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Poststructuralism as Alternative Social Science in Malaysia¹
Pascastrukturalisme Sebagai Sains Sosial Alternatif di Malaysia

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Introduction

In this paper, I consider an interim vision of a social science in Malaysia that departs from traditional, mainstream approaches. A major point of discussion within the realm of social sciences in Malaysia has revolved around the need to develop a social science that considers epistemological problems pertaining to the adoption of approaches inspired by Western scientific influence (Rustam and Norani), and one that is able to provide a robust theoretical and methodological platform on which social scientific research can rest. In order to meet this challenge, the present dynamics within the social sciences in Malaysia must be deconstructed. Overwhelmingly, this dynamics is shaped, on the one hand, by works that invest heavily in normative presuppositions – either by ways of invoking the virtues of policies and measures that are pursued by the establishment, or critiquing such policies and measures from contending perspectives – and on the other, by works that assume neutrality and objectivity in analysing social phenomena, with a heavy emphasis on empiricism, driven by the positivist and behaviourist paradigms. And, while there have been efforts to reconsider the fundamental problems surrounding the applications of those paradigms, they remain at the level of epistemological critique.

Hence, the challenge that needs to be taken up is to consider questions about how an alternative social science, at the level of doing actual research, can look like. One such question pertains to developing an alternative that would engage with its rival on an

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ontological platform, and at the same time offer a research programme that is contextually sensitive. As such, this alternative must be able to allow for research to not just explain social phenomena, but also to have a critical quality. It is argued that such challenge can be met by deploying a poststructuralist approach to social research.

In the following, I revisit the debate surrounding the state of the Malaysian social sciences, and I offer critical reflections on its present scenario. I then consider the poststructuralist perspective as both a means of ontological intervention and critical research programme. I highlight how poststructuralism has, today, furnished its anti-essentialist critique of Western social sciences with a series of theoretical and methodological innovations to inform research activities. The poststructuralist approach, via a specific understanding of the social realm as a discursive process, allows for research to be empirically sensitive, and to invoke particular normative commitments, but not in the same way as the mainstream approaches do. I proceed to demonstrate how poststructuralist research can work around the problems with approaches that are inspired by normative-*ism* and empiricism, through a preliminary study of the *new politics* idea in the realm of multiculturalism in Malaysia. Ultimately, I argue that a poststructuralist social science is able to offer critical explanation to social phenomena, affect debates amongst different approaches, and initiate and facilitate practical changes and reforms in society through research.

The State of Social Sciences in Malaysia Revisited

In the early 1990s, Rustam A. Sani and Norani Othman, to much controversy, sketched a “critical scenario” surrounding the development of the social sciences in Malaysia. Their rich genealogical study revisits the contexts within which the social sciences in Malaysia found their origins, and within which they culminated into their present dynamics. Fundamental to this development was the colonial scenario in Malaya, under which fledgling social sciences found their footing in the production of scientific writings by officers and administrators of the British colonial administration (Tham). This colonial context had since provided the flavour of how social science research is pursued in Malaysia.

In addition to the influence of the grammars through which the colonial administration articulated a representation of the nature of the Malaysian society (Yufu), more recently, within its post-colonial context, the social sciences in Malaysia have developed alongside developments of positivist and behaviourist paradigms. Both the former and the latter trends

have somewhat shaped – not in entirety, but quite overwhelmingly – the characteristics of the knowledge of the various aspects of the social sciences that are being produced. While these trends may not necessarily be as starkly divided in practice, as there may be overlap, we can nevertheless identify them as such, by way of identifying their ontological presuppositions.

A typical end-product of the former trend, for example, may come in the form of a reproduction of philosophical or ideological messages that accompany particular political projects that are pursued by the establishment, a situation which was also not unusual in the context of early colonial social sciences (Ramasamy). Conversely, we may also get to witness anti-establishment policies. This situation, then, is effectively one that is defined by different normative-isms, whereby one, through scientific justifications that are drawn internally within the demands of the given structure of the establishment, is challenged by the other, whose justification may be found within presuppositions that are entirely critical against the given structure.

On the other hand, echoing global trends, the development of positivist and behaviourist research paradigms have injected a belief in the social sciences that it is possible to assume neutrality and objectivity in analysis. In this case, we have witnessed the expansion of economic and “rationalist” perspectives as regulative ideals of social science research. According to such a paradigm, a “value-free” research is very much a possibility, whereby the task of the researcher is, within an arbitrarily chosen theoretical framework, to uncover causal accounts of social phenomena. Social reality, then, can be seen as “objective,” and the researcher may act as a “disengaged spectator” (Howarth, *Discourse* 127). Accompanying this scientism is a heavy emphasis on empirical knowledge and the ability to offer generalised and universal explanation of social phenomena under study (Ramasamy).

Amongst the many issues that Rustam and Norani raised, a particular one serves as this paper’s point of departure. In their study, the authors lamented the hegemony of transplanted Western social scientific approaches and the lack of resources to foster an intellectual orientation that is critical and sensitive to the context of the Malaysian society. Central in this problem is a lack of awareness of theoretical content and ideological orientation of the transplanted knowledge (Rustam and Norani 17).

