Review Essay

The State of Malaysian Studies

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In the 1980s political theorist Quentin Skinner noted that the empiricist and positivist turn in the social sciences, which had driven the study of politics and society in the three preceding decades, was under challenge by “hermeneuticists, structuralists, post-empiricists, deconstructionists, and other invading hordes.” The general skepticism about positivist social science was a reaction, noted Skinner, “against the assumption that the natural sciences offer an adequate or even a relevant model for the practice of the social disciplines.” Anti-positivist critics advocated instead uncovering or recovering meaning, explaining the contingent and the unpredictable and contextualizing inquiry. The turn toward history, a form of “grounded” knowledge, and an awareness of the normative and ideological bases of inquiry and the uses to which knowledge may be put signified an important shift in the social sciences and was critical in the evolution of “area studies.” The impact of the positivist movement on the study of politics and society in Malaysia during the same period and for some time afterward has been profound. It shaped Malaysian studies in much the same way it impacted the inception of area studies — it underscored positivism’s central tenets about an objective universe that could be rationally apprehended and scientifically known. Linear notions of political and social development dominated the scholarly literature, one largely influenced by U.S. social scientific thinking about “modernization,” political systems, and the societies these embraced.

Modernization’s claims, which relied on assumptions about objective knowledge, and specifically the relationship between political development and eco-
omic growth, hardly go unchallenged today, but modernization’s influence has been lasting in the literature on Malaysia. Concerned for the most part with explaining elite politics, party politics, government, and ethnic pluralism, Malaysian Studies — particularly works focusing on politics and social change — in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s tended toward analyses rooted in a modernization paradigm. Especially troubling was the tendency to see one or more variables — particularly ethnic identity and conflict — as explaining major political outcomes. There was also a tendency to formulate frameworks for analysis by which the evidence gathered would be used to test the author’s initial hypotheses. Arguments were generally rendered as objective and value neutral. However, as Skinner paraphrasing Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* suggests, “there are no facts independent of our theories about them, and in consequence no one way of viewing, classifying and explaining the world that all rational persons are obliged to accept.” Despite these efforts to “scientifically” produce knowledge about Malaysian politics and society, the process of “classifying,” “ordering,” or “systematizing” evidence in a particular way resulted in understanding that was more or less skewed toward the categories being employed, instead of being a reflective representation of the “facts” of the situation. Such knowledge, apart from being embedded in a dualistic conceptualization of modernity and tradition, demonstrated a preoccupation with Western, mainly North American, social scientific criteria.

Despite these drawbacks, several earlier studies generated much insight on the nature and role of political institutions and processes, and stimulated vigorous debate among scholars. A few also revealed a self-consciousness about knowledge production and the position of the researcher/analyst/scholar in shaping that knowledge. Among the works that demonstrated such a sensitivity to context, history, and reflective inquiry is William Roff’s remarkably interpretive analysis, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism* (1967). The narrative allows its “subjects” to be heard in the text rather than merely imposing the author’s voice. The research is painstaking, and its presentation in the book conveys not concrete evidence of this or that event or fact, but instead a compelling explanation of the sources of Malay nationalism. Roff’s analysis of Sahabat Pena’s (Brotherhood of Pen Friends) emergence as a nationalist movement, for example, informs us of its early ideological beginnings in a newspaper column, to its growth into a correspondence club, and thence to a national movement. The controversies surrounding the formation of the movement and its “political” orientation are presented in a way that brings out what may initially appear as minor details, such as the injunction to boys and girls in the column published in the newspaper *Saudara* to communicate only with members of the same sex. These bits of information are in effect critical to our understanding of the larger narrative generating insight into other facets of Malay society such as the state of gender relations. Roff’s study provides us with a window into the formation of early Malay nationalism that is nuanced and persuasive in its complexity.

