

Race and Multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore

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This book explores race and multiculturalism in Malaysia and Singapore from a range of different disciplinary perspectives, showing how race and multiculturalism are represented, how multiculturalism works out in practice and how attitudes towards race and multiculturalism – and multicultural practices – have developed over time.

Going beyond existing studies – which concentrate on the politics and public aspects of multiculturalism – this book burrows deeper into the cultural underpinnings of multicultural politics; relating the subject to the theoretical angles of cultural studies and post-colonial theory and discussing a range of empirical examples (drawn from extensive original research, covering diverse practices such as films, weblogs, music subcultures, art, policy discourse, textbooks, novels, poetry) which demonstrate overall how the identity politics of race and intercultural interaction are being shaped today.

It concentrates on two key Asian countries particularly noted for their relatively successful record in managing ethnic differences, at a time when many fast-developing Asian countries increasingly have to come to terms with cultural pluralism and migrant diversity.

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Introduction

Postcoloniality, race and multiculturalism

Daniel P.S. Goh and Philip Holden

Multiculturalism as postcolonial culture

Attention to the postcolonial nation-states of Singapore and Malaysia in the international media frequently focuses on two apparently mutually contradictory areas. In economic terms, the two countries are frequently praised as success stories of modernization; in cultural terms, they are often seen as falling away from the principles of liberal democracy that are taken as representative of modernity. In the last few years, for instance, media coverage of Malaysia's planned coast-to-coast oil pipeline and Singapore's integrated resort developments has alternated with accounts of the failure of a Muslim convert to Christianity to have her case heard by a Malaysian civil court and Singapore's use of sedition laws against bloggers who posted racist remarks online. Yet what if these economic and cultural elements, rather than being profoundly and puzzlingly opposed to each other, were in fact closely related; if the conditions for existence of the developmental state in each country were profoundly shaped by a racial governmentality?

Such a realization asks us to reconsider the manner in which multiculturalism as a global phenomenon has been discussed in much recent literature. In the last fifty years much attention has been given to the recognition and problematization of cultural difference within the framework of the nation-state. Former metropolitan colonial powers have belatedly realized the central place of cultural diversity in their polities, while newly independent states have often needed to devise nationalisms that acknowledge the many overlapping cultural communities that exist in a single national space. Academic and popular discourse has tended to separate these two experiences, tagging the former as the issue of multiculturalism (Goldberg 1994a) while treating the latter as the problem of ethnic pluralism and ethnonationalism (Brown 1994), despite the fact that both have similar origins in what we call colonial race/culture, and both confront colonial race/culture's postcolonial consequences. This division between multiculturalism and ethnonationalism, indeed, promotes a binary division based on Orientalist positive and negative valences. In this book, in examining Singapore and Malaysia as examples of non-Western multiculturalisms, we thus recast the problem of pluralism as a question of multiculturalism comparable to its Western counterpart.

In reading Singaporean and Malaysian multiculturalism, we need to show caution over some of the premises of previous work on multiculturalism, consequences

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of the practice V.J. Mishra (2002: 199) has characterized as ‘a tendency to read multiculturalism as a purely Western phenomenon requiring urgent academic analysis and attention in the context of a largely post-1965 immigration of non-white peoples into Western nation-states.’ Thus much critical discussion of multiculturalism in Europe, the United States, Canada and Australia in recent years has utilized Martin Barker’s (1981: 3) notion of a ‘new racism’, in which the ‘apparently innocent language’ of culture replaces essentialized biologisms at the surface of racial discourses: the target of racism become lifestyle ‘choices’, ethnicity, or immigration, rather than directly articulated references to race itself. Yet in postcolonial societies such as Singapore and Malaysia ‘race’ itself is a category openly made use of by the state apparatus. As Chua Beng Huat (2005) reminds us in his discussion of communitarian multiculturalism in Singapore, the various questions raised by multiculturalism for those of us working, studying and living in postcolonial societies are not simply concerned with the squaring of liberalism with cultural diversity. In order to explore the social questions raised by Singaporean and Malaysian multiculturalism, we need first to explore and identify the characteristics of what we might call postcolonial multiculturalism, as differentiated from Western multiculturalism in various liberal manifestations.

An initial approach might thus be to review literature on Singaporean and Malaysian multiculturalism. Ours is not the first book that attempts to specify the difference between Western and postcolonial multiculturalism, especially with regards to multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia, since these two countries have been touted as the most successful of postcolonial states in managing ethnic differences and conflicts. The collections of essays edited by Robert Hefner (2001) and Will Kymlicka and Baogang He (2005) are landmark works in this respect. Hefner’s collection is particularly postcolonial in orientation; it grounds the investigation of multiculturalism in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia in the production and reproduction of precolonial, colonial and postcolonial pluralisms, with special reference to J.S. Furnivall’s (1948) founding work on ethnic pluralism and state policy in the Southeast Asian region. The essays in Kymlicka and He’s collection deal more with the neo-liberal present, but the two collections share a focus on the public character of multiculturalism, or the cluster of issues and questions around what Kymlicka (1998) has called ‘multicultural citizenship’. In both collections the shadow of the challenge to neo-liberalism posed by ‘Asian values’ hovers in the background, because their overall approaches to postcolonial multiculturalism still take their theoretical cues, if not a complete conceptual apparatus, from liberal considerations of multiculturalism. In contrast, this collection here seeks to interrogate multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia from the theoretical angles of cultural studies and postcolonial theory. We see this strategy as complementary to rather than conflicting with the work the other collections have done, since understanding the postcolonial cultural logics of state multiculturalism in the two nation-states allows us to better discern the conditions of possibility of politics, liberal or otherwise.