For a socially relevant and critical social science to emerge in Malaysia, it is argued here that, of benefit is a critical engagement with the philosophical fundamentals on which social science research rests in Malaysia. For this to be done, a point of entry is needed. But it is not possible for this point of entry to be entirely “Malaysian,” for the transplanted Western knowledge is a legacy that is very much here to stay and is part and parcel of the country’s intellectual tradition. That is to say, we cannot begin by dising established trends in social science research from the onset. This may well fall short of any expectations to have social science informed by what some term “local knowledge” (Selvadurai et. al.), but we need to engage with the established trends from a fundamental point of departure, and this may well begin with insights from within the Western tradition itself. To put it more simply, in order to affect a shift in the fundamental presuppositions of mainstream social sciences, a sustained engagement with alternative trends from within the Western debate is practical and needed.

As such, we may echo recent debates within the Western social sciences, in which the very foundation of Western philosophical tradition, such as the Enlightenment and Marxism, which inspired the myriad of modern approaches in modern social sciences, are put to task. In particular, the contributions of the poststructuralist strand of thought are invaluable in developing an innovative social science, which does not depend on the platforms of positivism, behaviourism and normativism. Though the poststructuralist research programme does not bring about an exclusive tradition that is not Western, its insights are vital and relevant for a reconsideration of the present legacy of the social sciences in Malaysia. It represents what we can call a “critique from within,” which allows for a moment in which the very basis of “universality” of modern scientism is questioned. The point is to cultivate a critical perspective that will yield valuable insights into the many issues affecting Malaysia’s socio-political development. From the point of view of conducting actual research work, this shall be shown below through a preliminary study of what the *new politics* discourse is in Malaysia. From a more general philosophical point of view, it is hoped that the points that are raised in this paper will help foster a more critical intellectual tradition, towards what Rustam and Norani call “a functioning community of critical intellectuals” (17; see also Samad). The ultimate challenge would be to channel critical insights into valuable and constructive contributions to meaningful reforms in the future.

Poststructuralism as a Means of Critical Self-reflection

This, however, is not to say that work of critical nature is absent in the context of the social sciences in Malaysia. Sustained engagements with the “imperialising” nature of Western social sciences are evident amongst commentators coming from different fields, for example (Merican). It has also been argued that knowledge production in the Malaysian context has always been heavily sustained by relations of power between, first, colonial administration (Shamsul), and later, the hegemony of Western modern and scientific knowledge (Alatas) with local contexts. Such (largely) epistemological engagements have also been joined by the “Islamization of knowledge” discourse (Al-Attas), which calls for the inscription of Islamic values and principles into the intellectual culture of the different fields of knowledge in societies with Islamic inheritance, Malaysia included.

However, despite the erudite effort of the above nature, a social science research that departs from the now familiar Western modernist positivist and behaviourist inspired paradigms remains on the margins (Selvadurai et. al.), and at times even excluded. Holders of political authority are quite comfortable taking policy advice from social scientists who sit within the modernist framework, who today could also come in the form of experts from multinational consultancy firms. Such advice would of course sit well within the context of globalisation, which is informed by the expansion of neoliberal capitalism, whose demands have of course put state governments under tremendous pressure to conform. The efficacy of the course of policy actions could also then be reinforced by the scholarly approval of establishment-friendly academics. At the expense of this scenario would be critical perspectives that, while may be antagonistic to the approaches of mainstream reforms, could well be able to offer works of reform that are sensitive to the local context. As such, critical voices are drowned if we refer specifically to the context of the *realpolitik* of the nation, and what becomes obvious are reactionary voices seeking to expose the perceived incompetence of those in the establishment, inspired by populist and selective appropriation of Western-modernist social science research.

Speculatively, there could also emerge a scenario whereby research funding and grants are in the control of more behaviourist and positivist oriented gatekeepers, a situation not uncommon in Western social science academies. In such a situation, proposals that fail to produce research designs that do not incorporate statistical methods, for example, may find

themselves kept away from funding, despite their unique methodological potentials, which could yield meaningful results and explanations. Related to this, there is also the issue of the need to publish in the “right places” today, as universities conform and mainstream their research outputs with the demands of the contemporary race for global rankings. The dearth of academic journals which are open to alternative critical approaches that are indexed by benchmark indexing organisations is also not unknown.

Still, the push for a more critical and contextually relevant social science will persevere. But in addition to arguments of the *need* for an epistemologically sensitive social science, there should also be a demonstration of *how* such a social science can transpire. As put by Rustam and Norani, “a relevant and innovative ‘alternative’ social science would do well to address social issues from” a contextually grounded “point of departure, arguing for its own intellectual and analytical strategies and engaging with those of its rival, rather than rejecting outright and in advance existing paradigms that it has yet to comprehend fully, or even attempt to really understand” (15). For this to be done, a more concrete endeavour to explore how an alternative social science must take shape, which critiques the epistemological underpinnings of its rivals, offers a different ontological standpoint, and furnishes us with appropriate methodological techniques to research social phenomena. This is the spirit through which the poststructuralist perspective is invoked as one of the approaches that can help us foster a more sustained and fruitful social science.

Basic Assumptions

As alluded to above, poststructuralism emerged alongside the advent of the postmodern critique of the Western society, most especially as a result of the infamous May 1968 events in France, whereby the most realistic opportunity for a Marxist revolution failed to transpire, stifled from within by voices from the Left (Lyotard). This resulted in the crisis of the grand narratives, i.e. the regulative ideals of European life, most notably of the Enlightenment, with its idea of infinite progress, and Marxism, with its narrative of progressive emancipation of labour from capitalist modes of production. What is left, then, is a world in which no single grand narrative is adequate to guide its followers into the future. That is to say, the postmodern condition is one that is imbued with contextual sensibility (i.e. relativism) and the affirmation of difference, as well as a rejection of essentialism and universalism.

