skills associated with the plantation industry were identified mainly with the Europeans and the immigrants and this may account for their preponderance in the above plantation. Moreover, whilst the Trengganu SEDC stipulated that all the three major ethnic groups must be equally represented in the official hierarchy as a whole, there was no specification that this must be so at every level of the hierarchy. Since the company was Chinese-owned and was left relatively free to recruit its officers without much interference by the state government and since experienced Malay plantation executives were hard to find, especially from the local state, the choice of non-Malays for these higher posts was unavoidable.

It is important to clarify here that the term *pegawai* refers to everyone in the official hierarchy. It is obvious that, following Poulantzas, the economic criterion alone is not sufficient to define the structural determination of the *pegawai* class. Whilst they are excluded from the bourgeoisie, “The use of political criteria is especially important in Poulantzas’s analysis of the class position of managerial and supervisory labour. Within the process of material production, supervisory labour is unquestioningly productive because of its role in coordinating and integrating the production process. But within the social division of labour, supervisory activity represents the political domination of capital over the working class.” Erik Olin Wright, *Class, Crisis and the State* (London: Verso, 1979), p. 36.

such elders and the *pegawai* (which even included some non-Malays). In this initial stage, ethnicity was only important in a cultural rather than a political sense. The prayer-house (*surau*), both as a religious institution as well as a basis for social organization, became the central focus of the community. It mediated the relationship between Malay workers and the Malay *pegawai* in their midst, and in the process also made room for some of them to assume informal leadership roles in the community. Through the same organization, important matters relating to the social and cultural aspects of the community were discussed and resolved.

As workers began to question their rights as employees in the context of the industrial occupational structure of the plantation, neither the prayer-house organization nor the role of these "expressive" leaders was found to be effective in serving their interests. Moreover the one-sided emphasis of the company on capital outlay for land development leaving little for labor welfare soon began to leave the workers searching for other outlets to express their socio-economic discontent and serve their instrumental needs. This then marked the entry of the "political phase" in the community in which new forms of organization and leadership began to take shape.

The early rumblings of the workers' dissatisfaction first found expression in ethnic terms. The dominant position of the non-Malays in the new environment of the plantation hierarchy rekindled old ethnic sentiments typical of the wider society and led to the politicization of the ethnic factor. Moreover, coming from the peasantry where ethnic political parties are the common organizational and political outlets for their socio-economic problems, the initial political thrust of these emerging Malay proletarians took the expected direction. The first move by the workers was to form a plantation branch of the UMNO party (the dominant Malay partner of the ruling party in the country) in which the Malay *pegawai*, owing to their high social position in the hierarchy and perceived ethnic affinities with the workers, were invested with the formal role of political leadership.

This first form of political experimentation proved not to be as effective as anticipated. The workers became aware of the restricted role that UMNO could play in plantation society with its industrial occupation structure. Outside political leaders, though enthusiastic about the workers' demonstration of old loyalties, were hesitant about formal party links being used as the primary means of resolving problems pertaining to industrial or worker-employer relations, for the state had a vested interest in the success of the plantation venture as a "business" enterprise and was only too aware of the possible problems which could arise from mixing politics (especially ethnic politics) with business. On an informal level, a mutual understanding existed between state politicians and the management. Often loyal supporters of the party would be recommended for jobs, either as *pegawai* or workers on the plantation. On the other hand, the presence of an UMNO branch on the plantation was also seen as useful in so far as it ensured that the "right" party did exist in the midst of these workers.

The relative ineffectiveness of the organization was also related to the ambiguous position of the Malay *pegawai* in the system. In one set of social relations, these individu-

als were an integral component of the administrative hierarchy and authority structure of the plantation whose main official role was to organize and control labor for the purpose of production. In another set of social relations, these same actors occupied positions of formal political leadership in the very community they were supposed to control. The latter position, if taken to its logical conclusion, would in fact mean an alliance with the workers' economic interest against the management, to the possible detriment of their own careers and vested interests in the system.

The workers' view was that such a possibility was unrealistic. The Malay *pegawai* were first and foremost "the employers' men" (*orang majikan*), who must also "safeguard their own interest" (*jaga kepentingan diri mereka*) or "look after their own pots and pans" (*jaga periok belanga mereka*). According to the workers, while the *pegawai* leadership was useful in giving the organization some respectability when dealing with outside UMNO leaders and organizations, their role in advancing the workers' interest vis-a-vis the plantation authorities was restricted and ineffective.

The workers' initial enthusiasm gradually turned to hesitation. Meanwhile certain developments in the style of administration of the plantation began to raise doubts about the basis of an ethnic alignment between workers and their Malay *pegawai*. As noted earlier, owing to the specific conditions surrounding the nature of plantation society in the "cultural phase," it was politically convenient for the authorities to allow the *pegawai* to be voluntarily incorporated into aspects of the social organization of the laboring community. Indeed, in these early years it was only through such a strategy that the company could ensure the continuous appropriation of surplus and presence of its labor force in the frontier phases of the plantation. Given a situation where the initial laboring force was under the supervision of only a handful of field staff, familiarity and personalized relations were recognized as an essential cultural apparatus which the early administrative style should tacitly incorporate.

By the time of the emergence of the "political phase," the labor force had grown in size. The whole administrative apparatus had also expanded. In the area studied, the administrative center from the earlier phase of development was shifted to a different part of the plantation. By then too, both the social and spatial distance between workers and those above them began to be more structured and stratified. The plantation as a class-structured social and economic organization with its concomitant administrative apparatus in the form of a "rational-legal" bureaucratic system began to emerge more systematically. A variant of the "New Style Plantation"³⁴ started to make its presence felt, in which personalized relations between those in administration and those below were no longer tolerated. The familiarity which was earlier forged between the Malay workers and some of their Malay *pegawai* had to be redefined.