Roff’s analysis recalls Hirschman’s distinction, in the latter’s comparison of two noteworthy contributions to the study of Latin American politics, society,
Comparing two major studies on Latin America, James Payne’s *Patterns of Conflict in Colombia*, and John Womack’s *Zapata and the Mexican Revolution* (both published in the late 1960s), Hirschman suggests that Womack, who has rigorously excluded from his “universe any semblance of a paradigm...invites speculation and thereby contributes to the possibility of understanding.” Payne, on the other hand, appears trapped within his “paradigm” when he triumphantly presents the reader, according to Hirschman, with the “key to the full and complete understanding of the Colombian political system. The rest of the book is a demonstration that the key indeed unlocks all conceivable doors of Colombian political life, past, present, and future.” Roff, in light of Hirschman’s critique, has provided us with a richly conceived and textured account of the rise of Malay nationalist ideology.

Hirschman’s warnings against mindless theorizing as a substitute for that other pitfall, “rank empiricism,” is a point that all scholars and particularly those who might identify themselves as area or regional specialists, or experts on a country in an area or region, would do well to heed. Along those lines, other scholarship on Malaysia emerging in the 1980s and 1990s sought a balance between “objective” theorizing and empirical analysis. Several studies also expressed a commitment to social and political change by exposing and challenging the underlying ideological biases of earlier approaches. The move toward grounded theory — compared with more general formulations about the relationship between economic and political development, a preoccupation with the generalizability of models, and quantitative measurements of political behavior — saw the emergence of alternative schools of thought, which posed a challenge to the modernization paradigm. The analysis of the formation of class structures and the relationship of class to political power in Malaysia, which was soon evident in the literature, contributed greatly to the study of Malaysian political economy. An example being K.S. Jomo’s *A Question of Class* (1988), which was a timely work on class relations in colonial and postcolonial Malaya, tracing the development of capitalism and its implications for the political economy of the postcolonial state. This study provided an important critique not only of modernization, but also of the dependency school, which had influenced research on the political economy of Latin American and African societies. Jomo’s analysis also challenged theories that focused on the state as a neutral arbiter of competing interests in a plural society. Significantly, his work also revealed that a focus on the so-called ethnic bases of Malaysian society hid class relations. *A Question of Class* thus uncovered the complexity of the Malaysian class structure and its implications for political arrangements in the postcolonial state. This work shed new light not only on class formation but also on the state’s role in engendering the formation of new social forces.

The older debate between the modernizationists on the one hand and neo-Marxians on the other (among them works invoking one or more perspectives on imperialism and neocolonialism, dependency, world systems, and structural analyses of the state), has to some extent been displaced by more recent influences on the study of Malaysian politics including the various “posts-,” as in
postmodernism, post-structuralism, and postcolonial theory. Some of these theoretical shifts have influenced the study of Malaysian politics indirectly. In anthropology and sociology, in particular, these "newer" theoretical shifts have had a profound impact on the way these disciplines have reconstituted themselves. In addition, the emergence of a distinct body of feminist theory also suggests that the privileged "unit of analysis," the abstract rational individual, group, or class, in mainstream approaches, must be viewed as an inherently gendered category. Among the contributions to this literature are the writings of Ong (1987) and Peletz (1996). It is possible to view these post-positivist contributions to the literature as a continuation of the kind of work done by Roff (1967), Scott (1985), Jomo (1988), and others writing in an interpretive and/or critical vein.

However, despite the critical theoretical disjuncture provided by explicitly post-positivist methodologies, the modernization literature, which utilized implicitly or explicitly certain models of political behavior, has also informed the development of Malaysian Studies in the last decade. For example, studies of democratization in Malaysia, "soft authoritarianism," and state-society relations in the 1990s suggest a preoccupation with notions of political development, a key theme of modernization theory. I am mainly concerned in this essay with scholarship that falls within the domain of the study of politics or political science, but admittedly the distinction between what constitutes a particular discipline or field and the interdisciplinary aspects of these studies may make this an arbitrary distinction. Malaysian Studies in the new millennium reveals a continuing interest in questions concerning the electoral process, democratic institutions, ideology, the state, political economy, and civil society. The works reviewed below approach these questions from varying methodological angles and perspectives. What unites these studies is a concern with new configurations in Malaysian politics in the aftermath of a singularly important series of events in recent Malaysian history. These events were triggered with the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which affected Malaysia in rather profound ways. The Malaysian currency depreciated sharply and its fall was only halted by aggressive government policies aimed at curbing capital flows out of the country and currency speculation. Serious cracks soon emerged in ruling circles and were manifested most plainly in differences between the Malaysian prime minister, Mahathir Mohamad, and his deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. The subsequent expulsion of Anwar Ibrahim from both the ruling party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO), and the Barisan National (BN) coalition government, and his imprisonment on charges of corruption and sexual misconduct triggered a movement for reform, popularly known as reformasi. Several key themes dominate the post-1997 literature and include among others the emergence of the reform movement and its implications for electoral politics, and political transformation more broadly; the relationship between authoritarianism and democratization; and the relevance of ethnic identity and social class for an understanding of contemporary Malaysian politics.
Constructing a New Idiom: The “New Politics”