The above provides the general picture which contributed towards the societal shifts during our present age. A more specific discussion may be offered, so as to trace the intellectual origin of poststructuralist discourse theory. In 1985, Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe published *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* as a response to the disintegration of communism and social democracy's inability to fulfil its promises. In the book, they argue that in order for it to face up to future challenges, a comprehensive reconsideration of essentialist assumptions that informed Marxist thinking was needed. They include, among other things, revisiting its long-standing teleological conception of history, within which is inscribed a final socialist victory. In this light, Laclau and Mouffe invite us to rethink the "whole conception of socialism which rests upon the ontological centrality of the working class, upon the role of Revolution, with a capital 'r', as the founding moment in the transition from one type of society to another," and conceive socialism as a *discourse* among many other discourses, in a postmodern age which is marked by the emergence of new forms of social struggles, such as new feminist, ethnic, national and ecological movements (2). Drawing critically upon structuralist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and Marxist strands of thinking, Laclau and Mouffe contend that social actors and their identities are shaped by discursive structures, which are socially and politically constructed (Howarth 102). Such discourses, understood by Laclau and Mouffe in a broad rather than in a merely linguistic sense, are not characterised by their internal homogeneity (96). To define it simply, a discourse is a system of "meaningful practices that forms the identities of subjects and objects" that are intrinsically political (Howarth and Stavrakakis 3-4). It functions through the practice of *articulation*, whereby different contingent elements from discursive fields characterised by a "surplus of meaning" (Howarth 103) are brought together to fix some kind of a meaning for political subjects to grasp. In the "broad" sense as mentioned above, a discourse does not only contain abstract ideas or beliefs about the social world, but it also contains a set of practices that are instituted to realise those ideas or beliefs. From here, a *hegemonic project* may be instituted when different discourses are brought together to "dominate or structure a field of meaning" (Howarth 102).

Since its inception, Laclau and Mouffe's poststructuralist formulation of politics has been deployed in research on social and political movements across different contexts. Over time, the concepts that they had introduced gained significance as a social scientific tool which can help us render contemporary social struggles "thinkable" (Laclau and Mouffe, 3). As such, the complexities within which social actors respond to the terrain of new politics in Malaysia

can be understood from a framework which is furnished with those concepts, as discussed below.

One potential concern that may be posed with regard to the deployment of the above concepts in analysing social phenomena and relations is that they would render purely descriptive explanations. There could also be a danger of allowing the subjects in the topic under study to just speak for themselves as hermeneutical subjects who are invoking their contextualised self-interpretations. This, then, makes the theoretical innovations which are pursued in this paper an exercise that upholds the ethos of relativism, long associated with postmodern thinking (Geras), without any attempt at proper critique. Such claims, even if we were to leave things only at what have been presented so far, would not be valid. By virtue of its partly Marxist beginnings, poststructuralism takes as a point of departure a critical perspective (Laclau and Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Apology”). From a research perspective, if one were to have the intention to analyse a topic from the poststructuralist framework, this would entail that, from the onset, there would be more than just a positive curiosity that guides her/his selection of the research topic. In any case, while it is not my intention to rehearse these well-documented allegations, it is noted that, as we move into discussing the nature of poststructuralist research, it is very important to tread carefully, so as not to end up being accused of promoting an “anything goes” kind of research programme, or even methodological anarchism (Feyerabend). The perennial questions for poststructuralist research to answer, as put by Jason Glynos and David Howarth, are the following two: 1) Can we develop an approach that respects the self-interpretations of social actors, while not reducing explanations to their subjective viewpoints alone?; and 2) Is it possible to have a type of explanation that admits a certain generality, provides the space for critique, and yet respects the specificity of the case under investigation? (4),

As one of its main points of departure, the poststructuralist strand of social research, or poststructuralist discourse theory, questions the presupposition of positivist social science, that it is possible to maintain neutrality and objectivity in research. It also questions the positivist urge of pursuing the production of universal laws and theories. The poststructuralist perspective would argue that it is not possible to disregard or bracket the background assumptions of particular theories and even individual researchers (Howarth, *Discourse*; Dreyfus and Rainbow). To put it simply, it is not possible to pretend to be neutral and objective, for theories and individuals, even if they are social scientists, as they are permeated

with inherent beliefs and assumptions. Even if we assume that human beings are “rational,” far from being an objective presupposition of the nature of the human individual, the very basis of this assumption of the rational individual may be put to scrutiny. For it may be argued that, for example, the “rational” individual, who is motivated by the pursuit of economically inspired benefits in his social dealings, is born out of the specificity of the Enlightenment and modern definition of man. Analysing why Malaysia is an “authoritarian” democracy, for instance, could well end up being a self-fulfilling study, as the researcher is putting a particular socio-political context (i.e. Malaysia) against a set of presuppositions that, from the onset, may conflict with the nature of Malaysia’s socio-political context. In addition, an even more self-fulfilling endeavour is to reiterate first-principles or utopian ideals, either by way of reiterating establishment desires, or coming up with original accounts (Foucault).