The management could not do away with all forms of involvement between these two groups, but interaction between them gradually became formalized. Through the

34. Eric Wolf, op. cit.

prayer-house and UMNO, social relations became restricted to official occasions of meetings, and in most instances, only to those few workers who were involved in the actual committees. In the beginning, there were however a few staunch Malay *pegawai* who continued to carry on their "familiar" relationship with the laborers regardless of the warnings by the authorities. Management soon found various excuses to either transfer or dismiss these few individuals. Workers frequently referred to such *pegawai* as "being too close with the workers" (*terlampau rapat dengan pekerja*) and hence having "angered" the wrath of the management.

For the workers, the above developments taught a few initial lessons. The first lesson was that the plantation as an industrial occupational structure required a specific form of political relationship and organization more appropriate to class rather than ethnic status. The role of UMNO was seen as restricted and ineffective. Secondly, since the plantation had a class mode of organization, there were inherent structural limitations in the formation of any ethnic-based alignment with those Malays in the hierarchy. Clearly, the laborers had to seek a form of political leadership which emerged from within their own class rather than from above.

The workers turned to the second type of political organization via the NUPW as a more effective and appropriate outlet for their problems. Through the union, the workers were reintegrated into the wider and modern political processes of the country in their formal identity and role as a laboring class (*kaum buruh*) of a specific industrial community. Leaders too were drawn from the lower-class, and the union further linked them to other plantation workers in the area and throughout the country. Members of the NUPW today include the different ethnic groups and hence are not defined by ethnicity. The national leaders of the union are no longer the familiar ethnic patrons in government of political parties. Initially, the national leadership as well as members of the NUPW had primarily been Indians. Though still dominated by Indians, both its leadership and membership now also include a substantial number of Malays.³⁵

The formation of the union and its eventual official recognition on the plantation was not without problems. Though initial attempts to unionize the workers began much earlier in the first established part of the whole plantation, they were not successful. Only in early 1972, not long after the formation of the UMNO branch, was there a move to unionize in the area studied. While permission was given to outside trade union officials to campaign among the workers, any move to push for the recognition of the plantation NUPW branch committees established was always met negatively.

The management's decision finally to recognize the union by the end of 1973 could be explained by a few factors. When the company began operating in this region, its main priority was to develop the land until all the area sub-leased by the state was completely planted with oil palm. For a long period most capital outlay was toward this

end and the company was therefore not prepared to enter into negotiation over wages or other issues relating to labor welfare. Meanwhile, the expression of the workers' discontent in ethnic terms made politicians, labor officials and management only too aware of the potentially sensitive situation that could develop if the workers' problems could not be formally represented through the usual channels appropriate to an industrial occupational setting. This, combined with the fact that the company's developing spree was nearing completion, finally hastened the management's official recognition of the union.

In terms of the initial issues posed at the beginning of this paper, a few conclusions can now be drawn with regard to the interrelationship between ethnicity and class at this political level of the proletarian community. In the first instance, it can be observed that at the *formal* level of political organization of the proletarian community, there is a definite *displacement* of ethnicity by class. The industrial occupational context of the plantation places structural limits on the usefulness of the ethnic-based political organization. On the plantation, this gave impetus to the successful emergence of a class-based union movement. But at the ideological level, the same logic does not necessarily follow. The ideological support for the union could not be premised on class alone. The earlier ethnic content of the workers' ideology was not simply "displaced" but existed in a process of articulation with the emerging dominant class content to underline the new proletarian mode of political organization. Indeed, appeals by grassroots leaders to rally the workers around the union were couched in both class and ethnic terms, the latter being a crucial reinforcement for class political action. At the level of proletarian perception, a dominant class "we" worldview was strengthened by the unfolding class structure of the new-style plantation. But the thrust of this consciousness also drew its strength from the ethnic "we" sentiments. The events and processes leading to the political phase served to sharpen the workers' awareness of the contradictory position of the Malay *pegawai* in their midst. What was generated from this experience is that the ethnic "we" perception began to acquire a more specific lower-class association, and became less identified with other class outsiders regardless of their ethnic similarity.

The Arenas of Proletarian Protest

The specific class structure of the plantation system lends itself to forms of conflict which are generic to the asymmetrical relations between those who own the means of production or control labor on one hand, and those who sell labor power on the other.³⁶ It is essential to investigate the arenas of conflict so as to understand more precisely the

35. S. Arasaratnam, *Indians in Malaysia and Singapore* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), pp. 141-142.

36. As Dahrendorf observes: "An industrial enterprise is, among other things, an imperatively co-ordinated group. It contains positions with which are associated an expectation and a right of exercising authority and other positions whose occupants are subjected to authority. There are managers of many grades, and there are workers. . . . A conflict of [latent] interest between managers and workers is thus structurally unavoidable." R. Dahrendorf, "Towards a Theory of Social Conflict," in ed. W. Wallace, *Sociological Theory* (London: Heinemann, 1971), p. 221.

nature of the ideological components of proletarian protest on the plantation. For this purpose, the discussion will focus on two social arenas of conflict—the plantation labor process and lower-class strikes.

The Plantation Labor Process

Theoretically, under capitalist relations of production the laborer's social worth is primarily measured in terms of the labor power which he can provide. According to Wolf, the new-style plantation further reinforces this impersonal nature of the system since such a plantation does not cater to the "status needs" of the worker. Its social relations are mechanical and contractual; the worker is evaluated solely in terms of his role as a provider of muscular energy and other aspects of his social and cultural worth are irrelevant to those who wield authority and control the organization. Relations of domination are not mediated "through cultural forms that bear the personal stamp."³⁷

Confronted by such a system, the workers studied in this article began to internalize a proletarian ethos in which their social existence was primarily determined by "work selling labor power" (*jual tenaga*). Hence such comments as: "This company is only interested in us purely for work"; "Outside work, they are not bothered about the coolies"; "We are like the company's cows, let loose in the field for eight hours a day." The years when the company was concentrating its capital outlay on land development were marked by what the workers perceived to be a period of denial of their "moral economy," or rights to subsistence and reciprocity.³⁸ Thus:

All those who live here depend on the employer (majikan) for their livelihood. Without a doubt, it could be said that the labourers here . . . are oppressed and squeezed daily like land leeches by the employer, considering the low wages paid which are not fitting with the labour power poured. Many of these problems have already been told to various concerned authorities . . . but they have only given weak excuses and other kinds of explanation to the workers. . . . They have not shown any concern towards the labourers, for they have surrendered these matters to the employer, hence the labourers' social existence has also been surrendered to the employer. So what more, the employer is now free to treat the workers according to his whims. . . .