The common problem the essays collected here engage with is the manifestation of state multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia that have institutionalized

colonial racial identities and woven them into the fabric of political and social life to the extent that they constitute a common sense through which people conceive identities of themselves and others. There is, however, a growing sense in these societies that such a multiculturalism imposes limits upon the recognition and interrogation of cultural difference, in turn raising a key postcolonial question pertaining to multiculturalism: can we think beyond the terms and categories set by the white colonialists to know, conquer and rule the 'natives', to understand ourselves and the societies in which we live?

In answering this question, we might first take a cue from Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor. Taylor (1994) asserts that the ethics of recognition and respect for multicultural difference require that we approach the identities of others with the presumption of equal value and worth that we accord our own identities. Making this presumption, Taylor points out, does not prevent us from ultimately judging the identities of others as not equivalent to our own. But in the interest of securing recognition for non-hegemonic cultures, Taylor asks that both public and private judgements of the relative value of cultures be made in the light of non-ethnocentric criteria which look to all the horizons of the different cultures in question. This does not preclude a state from committing to support particular cultures for which the community has expressed preference or when preservation of such cultures is considered a moral necessity or good. To enable free discourse which maintains non-ethnocentric criteria, however, Taylor argues that state support of selected cultures can be justified only as long as the fundamental rights of citizens with commitments to other cultures or no commitments at all are protected.

Applying Taylor's perspective to postcolonial contexts evokes intriguing questions. State multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia has created possibilities and openings in the politics of recognition, but has closed off many others. The institutionalization of identities has foreclosed commitments to cultures other than the official categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO) inherited from the British colonial administration. Furthermore, in stressing the primacy of race in cultural affiliation, state multiculturalism is unable to accord recognition to other foci of cultural identity, and also denies the possibility of not committing to any essential cultural identity. Within the bound of these racial categories of 'local' culture, the presumption of equal value is implicitly already made. Possibilities of questioning the relative value of cultural practices or forms, or of expanding contemporary cultural horizons in response to changing social contexts, are foreclosed in the interest of maintaining racial tolerance and harmony between communities conceived of as equal but essentially different. Genuine respect and appreciation arising from intercultural dialogue thus may be frequently precluded. Taylor's perspective also allows us to make an approach towards the ethics of the state's commitment to promoting a constructed Chinese majoritarian culture in Singapore and Malay cultural primacy in Malaysia at the level of public policy, a consequence of the politics of decolonization driven by the momentum of colonial policies and anti-colonial politics. We might question whether such a practice contradicts the presumption of the equal worth of the recognized races, and whether the implicit argument that the promotion of such culture is a collective cultural good and

preference is sufficiently compelling as to permit the state intervention which Taylor associates with claims of special treatment.

It is clear from this preliminary consideration of multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia through the lens of Taylor's liberal multiculturalism that the coding of colonial race/culture in the state has not disappeared with decolonization. As we have indicated earlier, however, there are limits to a simple reading of Singaporean and Malaysian multiculturalism as diverging from an idealized and implicitly liberal script. Multiculturalism in Singapore and Malaysia should thus be read in the historical context of a scripting and re-scripting of colonial and postcolonial cultures. Indeed, it is our conviction that an examination of such scripting may usefully parallel recent critiques of liberal multiculturalism in the West: Sneja Gunew's discussion of the 'colonial seeds' of multiculturalisms in Canada and Australia, for example (2004: 33–50), or Ghassan Hage's analysis of Australian multiculturalism as complicit with 'a discourse of *internal* orientalism' (1998: 17).

This collection of articles thus seeks to reopen for inquiry areas that Western liberal multiculturalism and Asian state multiculturalism have foreclosed. How does state multiculturalism square with the colonial legacies of racializations, racisms and racial cultures? How does state multiculturalism enact historical erasure or ideological validation of specific vernacular multiculturalisms? What forms of critical multiculturalism, if any, might enable a more complex engagement with cultural difference in Singapore and Malaysia? In answering these questions, this book proceeds in two thematic sections, interrogating both governmental structures and social and cultural texts. In discussing the politics of multiculturalism, each essay in this book treats the Malaysian and Singaporean governments, civil groups, citizens and residents as postcolonial actors. What this means is that these social actors find themselves in an inextricable, and perhaps unfortunate, position in which they have no choice but to negotiate the colonial legacies of racialization and transform them into postcolonial multiculturalisms. In such a situation, the simple appeal to a race-blind liberalism is not an effective counter-hegemonic or oppositional strategy. The racializations, having formed the field of discursive knowledge and action, cannot be wished away and have to be engaged by social actors who seek political credibility, or simply, meaningful identities for themselves. What this means here is that it is important for us to plot the genealogy of multiculturalisms in Singapore and Malaysia in terms of racial governmentality in order to contextualize the essays that follow.

Postcolony: racial governmentality and multiculturalism

The creation of a colonial plural society, in which a 'medley' of different cultural communities each held 'its own religion, its own culture, its own ideas and ways', meeting 'only as individuals in the market place in buying and selling' (Furnivall 1948: 304), was certainly a project of British colonialism. Town planning in the early years of British settlement in Singapore (established 1819) famously racialized urban space: the ethnic areas of Chinatown, Little India and Kampong Glam were each assigned to Chinese, Indian and Malay communities respectively, even if