

The Struggle for History

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For tonight's launch of SEPHIS's new e-magazine, I volunteered a title, which has already been subject to considerable misinterpretation. As you know, there is declining interest in the study of history all over the world, particularly in developing countries. Almost all the History Departments in Malaysia have closed down or have been reinvented to study politics, international relations and other 'more relevant' subjects. Probably, there is only one Department of History left in the country right now. This is a matter of great concern because people who do not know history run the risk of repeating it. And as we know, when history repeats itself, tragedy becomes farce. So there is an important plea to be made for the study of history.

Second, there is a rather urgent need to return to the study of history, and particularly in this period for us in the South, to the study of imperialism and its discontents. We are living in very special times, which require us to return to the study of our past, to better understand the present and anticipate the future. Recent debates during the last decade and a half have had to address Francis Fukuyama's claim of reaching an 'end of history' in a Hegelian and Daniel Bell sense. Samuel Huntington's thesis of a 'clash of civilizations' dissented with Fukuyama by reifying imagined and real cultural conflicts. This discourse excludes much of the world, of people supposedly without history. In contemporary formulations, the notion of civilization adopts the old assumptions of Orientalism, and often only recognizes Chinese civilization, or what is misleadingly called Confucian civilization, as well as so-called Indian civilization and Islamic civilization, besides Western civilization – which Gandhi famously suggested would be a 'good idea'. Societies and cultures without written texts or what are considered sophisticated material artefacts are thus deemed to be without civilization, and thus without history. Civilizations are defined in terms of highly developed written chronicles or material culture, particularly in terms of the use of metal alloys and so on. So, a great number of cultures around the equator – which have creatively and adequately used wood and other organic materials – are thus often ignored as societies without history. Hence, in so far as it is empowering to recognize that these are societies with history, it involves yet another struggle for history.

However, my concern here is with a third struggle for history, that is, for an appreciation of what increasing numbers of people recognise as imperialism. For a long time, many have hesitated to use the word 'imperialism' because it is no longer considered a polite term. One should not talk about imperialism, so instead we use other terms such as transnationalism, globalization, hegemony, dominance or some other surrogate terms, sometimes with greater accuracy, but usually not. But this deference to what is mistakenly considered to be good manners, is really asymmetric, even passé on our part. In the West, for example, in the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, which are hardly rightwing tabloids, there has in recent years been an unabashed discussion of imperialism or 'empire talk', often justified in seemingly benign or even humanitarian terms – not just evoking contemporary versions of the 'white man's burden' to deal with 'failed states' and to uphold human rights and democracy, for instance.

We should not hesitate to call a spade a spade, particularly in recognizing contemporary imperialism. Unfortunately, much of the contemporary discussion of imperialism is rather lacking in serious economic content. Instead, in the last two decades or so, following the pioneering work of anti-imperialist scholars like Edward Said and others, there has been a focus on cultural imperialism. Of course, the recognition of cultural imperialism is not unimportant, but this focus has limited our understanding of the multifaceted character of imperialism. Hence, it is important for us to go beyond that. In more recent times, particularly after the end of the Cold War, with recognition of the uni-polar world after the demise of the Soviet Union, there is increasing recognition of growing American political and military domination. But again, this recognition is largely unconnected to understanding what should be termed 'economic imperialism'. For that reason, there is need for better understanding and appreciation of economic imperialism and its consequences.

The study of contemporary economic imperialism and its historical origins and transformation should be very high on the agenda for addressing questions raised by imperialism in the present age. There have been many scholars of cultural and other aspects of imperialism who have looked at some of these economic issues, but with rather mixed results. Perhaps most famous is the book *Empire*, by Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and published by Harvard University Press, which has made quite an impact in certain circles. It mainly confirms a pre-conceived, post-modern and post-Fordist 'network' view of the

organization of contemporary imperialism. This has the serious consequence of distracting us from a better appreciation of other economic dimensions of imperialism.

Two letters to the British *Guardian* by the same Michael Hardt in 2002 and 2003 were almost written like open letters to George W. Bush, pleading that the US President had failed to understand the contemporary ‘network’ character of imperialism, which defined new needs for empire in his fertile imagination. He urged Bush to recognize that capitalism and imperialism had changed, making states less needed if not irrelevant, and there was thus no longer any need for the US President to invade Iraq. While there may have been no systemic need for the US to invade Iraq in 2002, such an analysis is not going to lead us very far analytically and politically. Not surprisingly, Hardt and Negri advocate spontaneous mass action, with no clear direction or end.

This is not to suggest that there is nothing for us to learn from the various discourses, which have emerged in the recent period. Critique involves engagement, and not simple rejection, which we do at our peril. The discourse of globalization, for instance, is very interesting, and has emerged at a particular moment in time when there is greater appreciation of cheaper, more affordable means of transportation and communication, and as a consequence, what some people prefer to refer to as the compression of space and time. This is a very important insight because it implies a different view of history, of geography, of the relationship between geography and history, and so on.