37. E. Wolf, op. cit., p. 168. According to Wolf, "The new-style plantation . . . dispenses altogether with personalised phrasings of its technical requirements. Guided by the idea of rational efficiency in the interests of maximum production, it views the labour force as a reservoir of available muscular energy, with each labourer representing a roughly equivalent amount of such energy . . . The worker who provides a given amount of muscular energy is remunerated in wages. Otherwise his life-risks or life-chances are of no moment to the planners and managers of production and distribution . . . It does not extend credit to individual workers, nor differentiate between workers according to their different needs, or the urgency of their respective needs. It assumes no risks for the physical or psychological survival of the people who power its operations. At the same time, the new-style plantation is not an apparatus for the servicing of the status needs of its workers or managers. It thus bars the worker effectively from entering into personalised relationships with the administrative personnel." Ibid., p. 169.

38. James Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

This is thus the story about the life between the labourers and the employer here; with the labourers getting only very low wages, barely enough to eat and drink, like chickens — "scratch for food in the morning, eat in the morning; scratch for food in the evening, eat in the evening" (Malay proverb: "Kais pagi makan pagi, kais petang makan petang"). Many are saying the work load is increasing, but the rewards are not.

To a large extent, workers were able to accommodate to their role in the overall division of labor as the main providers of muscular energy. Nor was there any rejection on their part, of the plantation class-status institution, or resentment against those making a profit if labor could also be paid with wages that were "fitting" with work. More importantly, at this level of existence, their human worth (*maruah*, being the term used to handle workers' concept of human dignity) was still intact. The status of a coolie or laborer, however low, did not mean a loss of their *maruah* or dignity as human beings. They were coolies but not as yet animals or slaves. In the overall division of labor, they, like other human beings, were simply "searching for a living" (*sama-sama cari makan*); the question of loss of *maruah* did not arise and was irrelevant. Even what was felt to be "exploitation" at this level still assumed a generalized and instrumental form to which the workers could still accommodate or take philosophically.

The danger of loss of *maruah* is greatest in the relations around the productive process where the actual physical acts of labor power production and surplus appropriation take place. In this on-going labor process of the capitalist system, the confrontation between capital and labor takes on a new dimension—capitalist exploitation becomes personalized and personally mediated. Here workers enter a set of face-to-face social relations with their *pegawai* who supervise and control them. The *pegawai* has legitimate claims to "bureaucratic" authority (*kuasa*) and how he asserts his authority to reprimand the worker or instruct him as to how, when and how much to work may inflict upon him a sense of moral suffering and a loss of his human dignity. It is through such instances that exploitation becomes personalized and the feeling of being nothing more than a mere commodity of labor hits the worker right on his face. He becomes deprived of his *maruah*. He actually feels like an animal, a cow (*lembu*), a slave (*hamba*), a bundle of muscular energy with no human face. Moments of such personalized exploitation are captured below, as expressed by the workers themselves, based on their work experience on the plantation.

Just because he is masta or pegawai he thinks he can treat us like slaves here—Hey here! Hey there!

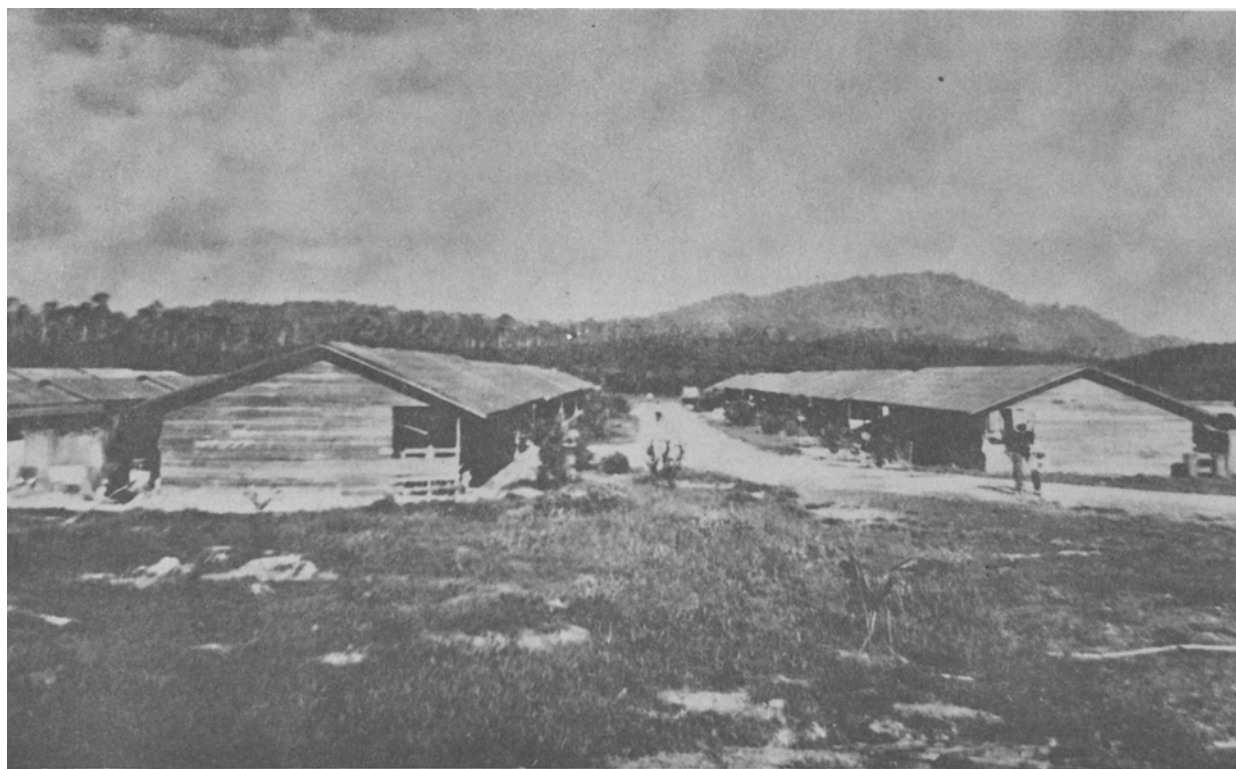
Just because he has a higher rank, he thinks he can treat us coolies like rubbish by the roadside!