Drawing inspiration from *interpretive* sciences such as hermeneutics, structuralism, deconstruction and psychoanalysis, poststructuralist theory develops an alternative ontological standpoint to critically explain a range of phenomena (Howarth, “Discourse Theory”; Glynos and Howarth). At the onset, a poststructuralist research endeavour is not just about developing hypotheses and proceeding to test them empirically in order to develop explanations. Rather, it seeks to uncover the contingencies of social phenomena and social relations, without foreclosing the terms of a research project. If, as I will show in the following section, there is a landscape of a *new politics* in Malaysia after the 2008 general elections, the point is not to ask whether or not, *in essence*, such politics exists, or to predict the direction of Malaysian politics based on a normative acceptance of the *new politics* idea, or to identify how the discourse, though abstract, had *generally* affected the way Malaysians view politics. Poststructuralist discourse theory stresses on the *radical contingency* and *structural incompleteness* of all systems of social relations (Glynos and Howarth). Therefore, it is argued that a more insightful way to study the social phenomena is to analyse how, in the realm of practices, subjects react, respond and construct meanings, in the face of the presence of an ideology or a discourse. Focus is directed towards how *hegemonic* and *counter-hegemonic* projects emerge, within a particular radically contingent context, and how they play out in actual social practices. The poststructuralist perspective, as contended by Glynos and Howarth, develops “the theoretical means to account for the ways in which subjects are gripped by certain ideologies or discourses (even if the latter are not necessarily in their

interests, or indeed consistent with their beliefs), while also seeking to account for the different ways in which dominant orders are contested by counter-hegemonic or other resistance projects, where the latter involve the construction of new identities” (5). The stress here is on the “primacy of politics” to explain social phenomena under study (Laclau and Mouffe).

Further to the concern of being accused of promoting an *anything goes* research programme, what then, would be the tools to explain the phenomena under study? Over the last three decades or so, much has been done by proponents of poststructuralism to develop not only an ontological standpoint that a poststructuralist research can rest on, but also research strategies which can be offered as robust alternatives to mainstream social sciences. Maintaining a commitment to the basic concepts introduced by Laclau and Mouffe, poststructuralist theorists such as Glynos, Howarth, Aletta Norval and Jacob Torfing have worked to offer the social sciences with a more formal picture of the approach (Torfing). At its basic, we may assume five key arguments. First, social practices emerge against the background of historically specific discourses, through which meanings are constructed in a relational way by subjects in terms of *difference* or *equivalence*. Second, as put by Torfing, a “discourse is constructed through *hegemonic struggles* that aim to establish an intellectual and moral political leadership through the articulation of meaning and identity” (15). In effect, a discourse is a product of political decisions, rather than a product of either the rational unfolding of events or structural pressures. Third, intrinsic to the construction of meaning by subjects is *social antagonism*, whereby frontiers are drawn in opposition to an Other. As such, the unity of a particular discourse does not appeal to internal coherence or inner essence. Rather, what matters is how its unity is sustained through its relation with an Other force that externally threatens or limits its existence. Fourth, when confronted by new events it cannot explain, a hegemonic discourse becomes *dislocated*. The ability of a discourse to grasp and domesticate newly unfolding events is finite, even if it has hitherto been able to do so. Fifth, inspired by psychoanalysis and related to *dislocation*, is the emergence of the *split subject*, who, as a result of dislocatory events, might try to attain fullness through “acts of identification” (Torfing 16).

The above helps us explain particular social phenomena under observation. However, it could be argued here that, in positioning the poststructuralist method as a credible alternative to other approaches, it is not enough just to explain it. Is it possible for us to go beyond, as put

by Simon Critchley, describing a purely “positively existing state of affair?” What is so critical about poststructuralism, beyond telling us about the processes surrounding discursive formations and dynamics? A more recent effort by Glynos and Howarth has sought to develop what is known as logics of critical explanation. The central aim in doing so, according to the authors, is to construct an explanatory logic, together with the grammar of concepts and assumptions that serve as its conditions of possibility, and to articulate a typology of basic logics – *social*, *political* and *fantasmatic* – which can serve to *characterise*, *explain* and *criticise* social phenomena” (Glynos and Howarth 8; emphasis added). Through the three logics, social, which “enables us to characterise practices in a particular social domain,” political, which “provides the means to explore the conditions of possibility and vulnerability of social practices and regimes by focusing in the latter’s contestation and institution,” and fantasmatic, which helps us show “how subjects are rendered complicit in concealing or covering over” the contingency of their social relations, we are able to closely examine the social phenomena under observation without having to leave it only at the level of description or just reporting on the contextualised self-interpretation of subjects (Glynos and Howarth 14-15). What we are able to do, within the logics approach, is to allow subjects to speak, but also extend an engaged and contextually grounded critical explanation of the phenomenon. This approach is in contrast with mainstream approaches in the social sciences, which often times separate the terms *critical* and *explanation*, which would be one reason why, in the realm of political science at least, there is a general acceptance that normative and positive research are starkly different. In some academies where the hegemonic order is constituted by positivist and behavioural academics, the discipline of political theory or philosophy is construed as an Other discipline that belongs to the humanities rather than political science or the study of government.