Understandings of globalization have been rather simplistically polarized in ways which are not particularly useful. A close friend of some of us here, for instance, has coined the term ‘deglobalization’ – not very different from ‘de-linking’, a term which emerged about three to four decades ago. Unfortunately, this has become a caricature of some critiques of globalization and does not offer a serious and viable alternative to the challenges of the times we live in. To be relevant, to be taken seriously and to forge popular alliances against imperialism, we have to get away from such simplistic binary choices to develop a much richer and more credible understanding which better captures most experiences of imperialism. After all, many critics or opponents of so-called globalization are first and foremost – perhaps more than the ostensible proponents of what they term globalization – internationalist in their intellectual formation, political practice, and sense of solidarity as well as priorities. Part of the problem with this analysis and discourse is that there are so

many different meanings to globalization, like the proverbial six blind men touching different parts of the elephant, and referring to its different body parts as if they were all the same thing. So we do not get very far with some people talking about globalization in terms of the communications revolution, while others refer principally to the fluidity of finance, and yet others talk about globalization as involving the reduction of barriers to cross border flows of goods, services, investment, finance, ideas and, sometimes, people.

This kind of debate forces us to take positions – are you for or against globalization? This is a binary game that we should refuse to play as it is a caricature of many difficult and complex challenges and choices requiring more creative options. So we need to deconstruct the discourse and refuse to participate on these terms in such debates because they will not help us understand what is going on.

It has become almost banal to observe that we are living in a period of globalization, but this, of course, is not the first period of globalization. The synthetic historical review by Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*, reminds us of a period of intense relations among different parts of the world, stretching from China in the East, beyond Istanbul in the West, with many other cities in between, in South Asia, Africa and elsewhere. Her work reminds us of the emergence of a world system not characterized by domination, one which was, in a sense, far more egalitarian than any world system since. Since the Renaissance, we have seen a long period of history, which has always had the domination of one power or another. For instance, after the long century of the Italian city states of Venice, Genoa and Florence, we have seen periods of domination involving, first, the Dutch Republic, subsequently superseded by Britain, thanks partly to the very significant financial contribution, particularly of the British West Indies in the Caribbean and India to the accumulation process for the Industrial Revolution. In the first half of the twentieth century, the British empire was increasingly superseded by what most now recognize as the US empire. This, of course, has been a very interesting and complicated process because, in many ways, the nature of the US empire is unfamiliar, in that it did not rely on colonial expansionism, which characterized the last era of globalization.

A century ago, the English economist, John Hobson, objected to imperialism from a liberal point of view. For Hobson, the growing empire, e.g. in South Africa, was objectionable because it reflected two things familiar to us. For Hobson, the concentration and

centralization of capital had betrayed the liberal ethics of economic as well as political freedom. Hobson also found imperialism objectionable because such concentration of economic power had resulted in greater business influence on public policy,¹ what we now called cronyism.²

This Filipino contribution to the English language vocabulary also influenced the Reformasi movement in Malaysia. Anwar Ibrahim and his supporters imported the acronym KKN from Indonesia for ‘Korupsi (Corruption), Kolusi (Collusion), Nepotisma (Nepotism)’. They changed ‘kolusi’ to ‘kronisme’ (cronyism) – something more familiar to Malaysians, thanks to the Filipinos’ struggle against Marcos’ cronyism during the mid-1980s, and then Prime Minister Mahathir’s blatant bias for the ostensibly successful businessmen who caught his fancy.

Thus, imperialism was recognized from a liberal perspective by John Hobson over a century ago as a problem caused by the rise of monopoly capital and of cronyism. It is that kind of liberal sensibility which is absent among the so-called neo-liberals, who seem to have no hang-ups about monopoly power today, or their influence on public policy. It is precisely that kind of recognition which forces us to begin to try to reconstruct very broad, often new coalitions for struggle including people who seriously recognize and pursue nineteenth-century liberal ethics in the present context, which leads us to oppose the concentration of economic power on the one hand, and the intimate – often illicit – relationship between economic and political power on the other.

A major contributor to empire talk in Washington and New York today is arguably the most prominent historian of our age, Niall Ferguson, who is probably the only historian in the media list of the 100 most influential people in the world today. There are also a couple of economists, but almost no other academics. Ferguson’s latest book, *Colossus*, about the desirability of US empire, directly appeals to the US elite to rise to the challenge of imperial responsibility. His influential previous book, *Empire* was a coffee table book, accompanying a widely watched BBC television series. Imagine Ferguson’s influence, with millions of people all over the world watching. He claims that the British empire was generally benign, if not modernizing and historically progressive in consequence, in one fell swoop obliterating the painstaking research of thousands of historians and others, and violating the memory of suffering and sacrifice by our forebears.