All of us have tasted it. Pegawai—they all have airs. That's the policy of the pegawai as Tuan and coolies as slaves—twisted laws!

We are always chased out or abused in the factory. He always says to us, "If you want to work, work! If not, you can go home!" Already two workers have been scolded like that and they both have left.



Young workers on the plantation



The main kongsi compound at Padang Kubu which housed about 1,200 working (mostly unskilled) and non-working population in 1972-73.

We don't want to hear them go on telling us, 'You stupid cow! If you don't want to work, you can go home!' Never for one moment should we let them feel that they can treat us like cows, depending on them for food here!

This factory does not want people who have moral etiquette (budi bahasa). They only want people who can eat people! Workers have always told me that if they were to follow their emotions, they would have thrown him (a pegawai) into the boiler, so that he would turn to ashes.

The above pegawai has many times committed acts of inhumanity to these workers who are thirsty for work by abusing them with words that hurt the feelings of the workers under his charge. . . . We feel that what is contained in the body of the pegawai is full of thoughts to make the workers suffer. We have always received complaints from the workers, and according to them, they have never disobeyed him . . . since this is our duty as workers. But what saddens us is that these matters touch on the personality of the individual worker. . . . We on behalf of the workers feel anxious and worried in case anything unpleasant were to occur since both sides would be in trouble. If they were to follow their emotions, all these things would surely happen. . . . (part of a letter from the plantation union committee to the management)

The pegawai mentioned . . . has always caused great unrest amongst the workers. He always uses his authority to hurt our feelings . . . with his harsh and rough action, even though the workers concerned may have only committed a small mistake, which is an aspect of human character. . . . Some proper action should be taken . . . before anything unpleasant is done by the workers who are always harboring their grudges toward him. (part of a letter by an ordinary worker written to outside authorities)

The above examples are instances or moments in the productive process in which authority is being asserted to control or appropriate labor power, in this case, through language and verbal communication. On other occasions, a *pegawai* may also resort to other means and ways of making the workers work harder than usual in order to maximize productivity for the company and hence gain personal recognition from his superiors for the purpose of job promotion or bonus increment. Such an act is called *tekan* by the workers (to *tekan* literally means "to press"). Both types of action cited above are perceived by workers as variants of personalized modes of exploitation whose immediate impact is to inflict upon them a sense of moral suffering and reduce their human status or *maruah* to a mere commodity of labor.

Some examples of *tekan* are given below:

- Workers work for eight hours a day. Depending on the nature of work already done, the kind of physical area or terrain of their work environment including the weather (in the cool morning or in the heat of the day), a few minutes rest "to catch their breath" are usually to be given as a matter of course by their respective supervisor-in-charge. Those who do not grant this "goodwill" are usually accused of indulging in "too much *tekan*."
- Some types of work are more quantifiable than others, yet workers are paid on a checkroll basis (that is, not by piece-rate). The supervisor-in-charge may then insist that a certain quota be completed during the eight-hour

period before the workers could be eligible for their daily amount. The workers would not get extra pay for doing the extra work imposed upon them; indeed, the workers would be pushed to work harder during a specified period so as to get the amount of daily wages that they already rightfully deserve. Sometimes, a cunning superior would vary this quota of work by increasing it from day to day. Thus:

By right, some of these tasks should be done on a contract basis, but the company wants to save money; so they get checkroll workers to do the job. . . . You have to work like a punished person. . . . You feel that your maruah is lowered. . . . This is only one example of tekan. . . , it doesn't only happen to me. . . .

- Sometimes *tekan* is deliberately resorted to by the *pegawai* as a strategy to "tame" or teach a lesson to selected workers who are seen as troublemakers or as not working hard enough. Sometimes the intention may in fact be to make them leave the plantation altogether. As a victim bemoans,

You do work which is most inappropriate . . . , odd jobs such as cleaning drains, making drains, gardening, cutting weeds, loading stones, or fetching firewood from the jungle. You get the same pay as other unskilled working in the shade inside, but you have to work harder . . . in the hot sun. . . . This shows the unjust system of work distribution—tekan to those they hate!

It is apparent that under proletarian relations of production, Scott's notion of peasant moral economy takes on an added component, namely proletarian rights to their human worth (*maruah*) as human beings. For the workers, then, the everyday class struggle (as observed by the researcher) was essentially an on-going struggle in the labor process to maintain and preserve these rights to their "personal moral economy." The moral regulator was sought in the principle of *timbang rasa* (their concept of empathy—to *timbang*: to "weigh" and to *rasa*: to "feel"). According to them, acts of personalized exploitation which inflicted upon them loss of *maruah* occurred because the values of those who controlled them were not governed by this universal spirit (*semangat*) of empathy. Only when the assertion of authority was guided by this "spirit" would workers experience no loss of human worth or status. Ideally the spirit of *timbang rasa*, they argued, should be forthcoming voluntarily and naturally, based on human sensitivity. But if it did not, then workers themselves felt that they should be the ones to initiate action to instil this moral component into the values of their immediate superiors. There was thus a strong belief that: "We must be the people who should teach (*ajar*) them so that they can understand a bit of *timbang rasa*. If we protest (*lawan*) everytime they 'press' us, after a while they will know the ways of *timbang rasa*." Hence acts of personal or social protest against the *pegawai*—ranging from verbal appeals or outbursts to defiance or, more extreme still, even actual physical retaliation—became intricately tied to the workers' desire to teach the spirit of *timbang rasa* to those individuals who controlled them.