New Politics: Nascent Insights

To begin with, in analysing the idea of *new politics* in Malaysia from the poststructuralist point of view, guided by an anti-essentialist ontology, we offer a hypothesis or an argument which will serve as the guiding thesis of the investigation. However, the task here is not to pursue a causal explanation, guided by the hypothesis, against the background of empirical phenomena. The point is to engage, first, with a *problematization* of empirical phenomena, and second, to *retroductively explain* these phenomena. The concept of retroduction here differs from the inductive and deductive techniques of hypothesis testing in the social sciences. Retroductive reasoning allows us to *provisionally* adopt a hypothesis (Peirce), work

through empirical phenomena *as if* we are able to explain them, but also, at the same time, return and revisit our hypothesis as we encounter unexpected and perhaps even surprising events or occurrences in the realm of practices. Our hypothesis, in this sense, does not come in the form of an essentialist statement, in the form of a singular or definitive answer, which demands to be confirmed or falsified through empirical testing. Instead, we offer preliminary statements that can be revisited and constantly reformulated as we engage in our *problematization* of empirical phenomena (Glynos and Howarth).

How can we account for the *new politics* landscape in Malaysia? As a result of the historic losses that was suffered by the long-ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) government in the 12th General Elections in 2008, a number of commentators and political actors proclaimed the arrival of a *new politics* in the Malaysian political landscape (O'Shannassy; Weiss). This idea asserts that, based on the electoral successes of the fledgling Pakatan Rakyat (PR) coalition in the elections, Malaysia was witnessing the coming of new *zeitgeist* of a social and political consciousness that transcend its long-standing communitarian socio-political arrangement. The implication of this development, it is further argued, would be a progressive brand of democratic politics, sustained by the strength of this new-found consciousness, helmed by the younger, urban, more educated constituency.

Academically, the idea of the emergence of new politics occurred about a decade before 2008. In light of the opposition's promising achievements in the 1999 general elections, Francis Loh offers us an insight into the conditions that allowed for the emergence of this "new politics." While this notion may be conflated with a moral support for a new democratic politics, as indicated in the above paragraph, it also connotes the condition that has emerged in defining the makeup of present-day Malaysian politics. Its emergence, argues Loh, could be seen both from the perspectives of the formal political process, in the form of the electoral process, as well as non-formal politics, which saw changes – through accelerated economic development of the 1980s and 1990s – in the socio-economic makeup of the Malaysian society, particularly in the creation of a significant number of new educated middle class. Crucially, this development, spurred by the government's own objectives of creating an ethnic Malay middle class through the New Economic Policy (NEP), meant that the previously more or less homogenous Malay political constituency had been replaced by one that is differentiated by a class divide (Maznah). Political contestations would be played out, according to Loh, along the divide between long-standing ethnic-based political formulation,

the developmentalist ideology, and a participatory democratic consciousness. Such contestations would have a significant role in how votes were distributed in the formal political process. In addition, Loh had wondered if the inroads that the opposition forces had made on the back of the rise of the new politics in 1999 could be sustained in the following round in 2004. As it turned out, the BN, invigorated by the inauguration of a fresh face as Prime Minister in the form of Abdullah Badawi, after Mahathir Mohamad's twenty-two year rule, celebrated its biggest ever victory. This, then, explains why the PR's success in 2008 was so significant. Abdullah's rule suffered a thumping blow (Ooi; Chin). His position as Prime Minister no longer tenable after the dust of March 2008 had settled, Abdullah, facing internal pressure from within UMNO to leave in addition to Mahathir's opposition, made way for his deputy, Najib Razak, in 2009.

What the success of PR had done in 2008 was to provide a context for the possible emergence of some kind of a consolidated counter-hegemonic vision of politics which was stronger than ever. Against this background, commentaries addressing the idea of new politics flourished. On the one hand, when conflated with a normative call for democratic reform, it was, unsurprisingly, utilised as leverage to gain further support by politicians. On the other, it was also the subject of much academic fascination, which overwhelmingly tilted in the direction of a positive embrace. This includes highlighting the positive role of civil societies in contributing to the success of the opposition in the elections as well as the centrality of their role in shaping the future direction of the new politics (Weiss), as well as speculating about the emergence of a democratic space opened up by the usage of the new media that would shape a gradual democratization process (S. Subramaniam; Postill). Further, those academic responses also reflect on the possibility of a future with a two-party system (Saravanamuttu, "Twin Coalition Politics in Malaysia since 2008"), and imagine a future of Malaysia with a new government that is committed to democracy, pluralism and inclusivity, led by the opposition coalition (Maznah 2008; Singh 2009).

Between the watershed moment of March 2008 and the present, the new political terrain has been sustained through the presence of vibrant public discourses. Awareness of the role of the civil society in the Malaysian public space has also been raised through greater public presence and engagement by a multitude of organisations, including think tanks of different ideological persuasions, rights groups and charity organisations, which consequently maintained a steady flow of information to the public of the presence of alternative political

visions, all of course helped by “internet activism” and the new media, which were able to bypass the BN’s strict control of the print media. The highlight of all this was the series of Bersih rallies to demand for free and fair elections, which brought together forces from across the public space in a show of solidarity against the perceived lack of fairness in the Malaysian electoral process, which some saw as the chief reason why there wasn’t an outright victory for the PR in the thirteenth general elections in May 2013 (P. Subramaniam).