In much of the West today, you have a growing normalization of imperialism, growing acceptance, if not approval, of Western intervention, always presumed to be selfless, if not benign. Ferguson is currently one of the most frequent contributors to *Foreign Affairs*, the single most widely read semi-academic journal in the West today. His many widely read writings claim that the British empire brought the rule of law, infrastructure, progress, etc. He unabashedly insists that the American leadership today must not hesitate to rise to its imperial responsibilities, and should get over its historical and ideological baggage of ‘empire denial’, partly due to having waged the first modern war of national liberation from 1776.³

Sadly, after all the critical revisionist historical work on empire in the last third of the twentieth century, such claims are going largely unchallenged, especially in most influential western publications.⁴ We in the South urgently need to set the record straight, but we are in a very weak position, because there is very little serious work going on. As an adviser on public policy on higher education policy in Malaysia put it, ‘We have to stop wasting our time on useless subjects like history, philosophy and so on. Instead, we should devote more resources to the sciences, particularly technology and some other applied social sciences, such as urban planning.’ Everything else is to be consigned to the dustbin including history. Unfortunately, this is the attitude of influential policy makers in much of the Third World.

Following *Washington Post* columnist Sebastian Mallaby, Ferguson assumes sub-Saharan Africa has collapsed mainly leaving failed states. For this reason, they and others argue, developed country governments have to take on the colonial ‘white man’s burden’ to impose law and order, uphold human rights and bring democracy until the natives are ready to govern themselves. You may smile or think I’m exaggerating, but please read Ferguson, Mallaby and other supposedly liberal advocates of human rights.

Much of the research which people like Ferguson build on has actually long been discredited for being partial at best and often biased, if not dishonest, e.g. the work of David Fieldhouse defending British empire 30 or 40 years ago. By selectively citing as it suits him, Ferguson offers an interpretation of imperial history which is not old-style colonial apologia, but instead seems to offer a seemingly nuanced and supposedly balanced view. Thus, the British empire is recognized as flawed and with blemishes, but is not only superior to other colonial empires, but most importantly, benign and progressive on balance.

As Hobson and Lenin noted, Britain supplied capital to the world and financed growth in the world economy from around 1870 until the outbreak of World War I. But where did London's capital come from? Largely from the current account surpluses we in the Empire contributed, initially from the West Indies and India, but later also from Africa and Southeast Asia from around 1880 or so. The massive contribution to capital accumulation by the trade surpluses of the British colonies is hardly ever mentioned in most historical narratives of this Industrial Revolution. After the Second World War, for example, Malaya contributed more to the UK's economic recovery than any other part of the Empire, including Britain itself, or even by post-war US Marshall Plan and other aid.⁵

At the beginning of the third Christian millennium, economic historian Angus Madisson's *Millennial Perspective* (OECD, 2001) offered his best guesses of what has happened in the last two millennia. He suggests that until the thirteenth century, the world was quite equal, with China slightly ahead, after which Europe began to catch up with and then overtake China. Thus, contemporary inequalities began to grow with the Italian Renaissance, the rise of Iberia and then, the Dutch Republic. But the 'great divergence' – between 'North' and 'South' – began around the time of the Industrial Revolution.

This divergence from the time of the Industrial Revolution has been slightly reversed after the Second World War, with trends since the 1980s more ambiguous. From around 1950 until the 1970s, there was a temporary reversal of this divergence, with import-substituting industrialization and economic growth following decolonization. The subsequent decline in Africa, much of Latin America and parts of Asia has been offset by the continued tremendous growth of East Asia, now including China and India, in the last couple of decades. Growing domestic inequalities following economic liberalization have also had mixed consequences for overall global inequalities. So while large parts of the South have grown, much of the rest of the South has been falling further behind.

This struggle for history is a struggle, which involves far more than history in the sense of the past, but also the present as history. Hence, the stakes are extremely high. Unfortunately, we may be in a situation, where history may repeat itself. And of course, if we do not recognize history, and more importantly, the forces that underlie historical phenomena, outcomes and trends, we run the risk of sliding further into imperial farce.

Malaysians know me as someone who has criticized many economic policies associated with former Prime Minister Mahathir. But at the risk of sounding like a founder of the post-Mahathir nostalgia circle, we are now in a situation of ignoring, if not forgetting some important issues Mahathir raised, albeit in his typically quixotic fashion. In contrast, the new Malaysian regime is trying very hard to ‘normalize’, to be internationally acceptable after the Mahathir interregnum, to be ‘one of the boys’ again.