Timbang rasa is thus an integral moral and ideological component of the proletarian consciousness and protest. It

is intricately related to the preservation of social worth and dignity (*maruah*) of human beings despite their class-status differences. The spirit of *timbang rasa* is not directed against roles, institutions or the class structure; its rationale is found on a universal human praxis which accommodates class inequalities and the social division of labor: "We must have *timbang rasa*. We are both in search of a living (*Kita mesti ada timbang rasa. Kita sama-sama cari makan*)."³⁹ Clearly, this class ideological practice draws its impetus and strength from a synthesis of two sources—class and non-class values. Crucial to the latter is a more universal identity and status of proletarians as "people" or human beings.

Lower Class Strikes

Strikes, though infrequent, were not an uncommon form of protest among this lower class community. What is interesting to note is that the period before rather than after the union was officially recognized saw more of these strikes on the plantation. The official union line is not to encourage strikes amongst its members, but to pursue a gradualistic approach to the problems of industrial relations, based on negotiation and collective bargaining. Immediately after management finally decided to give official recognition to the status of the NUPW plantation branch by the end of 1973, it became a member of MAPA (Malaysian Agricultural Producers' Association), a national organization which caters to the interest of owners and employers in the plantation industry throughout the country. At the national level both the NUPW and MAPA organizations have evolved certain agreements which spell out common and standardized guidelines relating to wages and other terms of employment to be observed by all NUPW-MAPA. In its attempt to promote a "responsible" image, and given the context of the political and legislative constraints of the post-colonial state,³⁹ the NUPW is accommodative to the interest of capital⁴⁰ and is unlikely to resort

39. It was, according to Ali Raza, a union which was "blessed by the government." Legislative and Public Policy Development in Malaysia's Industrial Relations," *The Journal of Developing Areas*, Vol. 3, 1969, p. 358. "The present security powers of the Malaysian government, based on such provisions as article 149 of the Malaysian Constitution, the Defamation Ordinance of 1957, the Public Order (Preservation) Ordinance of 1958, and the Internal Security Act of 1960 (as amended in 1962), are truly very great. The government possesses extensive powers to restrict freedom of assembly, movement and expression, to detain without trial, close schools, ban associations, prorogue publication rights, and so on. The phrasing of the legal clauses granting such power, is moreover, often quite vague, and the readiness to apply them has not always been restricted by a lively sense of the needs of a free society." Justus M. van der Kroef, cited in B. Gunaway & H. Raghavan, *The Plight of the Plantation Workers in West Malaysia, With Special Reference to Indian Labour* (Amsterdam: Anthropologisch-Sociologisch Centrum, 1977), pp. 28-29.

40. See, for instance, the statements by the NUPW Secretary General, Narayanan, accepting the interests of both domestic and foreign capital and promising a "sensible" unionism in exchange for employment and a "fair share of the wealth produced." *Union Herald*, April 1970, p. 9; also *Union Herald*, August 1970. A situation of "fair share" has never been fulfilled. Stenson, for instance, points out that "during the boom of the early fifties even the relatively powerful NUPW gained but the crumbs of prosperity." M. Stenson, *Industrial Conflict in Malaya* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 238. A recent observation also shows that "plantation workers, in contra-distinction to other poverty groups, have not enjoyed any improvement in their economic condition." Gunaway & Raghavan, op. cit., p. 32.

to strikes as a means to achieve its ends.⁴¹

After the workers became officially organized in the union, there were hardly any strikes to speak of on the plantation. In a particular case involving the firemen in the factory, the workers in a secret meeting decided to call a strike but were stopped and persuaded to "negotiate" as soon as the branch trade union leader came to know of it. One of the major dissatisfactions among at least some of the workers was that they found it hard to negotiate for terms which deviated from the standardized NUPW-MAPA official agreement although in theory they were told that it was possible. By and large, however, the majority of the workers were not critically inclined to the point of questioning the dominant ideological orientation of the union.

Most of the strikes which occurred in the earlier period were informally initiated, spontaneous and usually without the advanced knowledge of the management or state labor authorities. They usually involved a small section of the laboring community and were based on some form of dissatisfaction about conditions of work or employment. Most of these cases were settled informally between worker and concerned plantation authorities without resort to prolonged bureaucratic processes or officialdom. It is easy enough to understand the bases for such strikes. The ideological underpinning is one that is directly related to workers' economic position and immediate instrumental interest as a laboring class in an industrial occupational system.

Nevertheless, sometime in 1972, just after a union committee had been informally set up on this part of the plantation, a major strike did take place which involved most of the workers from this area as well as others from neighboring estate branches. The issues surrounding this particular strike were not as straightforward as and cannot simply be understood as other minor strikes. Workers often referred to this incident as a "demonstration" (*tunjuk perasaan*) rather than as a strike per se. The strike was resolved by the intervention of state politicians and labor authorities from outside. An understanding of this event is both interesting and illuminating in showing how class ideology is articulated with other non-class elements in the context of a particular type of proletarian political action and protest.