In any case, with the passing of another round of elections, the results of the thirteenth installment of the general elections in May 2013 has indicated that BN, while doing not much better than in 2008, has somehow managed to fend off bigger losses in terms of the number of parliamentary seats, and has maintained control of federal power (Grudging and Hamzah). In addition, it regained control of Kedah. The PR, nonetheless, made headways in seats in the states of Johor, Sabah and Sarawak, which it identified as “frontline states” prior to the elections, in addition to keeping most of the seats it won in 2008, which are mostly urban, mixed-race seats, where communal concerns feature less prominently. Explanations of events surrounding this election too are in abundance, focusing largely on themes that address the reasons behind another BN win. One, for example, highlights the theme of malapportionment, or the manipulation of election rules, which is not dissimilar to the concerns of the Bersih coalition that has been mentioned above (Case; Ostwald). It has also been argued that, in the run up to the polling day, communal issues were brought back to the fore, chiefly by UMNO, to mobilise most especially the Malay rural votes (Saravanamuttu; Case; Welsh). This includes the flourishing of Malay right wing groups, most notably the *Persatuan Pribumi Perkasa* (Perkasa), led by the seasoned politician Ibrahim Ali, which, in their publicly fiery rhetoric touching on issues which they saw as crucial to the protection of Malay rights and Islam, went, at times, to the extent of singling out members of the Chinese community as one of the chief causes of “disharmony” in Malaysia (Choong).

What we can establish from existing literature is an agreement that there is no question that after March 2008, as put by James Chin and Wong Chin Huat, “Malaysia’s political landscape has changed forever” (82). However, perhaps, in the midst of embracing this new politics *zeitgeist*, existing work have neglected to look more closely into what BN has done in trying to acclimatise itself to the new political dynamics. While it fared no better in 2013 as compared to 2008, its effort to recuperate its hegemonic position in Malaysian politics has had a practical impact in the way governance is configured.

Such a social phenomenon can be examined from the mainstream social science paradigms. Many of the works cited above, for example, give a considerable degree of acceptance that the new political scenario would work outside the BN's strength to politically sustain itself. But, from the poststructuralist point of view, it constitutes the very phenomenon that we shall problematise. Rather than attempt to link the idea of new politics with some kind of normative necessity for Malaysia's politics to move forward, we are interested in looking into what it actually entails in the realm of practices. Based on a preliminary reading of empirical data, it is argued here that the opposition discourse represents a counter-hegemonic project, which draws its antagonistic frontier against a long-standing hegemonic order (i.e. the regime), which constitutes a stumbling block to its success on the electoral front. This counter-hegemonic discourse, in practice, is inherently sedimented. It strives towards a semblance of unity, while at the same time negotiates, within itself, the plurality and often contradictory nature of the forces that constitute it.

Logics

The previously impossible alliance between the Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS), whose fundamental struggle is for the establishment of an "Islamic state" in Malaysia, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), which calls for the defence of the secular nature of Malaysia and the People's Justice Party (PKR), which struggles for a liberal state on the back of Anwar Ibrahim's political clout, can be explained in these terms. The unstable nature of the alliance is sustained by appealing to a set of ideas, which are both empty, i.e. able to be defined in a multitude of ways (*empty signifier*), and can be seen as naturally not something the hegemonic order would be associated with. Here we can identify at least two *social logics*, "the conditional and historically specific systems of sedimented practice" (Howarth, "Applying Discourse Theory" 323), which denotes the discourse's articulation of the present condition of the Malaysian socio-political structure, which are logic of racial politics and logic of political patronage.

Through *political logics*, we can identify the *logic of equivalence* that is deployed by the discourse, through which we will be able to observe how the three opposition parties articulated their positions on pressing political issues, alongside and by bringing together other disparate actors who would be open to accept a project of *new politics*, for instance civil liberty NGOs from within the civil society, which would further dislocate the hegemonic

order. This is done through intense public discourses that target a multifaceted set of factors within the hegemonic order that would put its alleged failings into light, such as highlighting the issue of corruption, racialism and incompetence. Some of the overarching appeals that sustain the logic of equivalence include, among other things, the promises of non-racial politics, inclusiveness and progressive politics. Attacks against the hegemonic discourse must be sustained by *fantasmatic logics*, which would reinforce the negative and antagonistic image of the hegemonic order, and at the same time making sure that such ideas remain primal in the political project of the counter-hegemonic discourse. Here, through the *fantasmatic logics*, we are able to understand “why specific practices and regimes grip subjects” (Glynos and Howarth 145; emphasis in the original). We look for utterances or pronouncements of actors who are internal to the particular discourse, particularly in how those associated with the BN hegemonic order are portrayed and represented. They could be ideas that promise “a fullness-to-come once a named or implied obstacle is overcome... or which foretells of disaster if the obstacle proves insurmountable” (Glynos and Howarth 147).

As discussed earlier, it is also possible to examine the regime’s own attempt at acclimatising itself to the new political terrain. Indeed, as far as looking into what BN has done to respond to the challenges of the new political terrain is concerned, critical attention has been scant. It is here that we observe the location of works that are less critical or openly in support of the authority of its hegemonic claim (see for example Mohd. Adnan and Melina; Amini, Shamsuddin and Aziz; Yusri and Tengku Ghani). An analysis that attempts an in-depth look into such re-articulation of hegemonic power must, as a point of departure, consider the series of reforms that were initiated particularly after Najib ascended to power, more seriously. Amidst the dearth of such work, O’Shannassy offers an excellent analysis of the internal dynamics surrounding Najib’s *IMalaysia* slogan (launched in September 2010), especially within UMNO, in a process of seeking legitimation of the BN’s rule from the external political environment, within a changing political landscape. O’Shannassy is right in arguing that, unlike previous prime ministerial slogans, such as Abdullah’s *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam) or Mahathir’s *Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah* (Clean, Competent and Trustworthy), Najib’s effort, beginning with *IMalaysia*, was no mere slogan. They contained substantial proactive measures (O’Shannassy 435), translated into the form of reorganisations in public management. As such, reorganisations took place namely through the National Transformation Programme (NTP) and its four pillars, *IMalaysia*, Economic Transformation Programme (ETP), Government Transformation Programme (GTP) and the Tenth Malaysia