Thankfully, some of the new governments emerging in the South are trying to make a difference, trying to remind us that there are alternatives for the South. This was the significance of Cancun II in 2003 following the two lost decades after Cancun I in 1983, when then late Jamaican Prime Minister Michael Manley reported how US President Reagan ‘killed the South softly with his smile’. We seem not to appreciate our own history well enough to want to chart a path significantly different from the sad history of our past, including our post colonial experience. Instead, we seem resigned to the processes taking place, which are largely being shaped in Washington DC and on Wall Street, as if we have no alternative to them.

It is precisely for this reason that Sephis was founded to promote the study of the history of development, especially the history of the South. By knowing our history, we know ourselves and learn how we can better support the aspirations for development of people in the South, and not just by looking in the rear view mirror of history, we better understand the significance of what has happened and is happening to us, in turn enabling us to act far more knowledgably and effectively.

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Born in Penang, Malaysia, in 1952, Jomo studied at the Penang Free School (PFS, 1964-6), Royal Military College (RMC, 1967-70), Yale (1970-3) and Harvard (1973-7). He taught at the Science University of Malaysia (USM, 1974), Harvard (1974-5), Yale (1977), National

University of Malaysia (UKM, 1977-82), University of Malaya (since 1982), and Cornell (1993). He was a Visiting Fellow at Cambridge University (1987-8; 1991-2).

He has authored over 35 monographs, edited over 45 books and translated 11 volumes besides writing many academic papers and articles for the media. He is on the editorial boards of several learned journals. Some of his most recent book publications include *Malaysia's Political Economy* (with E. T. Gomez), *Tigers in Trouble, Rents, Rent-Seeking and Economic Development: Theory and the Asian Evidence* (with Mushtaq Khan), *Malaysian Eclipse: Economic Crisis and Recovery*, *Globalization Versus Development: Heterodox Perspectives*, *Southeast Asia's Industrialization*, *Ugly Malaysians? South-South Investments Abused*, *Southeast Asian Paper Tigers? Behind Miracle and Debacle*, *Manufacturing Competitiveness: How Internationally Competitive National Firms And Industries Developed In East Asia*, *Ethnic Business? Chinese Capitalism in Southeast Asia* (with Brian Folk), *Deforesting Malaysia: The Political Economy of Agricultural Expansion and Commercial Logging* (with YT Chang and KJ Khoo) and *M Way: Mahathir's Economic Legacy*.

He is a sharp and well-informed critic of many of Dr Mahathir's policies, 1981-2003, as evident from his book, *M Way: Mahathir's Economic Legacy* (2003), a collection of 17 thoughtful articles written over twenty years. Since the mid-90s, his research on South East Asia has been in wider regional and international contexts, such as Africa and Latin America. He is to be Assistant Secretary General of the United Nation's Department for Economics and Social Affairs from January 2005.

¹ Indeed, most of the richest people in Asia identified in a recent survey make most of their money from state guaranteed monopolies.

² One of the most interesting acronyms ever created by the Filipinos, they usually decide on the acronym first before they decide on what to call the organization, is the word 'acronym' itself, for the Anticronymism Movement.

³ Within a kilometre from here, there is a fort named after Lord Cornwallis, who lost this first war of national liberation and was subsequently consigned to Penang after it was 'founded' in 1786. The original idea was to build a fort to protect the whole area now called Weld Quay, but it cost a bit too much, and the English did not want to spend money to pay the Chinese contractors. So Fort Cornwallis is only the size of a football field.

⁴ Ferguson is no fool, and wrote some substantial books on the rise of industry and finance in Europe plus an influential book on World War One and another successful book on *The House of Rothschild*. He is no intellectual lightweight, but was a professor at Oxford and now a professor at Harvard. They define the history of the world for much of the western world. He made the Empire series for the BBC and is popular with almost all major Anglophone television networks in the US and UK. A recent essay, by Stephen Howe in *Open Democracy*, about Ferguson, suggests a precocious Thatcherite, intellectually formed in the 1980s. Thatcherism was a very important challenge not only to the left, but also to the old style pro-welfare state 'soft' conservatism of 'wets' like Harold Macmillan and Ted Heath.

⁵ The relationship between Penang and the US is longstanding. After Cornwallis, Penang's role as an exporter and smelter of tin was boosted by the increased demand for tinned food during the Civil War following the decline of Cornwall supplies. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Henry Ford began mass production of automobiles, raising the demand for rubber and encouraging capitalist cultivation on plantations in Malaya to replace supplies from tapping jungle trees. Since the 1970s, Penang has been one of the favourite sites for electronic (re)export processing, even earning the title of 'Silicon Island'. Recent deindustrialization and growth of cosmetic surgery tourism has already changed this appellation to 'Silicone Isle' as Hollywood and globalized aesthetic norms encourage those who can afford it to transform their physical appearances to imitate these perceived new norms.