41. Its policy of non-alliance with political parties has apparently been both its source of survival and its weakness. According to Stenson, its lack of representation in the parliamentary system predominated overwhelmingly by "representatives of rural Malay peasant and Chinese capitalist interests" also means that "politically the unions and their members are isolated, if not incompetent." Op. cit., pp. 240-242. On the other hand, its subordination to the government's wishes that it not play a "political role" has been seen by the opposition as "betraying labour interest to the 'plantocracy' and government." Martin Rudner, "Malayan Labour in Transition: Labour Policy and Trade Unionism 1953-63," *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 1973, p. 24. The NUPW leadership has always been adamant that their strategy to promote "peacefulness should not be misunderstood for synonym of weakness"; its past activities (such as the "go-slow" of 1956, and the pilot strike of 1964) would often be cited to show its preparedness to "turn to militancy" when necessary. K. Kumaran, *Collective Bargaining in the Rubber Industry* (Petaling Jaya: NUPW, 1967), p. 41. Stenson, remarking on the 1956 "go-slow" action commented that the "union . . . recognised the impossibility of a full scale strike." Op. cit., p. 238, footnote 5.

Briefly a Malay *pegawai* was apparently found “guilty” by the management for “misusing” the checkroll workers to clear the compound of “his” house (which in fact belonged to the company). The management “without further investigation” immediately gave him 24 hours notice to leave the plantation. When news of the sudden dismissal was heard by workers, a few of those who were involved in the prayer-house committee raised the idea of a meeting to be held that same night. It was felt that since the *pegawai* was an active member of the *surau* organization, and since he was supposed to leave the plantation the next day, the occasion was a good opportunity for the community to say farewell to him. Some of the other Malay *pegawai* were also invited. That night, the *surau* was thronged to full capacity by workers who came to attend the meeting. Many speeches and opinions were made; for many, it was also a night for reflection in which all the good things the *pegawai* did in the past were remembered and praised. A few thought of his long service (*orang lama*) and “good deeds” (Malay concept of *jasa*) for the company, and the fact that he had been around since “the oil palm trees were still small.” Others also recalled his *jasa* to the laboring community, especially his continuous involvement in the socio-cultural aspects of their lives through the prayer-house, despite repeated warnings from the management. The ethnic issue was also brought up, in that the authorities (dominated by non-Malays) were accused of consistently victimizing those Malay *pegawai* who were too involved or actively concerned with the working community.

As the “dialogue” progressed and the night grew older, the atmosphere of the meeting took on an expected turn and it became evident to all who were present that the Malay *pegawai* had been a victim of an unjust (*tak adil*) decision, especially when the nature of his apparent “crime” was weighed against his long service to the company. In the course of events, the leaders of the yet unofficial union committee took to the floor and challenged (*mencabar*) the workers to go on strike the next day by marching to the manager’s office to demand for the reinstatement of the *pegawai*. The crowd, whose emotions and spirit had by this time already run high (*naik semangat*), simultaneously and in one voice rose in support of the trade union leader’s challenge. Thenceforward, it was the union leaders who went round on a door-to-door campaign to all the *kongsi* houses asking for the workers to strike the next day. It is also interesting to note that in mobilizing the workers some of these leaders also resorted to ethnicity by apparently going around shouting “Chinese sack Malay!” (*Cina buang Melayu*) in their campaign that night.

It is tempting to see ethnicity as the primary basis for the strike. After all, the victim was not a fellow worker but a *pegawai*. He was, furthermore, a fellow Malay who had been dismissed by a Chinese manager, so the Malay workers presumably came to the support of their “ethnic” *pegawai*. Ethnically based support by Malay lower classes or peasants towards their Malay political elites is, for instance, rather typical of solidarity political structures in the wider “plural society.”⁴² Thus what happened on the plantation reflected the model of the broader system, albeit in a more specific and micro context.

A sample of 125 workers who took part in the strike

was selected and each was asked his/her reason for participating in the strike. Their answers (see table) are rather revealing. As can be seen from the table, only 9 percent of the total number of workers interviewed gave their reason in purely ethnic terms, such as “Our race (*bangsa*) was sacked” or “Spirit” (*semangat*) to help Malays.” Over two-thirds (67 percent) of the workers did not mention ethnicity at all. Their answers instead emphasized principles of reciprocity, empathy and justice.

Under reciprocity, what was stressed is the *pegawai*’s “good deeds” (*jasa*) through his long service with the company, implying a sense of injustice in terms of the decision made by the management. In Malay society and more specifically in the cultural tradition of the Malay peasantry, *jasa* is an important dimension of their concept of reciprocity, especially in their relationship with the state.⁴³ Workers’ responses ranged from “He gave a lot of *jasa* to the company” to “The management acted without remembering his *jasa*” or “He was one of the longest-serving *pegawai*

Workers’ Reasons for Supporting the Strike

Basis for Support	No. of Workers (n 125)	Percentage (100%)
A) Ethnicity	9	7%
B) Non-Ethnic Factors: Reciprocity principle (<i>jasa</i>), Empathy principle (<i>timbang rasa</i>) and Justice (<i>keadilan</i>)	84	67%
C) Ethnic & Non-Ethnic Factors (A + B)	32	26%

42. Note, for instance, this form of ethnic-based political mobilization in Malaya via the UMNO variant of nationalism in the wake of its decolonization. See W.R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1967); John Funston, *Malay Politics in Malaysia: A Study of UMNO and PAS* (Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1980).