Plan, Najib and BN have brought about a fundamental shift in the architecture of public management in Malaysia, by experimenting with techniques of governance that are inspired by the neo-liberal ideology. If – to provide an example – Abdullah’s *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam), launched soon after his impressive victory in the 2004 general elections, was largely used as a means to demonstrate to the public that the new man at the helm of power has a vision that can be represented by a slogan and reinforce his administration’s commitment to promoting Islamic values in public governance, Najib’s reforms have, to a significant extent, affected a shift in the practices of Malaysian public governance. Significantly, it is his open acceptance soon after taking power that there were problems with the way things were done previously – “the day when ‘government knows best’ is over,” as Najib had himself put it – that paved the way to his transformation programmes.

A key to understanding BN’s reform initiatives lies in looking at the ‘presidential’ manner through which Najib has conducted his administration since ascending to the premiership (Chin, “So Close Yet So Far”). Demonstrating to the public that he had a deep sense of understanding of the fundamental problems with Malaysia’s governance structure, many of which were issues that shaped opposition messages against the BN in the first place, Najib’s response included, crucially, the creation of an autonomous regulatory body within the Prime Minister’s Department, the Performance Management Delivery Unit (PEMANDU), to oversee the delivery of public services. This is a practice which is not unlike neo-liberal practices in other contexts, a strategy Stuart Hall has come to call *managerial marketization*, including in Britain during the rule of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown’s New Labour governments from 1997 to 2010.

What the BN under Najib has done demonstrates the complexities of how a ruptured hegemonic power reorients itself and reengages wider social practices and contestations, leading to a process of re-articulation of its project. This is done including by capturing and appropriating previously unfamiliar sentiments and messages and cohabitating them with its traditional concerns. The nature of the BN regime post-2008 elections is explained in terms of the social logics of stability and reform, through which it re-articulates its hegemonic project to become one that has a semblance of inclusivity beyond its traditional formulation. Through the political logic of difference, it is demonstrated how BN’s promises of inclusivity and pluralist politics, formulated largely by way of appropriating the progressive messages of

the opposition forces, have been deployed to break down the political frontier that was established by the latter, a moment which constitutes a political logic of difference. The NTP has had an effect on the practice of governance in Malaysia, as Najib and BN acted on their reform promises, bringing about a neo-liberal shift in public management in Malaysia, justified through the fantasmatic narrative of the promise of the attainment of a “high income nation” status by the year 2020.

Critical Explanation

If a basic critical explanation can be offered here, it would lie in the argument that new politics, as a normative concept, has gripped and reconfigured the nature of political debates within the Malaysian political landscape. On the more intellectual ground and as an academic discussion, as can be seen earlier, the contestations have not been so much whether or not the new politics is desirable, but about how it can be achieved. This is of course accompanied by moral voices which are clamouring to show, between the hegemonic and counter-hegemonic discourses, *who* should be carrying the mantle of political change and reform in Malaysia. This development disregards a more real thing that is taking place, which is the growing intervention of neoliberal measures in the practices of governance, which is indeed caused by the pressure brought about by this grip of the new politics in contemporary Malaysia. In developing this critical explanation, the method of *articulation* is deployed. The method of articulation, as explained by Howarth, “avoids the difficulties surrounding the mechanical application of ‘formal-abstract’ theory to ‘real-concrete’ events and processes” (“Applying Discourse Theory” 316). The challenge here is “to put together theoretical elements that (may) have no logical or necessary links into a new configuration that, if warranted, makes possible a critical explanation of the phenomenon under investigation” (Glynos and Howarth 183).

Let us try to substantiate our critical explanation. Consider, first, the response of the hegemonic discourse to the challenge that is posed by a normative commitment to the *new politics* idea. In the event of a dislocatory experience, i.e. the real electoral threat of a seemingly formidable and stable opposition coalition, the hegemonic discourse, interestingly, adopted messages which are philosophically not dissimilar to its rival. This moment of attempting to attain fullness once again is substantiated by ideological projects that would portray it as *the* political force that is inclusive and progressive. The 1Malaysia project that was initiated by Najib, for example, can be explained from this point of view. Further, as

mentioned earlier, such act of identification constitutes a *political logic of difference*, whereby the challenge is directed back at the counter-hegemonic discourse, by highlighting the seemingly clashing ideological commitments of its membership, by frequently portraying the opposition parties as “strange bedfellows” who lack ideological cohesion as well as formal recognition as a registered coalition (M. Hamzah and Hanif; Davidson and Wong). This is followed by the hegemonic discourse’s appeal to a set of abstract commitments that is believed to have the capacity to appeal to the constituents who may at this moment be attracted to the counter-hegemonic message. Ideological catchphrases such as “transformation” and “liberalisation” are marketed to the constituencies inhabiting the Malaysian public spaces.

