

**Book Review****Postmodern Analysis of Southeast Asian Identities**

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Joel Kahn, ed., *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998, 273pp.

Social theory today is in a state of crisis. The crisis is brought about by the rapid ascendancy of postmodern sensibility in social theory and rests ultimately on the new social configuration called postmodernity. The crisis occasioned by postmodernism challenges two fundamental concepts in modernist social theory, namely, representation and identity. Scholars studying Southeast Asian culture are not immune from this epistemological turmoil. Such crisis elicits radical and critical reexamination of the methods, concepts, theories and paradigms used in the past to analyze Southeast Asian identities and their representations.

In a recent collection of essays edited by Joel Kahn, several Asian scholars attempt to wrestle with the boa of postmodernist challenge in the context of Southeast Asian culture. The contributors to the anthology *Southeast Asian Identities: Culture and the Politics of Representation in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand* provide the readers a glimpse into Asian cultures and identities as interpreted from the lenses of post-isms (like post-colonialism, post structuralism, post-culturalism, and post-nationalism).

The first group of essays provides a surgical redefinition of the relationships between citizenship, ethnicity and race. In particular, the essay of Chua Beng Huat ("Racial Singaporeans: Absence After the Hyphen") provides a Foucauldian reinterpretation of race and ethnicity among Singaporeans. The author accomplishes this by demonstrating that a unified Singaporean identity is an invention of the state to homogenize ethnic and racial differences among "Singaporeans" in its bid to create a nation-state. However, such process "has not displaced the entrenchment of multiculturalism as a cultural policy" (p. 45). The author asserts that resistance of racial and ethnic groups against such

homogenization is what is keeping the "Asianization" of Singaporean identity at bay.

In another essay on constitution of ethnicities in Singapore, Nimala Purushotam ("Disciplining Difference: 'Race' in Singapore") adopts a social constructivist reading of racial identity of Singaporeans. She adeptly demonstrates this by discussing how census works as a disciplinary method in constructing Singaporean identities. Race names or categories, for Purushotam, following Foucault, "tame everyday life ethnicities" that "enhance disciplinary work through them" (pp. 82-83). Like Beng Huat, Purushotam also challenges vigorously the essentializing definition of race and ethnicity. She therefore problemizes the grounding of race and ethnicity to imaginary origin. The claim to space via origin is counterbalanced by the right to space via cultural contribution. This is "a tension couched in racial terms" (p. 85).

In the same vein, Ariel Heryanto ("Ethnic Identities and Erasure: Chinese Indonesians") deploys a qualified form of anti-essentialist analysis of ethnicity. In discussing the process of "othering" of Chinese Indonesians, he points out that "ethnicity, like all things, is always a set of dynamic relationships of real semiotic beings. It is never a thing" (p. 111). This "othering" is the result of crisscrossing of ethnic origin, political economy, and political culture of Singapore. The state, in its bid to assimilate this "other" does not completely wipe out Chinese identities: "They are carefully and continually reproduced, but always under erasure" (p. 104). The volatility of ethnicities and races is further illustrated in Goh Beng Lan's article ("Modern Dreams: An Inquiry into Power, Cityscape, Transformation and Cultural Difference in Contemporary Malaysia").

Beng Huat and Purushotam combine Foucauldian analysis of governmentality and social constructivist analysis to lay bare the disciplinary effects of attempts at homogenizing the multicultural character of Singapore. These authors show that races and ethnicities are socially and culturally invented. They are interwoven with the policing power of the state and the production of citizenship. The three defining features of race and ethnicity, namely, origin, biology and culture, are now viewed as interpellated within the matrix homogenization-versus-difference rather than on class distinctions. This approach is quite consistent with the valorization of difference, pluralism, and rejection of essentialism in postmodern social theory.

However, these authors failed to discuss how individual Singaporean resists this universalization of races and ethnicities in the context of capitalist intrusion. Beng Huat admits that "space and limitation does not permit the analysis of the potential and actual strategies [used by]...individual Singaporeans" to resist disciplinary control (p. 46). Interestingly enough, this failure is somewhat intrinsic to postculturalists' project of decentering the subject. Race and ethnicities are easily reduced to textualities divesting them of the active participation of the agents. This is amply demonstrated in Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*. Nevertheless future analysis need not toe this line. After all the late Foucault shifted his attention to the study of subjectivity.

Other contributors to the anthology even go further than this. They assert that cultural traditions are now being invented and being packaged for tourist consumption and nation formation. Thus, Albert Schrauwers ("Returning to the Origin: Church and State in Ethnogenesis of the To Pamona") shows that the Lake Poso festival of Indonesia is a battlefield for defining the meaning of this representation. Here religion, culture, geography, politics and traditions are vying for rightful representation. Indeed to capture representation is a form of power. Again this demolishes the traditional metaphysics of representation. Social representation is a function of power, and therefore, cannot be defined in monolithic manner.

Other sources of post-colonial reinvention of Asian identities are gender, religion and globalization. Rachel A. D. Boul ("Gender and Globalization of Islamic Discourse: A Case Study") pursues the theme on gender and religious representations. In her essay, Boul suggests that even Islamic discourse on gender is now being opened up to various interpretations and representations. Islamic religion that is traditionally seen as starkly patriarchal is now being deconstructed to provide resources for Islamic feminism. Yet even among Islamic feminists there is a contest on whose representation of women best describes the teachings of the Qu'ran. Unfortunately, none of the contributors tackle other religions in the region specially Christianity. Christianity, like Islam, is also undergoing critical interrogations among Christian feminist scholars.

Then, Wendy Mee ("National Difference and Global Citizenship") presents an interesting discussion of the effects of the new information technology on Malaysian identity. She focuses on the use of Internet among Malaysian migrants. Mee's research on Internet in Malaysia,



reminiscent of Appadurai's arguments, disputes the homogenizing thesis about globalization. The Internet links Malaysians in diaspora into an imagined nation. This does not portend the erasure of Malaysian nationalism, rather it merely extends the definition of nation into virtual communities.

This groundbreaking book provides new research programs for future research on Southeast Asian identities and their representations. The contributors are bold enough to chart new paths of research that are very cogent to the era of globalization and postmodernity. It shows how fruitful the effects of applying new conceptual models and paradigms — particularly post-structuralism and social constructivism — in the analysis of gender, religion, geography, race and ethnicity, and tradition. These new research programs go beyond the conventional analysis provided by Marxism and functionalism. Nevertheless the poststructuralist project also has several limitations. Those who will read the book and will apply these new research programs are well advised to take the following cautions. First, as I reiterated, poststructuralist decentering of the subject opens itself to the problem of articulating agency. This is very important with regard to articulation of issues on gender, race and ethnicities. Second, poststructuralist method takes language and text as paradigmatic models of analysis. There should be a clarification of the role of non-discursive aspects on the discursive field. For instance, it is not enough to analyze the text-like character of Asian identities and their various representations. We also need to connect it to the colonial ideology and the material and historical forces that shaped the making of these identities. Finally, by undermining the essentializing discourse of universalistic definition of Asian identities, and consequently, the valorization of differences and heterogeneity, poststructuralist analysis of Asian identities may lead to another form of essentialism. This time the metaphysics of difference may undermine the power of the subaltern communities to forge their own identities.

Nevertheless having said these reservations I still find the entire anthology highly provocative and challenging. It is a theoretical intervention not only in Asian studies but also in postmodern social theory. I therefore cannot but agree with the editor himself who observed, "the re-*invigoration of the social sciences has taken place, at least in part through the intervention of what perhaps too facetiously called 'post-colonial intellectuals' into social scientific debate"* (p.4). ♦