43. In Malay society, the legend of Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat is illuminating in elucidating the concept of *jasa* in traditional culture. There were two warriors of the Malaccan empire. Both had contributed *jasa* to king and empire until one day the more prominent Tuah was framed by a few who were envious of his position and closeness with the Sultan. The Sultan immediately ordered his minister, the *Bendahara*, to execute Tuah. When Jebat learnt of the news, he, being like a brother to Tuah, defied the king by running amok as a way of avenging Tuah’s “death.” Under traditional Malay custom, this was an act of treason (*durhaka*) but Jebat was adamant that Tuah was the victim of injustice. Tuah, who had contributed so much *jasa* to the state, was, without proper investigation and in one act of rash decision, ordered to be killed by the Sultan. It was a breach of the principle of reciprocity between the ruler and the ruled. But the *Bendahara* had not apparently carried out his orders. Being a wise statesman, he merely sent Tuah away into exile. Legend has it that Tuah was the only person who could kill Jebat; the king, after learning that Tuah was still alive, immediately ordered him to be recalled. The story ends on a sad note, with Tuah rather reluctantly having to carry out his duties to the king and state by killing Jebat.

here” and “He had been working here since the trees were still small.” On the other hand, his own *jasa* to the workers was equally stressed in statements that “He gave a lot of *jasa* to the company and workers here” and “He gave a lot of *jasa* to the coolies.”

Under empathy (*timbang rasa*) were emphasized the personal qualities and values of the *pegawai* in his dealings with the workers. The *pegawai* apparently had a reputation of being a supervisor with a lot of *timbang rasa*. Those who had worked under him knew him as a strict *pegawai*; but at the same time he also was known for “taking care of the workers’ feelings” (*pandai ambil hati pekerja*). Hence such comments as: “He was a *pegawai* with the spirit of *timbang rasa*,” “He knew how to consider the feelings of the workers,” “He showed sympathy to the workers.”

Factors relating to the third principle, justice, should not be seen in isolation from the others, especially that of *jasa*. Typical comments were that “The management’s action was unjust (*tak adil*)” or that “He was not guilty; the management did not investigate properly (*tidak usul periksa*).”

The last category (about 26 percent) consists of workers who mentioned both ethnic and non-ethnic factors in combination. Here it is evident that while ethnicity was important, it was no longer an adequate factor in itself. It had to be expressed in conjunction with non-ethnic factors as well.

It can be seen from the above that it is misleading to perceive the strike simply as a demonstration of “Malay spirit” (*semangat Melayu*). Most workers I spoke to were adamant that the strike was an expression of “workers’ spirit” (*semangat pekerja*). It would be equally misleading to reduce this spirit simply to terms of class, for it is a spirit in which class content exists in different forms of articulation with non-class elements. But these elements are principles which the proletarians as a class value and cherish, whether they relate to certain cultural or universal norms of reciprocity, empathy or justice. In this context, the workers’ support is not a support of the person (*pegawai*) per se, but rather of the spirit and principles which he embodies and symbolizes. In their day to day existence as workers on the plantation, these ideals remain unactualized.

As noted above, the struggle to actualize or instill these ideals (such as *timbang rasa*) into the dominant value system became an on-going necessity for the workers. In a way, the *pegawai* was as much a victim of the system as the workers; the decision to dismiss him was an assertion of authority which was not governed by the principle or spirit of *timbang rasa*. The decision was therefore an act of injustice which did not take into account his *jasa* to the company and breached the principles of reciprocity. The workers also had a debt to pay; the *pegawai* contributed *jasa* to the laboring community. It was his human disposition towards *timbang rasa* for the underdogs that gave him

The analogy of this legend with the strike is interesting, for like Jebat, the workers felt that the *pegawai* was the victim of an unjust decision by the management. The latter did not apparently investigate carefully about his alleged “crime.” Neither was the “sentence” passed [the dismissal] seen to be in accordance with the *jasa* rendered by the *pegawai* to the company. For an interesting analysis of the above legend, see Kassim, *Characterisation of Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa, 1966).

this capacity to render *jasa* to the lower class. The strike was not just in support of the spirit which he symbolized; it was also in payment of the debt for his *jasa* and *timbang rasa* to the workers. Ultimately it was also a spontaneous collective protest and assertion by the proletarians intended to instill the spirit of *timbang rasa* into a system which continuously negated their human, social and cultural worth in their everyday existence under capitalist relations of production.

Articulation and Contents of Proletarian Ideology

Articulation of Class and Non-Class Ideologies

An important thrust in the analysis in this article is that the existence of class at the level of ideology is not necessarily a mechanical reflection of class at the level of production relations. This does not mean that there is no relationship at all between these two levels. What happens at the level of ideological discourse is that class content exists in different forms of articulation with non-class contents.

In respect to Malay proletarians, it can be seen that such articulation emerges by virtue of the fact that they experience their class relations in various ways.

- They experience these relations as a class, in which their social existence, role and status is primarily defined in terms of the labor power (*tenaga*) that they can sell. The emergence of this ideology as a dominant proletarian ethos was clearly evident on the plantation studied. Essentially this ideology emphasizes the equality of sharing a similar life-chance and class-status position among those who are at the lowest rung of the plantation hierarchy and whose role is to provide labor power in the system. It is this same ideological underpinning (combined with instrumentalism) that also becomes the main source for the formation of the lower class as a political community.
- They experience these relations as “people” or human beings. This aspect is intricately related to the first, specifically to the process of commoditization of man through personalized forms of exploitation in the labor process. The concern here is with the loss of human dignity or their moral and social worth (*maruah*) as human beings. What emerges at the ideological level is an egalitarian norm, handled through the concept of *timbang rasa* which emphasizes human empathy on the basis of “the equality of men deriving from their intrinsic personal or human worth.”⁴⁴ The thrust of this ideology is on change at the level of personal human values rather than on existing roles, institutions, class structures or the division of labor. The emphasis of this equality “exists outside the system of social stratification”; it is instead “rooted in the human condition, in the equality of men as human beings, in their similar propensities to feel, to suffer and to enjoy.”⁴⁵ It is an egalitarianism which accepts the socio-economic differences of human beings “in search of a living.”

44. Chandra Jayawardena, “Ideology and Conflict in Lower Class communities,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. X, No. 4, 1968, p. 413.