Below the threshold of the moral and philosophical posturing and counter-posturing that we have discussed above, real and practical transformations are taking place. The pressure that was brought about by those moral and philosophical contestations has allowed for the seeping in of changes within realms that were traditionally of state concern. For example, the logic of incompetence that was invoked by the counter-hegemonic project, which includes a critique of the Malaysian civil service, has allowed for the previously unthinkable policy of creating an extra bureaucratic apparatus, in the form of corporate-like bodies like PEMANDU, to steer the country’s administration in a manner that is “competent,” so to speak. Here, markedly, the rationale of the regime’s reform initiatives follows on its response to the dislocatory experience in light of opposition gains in the 2008 elections, as has been discussed earlier. In its attempt to appropriate opposition reform messages, the regime itself has, inadvertently or not, bought into such messages, and has decided to act upon them. A key feature of its justification for the NTP has been a vague admission of the inefficiency of government bureaucracy and the civil service. While always appearing to be at pains to point out the presence of a “progressive civil service which embraces change” (Najib, “Foreword”, 4) and that it was the “commitment and dedication of the public servants” (Najib) that had shaped Malaysian nation building process hitherto, for example, such remarks are accompanied by proclamations on the need to move beyond the old ways of public management as well as an affirmation of an image of the present society which is supposedly more demanding, complex and nuanced. The latter, therefore, demands a reform of most especially the civil service (Lau).

This vague admission of the inefficiency of the civil service and public delivery system signifies the fantasmatic narrative which represents an implied obstacle that the

society needs to overcome if it wanted to achieve its ultimate goals and objectives. Fantasmatic narratives, in this sense, need to also construct promises of a “fullness-to-come” (Glynos and Howarth, 147) – a fantasy – which would function as a kind of a closure for the regime’s political project. The institutionalisation of those narratives, in practice, would marginalise possible contestatory aspects of the regimes’ promises that could arise from the opponent’s camp. This way, the regime’s actions will conceal the radical contingency of social relations. What are essentially contestable are made uncontestable through fantasies. Fantasies, in effect, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, are the means through which reality is structured (49).

Normative Critique

I have mentioned above that an alternative social science must be one that is able to participate in affecting positive changes in the socio-political practices of the society. Because the poststructuralist paradigm adopts a weak kind of ontology, we may find that within such a research framework, we are able to maintain some kind of a normative commitment. This normative commitment, however, does not come in the form of seeing social phenomena through the lenses of unchangeable theories, or in the form of heavy normative-isms. What we do, is to invest our effort in looking for ways, through understanding actual social practices, to highlight the perhaps unnoticed consequences of such practices, and suggest remedies, by tabling them as our “normatively preferable” (Coles & Hauerwas) answer to issues. In any event, it can be argued here that the particular social phenomenon that we choose to study has been selected by virtue of our personal concerns.

At this juncture we can return to the point that has been made on retroductive reasoning. Rather than confirm or disconfirm our hypothesis, what we do is table our arguments in a moment of *persuasion* and *intervention* into the relevant community and practices of scholars and lay-actors (Glynos and Howarth). The point is, for the social scientists, in the words of James Tully, to try to “characterise the conditions of possibility of the problematic forms of governance in a redescription (often in a new vocabulary) that transforms the self-understanding of those subject to and struggling within it, enabling them to see its contingent conditions and the possibilities of governing themselves differently” (16). For example, if there is a sense that there is a pressing need for today’s Malaysian society to reconfigure its old ways to one that embraces pluralism in a more progressive sense, then, as I have argued elsewhere (“A ‘Secular’ Malaysia”), perhaps the answer lies in the need for us to cultivate a

novel set of civic virtues that will help foster a positive democratic ethos, rather than continue with abstract posturing and counter-posturing that we are seeing today. While admittedly there is a need for reform, change, transformation, whatever you may call it, those democratic constituents who possess such sensitivities may well form an assemblage that would help direct democratic practices in such direction. There is also a need to safeguard aspects of the society that are invaluable, such as education, welfare services and healthcare from being further dictated by neoliberal capitalism, which rides on superficial ideological waves of democratic protests. This normative appraisal, of course, is not a kind of a final, once and for all solution that is derived from an essentialist standpoint. It must be seen, rather, as an ethical judgment of a theorist and researcher who – through investigation from the lenses of poststructuralism – is concerned about the well-being and the future direction of Malaysia’s multicultural landscape. A normative critique emerging from the poststructuralist point of view is always prepared to engage with competing interpretations, and even modify its views, should it be persuaded of the de-merits of its views. This constitutes what the American political theorist, William E. Connolly calls a spirit of “critical responsiveness.”

CONCLUSION

This effort to highlight the possible contribution of poststructuralism may alert the sceptical and the wary. How, they might ask, is this not another instance of a transplantation of Western science? In the context of the problems with mainstream social sciences that are highlighted in this paper, with the stated aim of exploring alternative visions for a more critical social science, the poststructuralist perspective has done a sufficient job in deconstructing the essentialist foundations of Western scientific epistemology. In addition, the poststructuralist perspective has also furnished this critique of epistemology with a robust research framework. There is no stopping us, within our particular socio-political setting in Malaysia, to adopt concerns and normative positions that we may think are contextually sensitive. As a consequence, it encourages the proliferation of a plurality of perspectives within a context of a healthy and positive academic debate which is sensitive to context and practices. At the very least, such is what we should aspire to in the interim.

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