45. *Ibid.*

- They experience these relations as Malays. Owing to the complication introduced by ethnicity in the plantation stratification system, it can also reinforce the “we” ethnic sentiments amongst the lower class. At the same time, the specific nature of the plantation class system and mode of organization makes it difficult for this same ethnic “we” lower class feeling to be extended to those ethnic members in the official hierarchy. Whilst ethnicity as a form of “communalism” may have a place in the ideological make-up of the workers, the relevance of this form of ethnicity cannot always be assumed. The strike was illuminating in this respect for it showed that what was more important to the workers were the non-ethnic factors as the bases for their support. Yet if we probe deeply, these so-called non-ethnic elements (such as *timbang rasa*, *jasa*) are cultural categories and idioms of a specific ethnic group. They form an important cultural dimension of ethnicity. By this I mean ethnicity as connotating a typification of shared knowledge, ideational resources, cultural concepts, norms, values or symbols which relate to how a particular ethnic group handles and understands certain social relations or phenomena. Indeed this cultural dimension of ethnicity may be the very source of class consciousness. As Thompson suggests, “Class consciousness is the way in which these experiences are handled in cultural terms: embodied in traditions, value-systems, ideas and institutional forms.”⁴⁶ What Thompson forgets is that under certain conditions, these “cultural terms” may also transcend their original cultural origins and specificities and take on a universal character and form at the level of ideological discourse. The concepts of *timbang rasa*, *maruah* and *jasa* are all culturally derived, and specific to Malays. Yet these are also translatable even by the Malay proletarians themselves into a more universal form and assume their own viability to underlie relations between individuals as “people” or human beings.⁴⁷

Articulation of Capitalist–Non-Capitalist Ideologies

Another important thrust of the argument of this paper is that the articulation of class and non-class ideologies can also be seen as an articulation of modes of production, albeit at the ideological level. This particular anal-

46. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), p. 9.

47. In this context, it is interesting to note the universalizing tendencies and aspects of *timbang rasa* which transcend ethnic boundaries. In one particular situation observed, a Chinese *pegawai* was transferred by the management from the factory to the transport workshop section. About 108 Malay factory workers came to his support and signed a petition appealing to the State Labour Department and the General Manager to retain him in his old position. The following excerpt of the petition clearly indicates that the Chinese *pegawai* had endeared himself to the workers because of his personal sensitivity to their moral needs.

Mr. . . . is a pegawai to whom we are loyal and respect. Through him, we have been able to learn all the mistakes in our daily work. He has guided us in every aspect of work and this has made us more spirited and dedicated in our work. He has also given all of us a lot of moral support in improving and perfecting our work. He has shown no hesitation in giving us good advice and guidance Therefore we feel most saddened about his transfer . . . since the person who has been guiding us all this time is now far away from us.

ysis hinges on the fact that these proletarians are recently reconstituted from the indigenous peasantry and have brought with them their own cultural system of ideas for handling class relations in their former society.⁴⁸

In the context of a peripheral Third World formation, Malay peasants are best seen as non-capitalist commodity producers articulated with a dominant capitalist mode.⁴⁹ Although Malay peasants are integrated into the capitalist world system via the circuit of merchant capital, because earlier pre-capitalist relations of production have been altered by the colonial processes into new forms which are neither pre-capitalist nor capitalist but non-capitalist, they still carry over some of their traditional ideological underpinnings. Under the impact of merchant capital, these pre-capitalist forms have not been completely dissolved into capitalist forms.⁵⁰

The “conservation-dissolution” effects of “restricted and uneven development” of capitalism in the periphery work equally well at the ideological level of the formation.⁵¹ As I have argued elsewhere,⁵² these traditional ideological forms may underlie, mediate and partially reproduce their present relations of production, which include personalism, patron-clients, kinship, moral economy, etc. Peasant relations of production have not as yet divorced man from his other social and cultural relations. This embeddedness of their economic relations within non-economic components⁵³ is what theoretically gives the peasant individual the possibility of not being defined solely in terms of his economic worth. As such, even though he is already a producer of commodity, he has not as yet become a total commodity of labor. Thus peasant class and economic relations may be personalized; the cultural forms which mediate these relations give enough recognition to the peasant’s sense of social and cultural worth.

Shifting to the plantation brings him right into the heart of the capitalist mode of production. Capitalist relations of production no longer provide him with the cultural and personalized milieu which formed the context for his previous relations of production. Yet the Malay proletarians are not totally devoid of their own ideological system; in the face-to-face relations around the productive process, they revitalize their old peasant strategies of handling class relations. To combat the loss of *maruah*, they attempt to personalize these contractual and technical relations of domination. Their attempt to instill *timbang rasa* into the values of their superiors or immediate dominant actors can be seen as a strategy to insert into the system

48. Thompson, *op. cit.*

49. Zawawi, 1982, *op. cit.*

50. See Geoffrey Kay, *Development and Underdevelopment: A Marxist Analysis* (London: Macmillan, 1975); Zawawi Ibrahim, in *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 1983, *op. cit.*

51. Taylor, *op. cit.*

52. *Ibid.*

53. “As a general phenomena . . . productive and social relations in peasant communities are simultaneously personal relations, either between tenants and his superior, between kin, between friend and between neighbours. . . . The bonds of kinship are more or less converging with the process of work or dominant productive relations.” E. Archetti & S. Ass, “Peasant Studies: An Overview,” in Howard Newby, ed., *International Perspectives in Rural Sociology* (London: Johan Wiley, 1978), p. 123.

some peasant values and ideological content in conducting class relations. The proletarian ideological synthesis reached at this level of discourse should also be seen as a process in which capitalist ideology is in articulation with non-capitalist ideological forms.

Conclusion

The question of lower-class ideology has yet to be explored fully in the context of contemporary Malaysian society. It can not be denied that, given the specific historical colonial experience of the society, ethnicity has assumed a prominence both at the objective and subjective levels of society. At the same time, the question of class must not also be ignored. The issue is not an either/or question. The realities of how different ideological contents are combined, articulated and synthesized are more complex than what normally meets the eye of the analyst of class or ethnicity. ★

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