One of the more common terms of reference in the Malaysian Studies literature in recent years is the idea of a “new politics.” This concept is used generally to describe a shift away from the “old politics” of race and ethnicity in Malaysia. The preoccupation with ethnic relations and ethnic politics was widely reflected in the literature for many decades and, as mentioned earlier, treated as the single most significant factor shaping state-society relations. While these arguments about the overriding claims of ethnicity on political culture and identity have some merit, this is surely only part of the story. Alternatively we can identify other sources that have influenced social and political change in Malaysia, such as class and gender affiliations. The new politics as it is conceived in recent contributions to the Malaysian Studies literature attacks the central premise of the earlier literature’s preoccupation with ethnic identity as the main source for the creation and stability of political coalitions and political participation. The use of a new lexicon to describe an apparent shift in political alignments and ethnic consciousness is the centerpiece of Loh and Saravanumuttu’s edited collection, *New Politics in Malaysia*. In this study the editors and individual authors set out to uncover “a shift in Malaysian politics” accompanying the events of 1998, using the Malaysian general election of 1999 as a turning point for an in-depth analysis of changes in the sociopolitical landscape of the country. The volume contains fourteen chapters, including two that reflect the editors’ efforts to analytically frame the volume, and twelve empirically driven studies of the impact of the general election on a wide range of issues and concerns including the drawing of electoral constituencies, voter behavior, ethnic voting patterns, gender and representation, “micro-politics” of particular constituencies, and state-level politics.

A strength of the volume is its comprehensive coverage of key issues surfacing around the 1999 Malaysian general election and its efforts to situate shifting political alignments and sentiments after 1997 through original and primary research by both well-established and junior scholars and practitioners. The volume highlights the dilemmas of a post-1997 Malaysian politics caught between ethnic chauvinism and a long-standing hegemonic ruling framework that reflects patriarchal privilege, authoritarianism, and elitism, and an opposing set of political forces pushing for the dismantling of the old order. Unlike in Suharto’s Indonesia where the New Order regime, which was by 1998 clearly an old order, fell apart in the wake of the currency crisis that hit that country especially hard, Malaysia’s ruling elite led by then prime minister Mahathir Mohamad entrenched its position. In characteristic and peremptory fashion Mahathir ousted his opponents, triggering widespread protests, but not to the extent that his government was ever seriously in danger of collapse. Yet how could it happen in Indonesia but not in Malaysia? Like the other works reviewed here, this volume struggles with why democratization, understood in the conventional sense of the institutionalization of an independent judiciary, media, civil society, and the promotion and protection of civil and political rights, has posed such a
challenge in Malaysia with the ruling party continuing to enjoy rather widespread electoral support.

In *New Politics in Malaysia* some answers are offered, including the tight control by the state of the media, gerrymandering, ethnic politics, hegemony of the dominant political culture, and fear of change. While the different chapters in this collection explore a slice of the larger electoral picture in 1999 in the context of the movement for reform, the book seeks to address the broader question and problem of political change. The contributions are generally useful additions to the literature, but a few, in this writer’s view, stand out, such as Lim Hong Hai’s “The Delineation of Peninsular Electoral Constituencies,” Johan Saravanamuttu’s study of the “middle class factor” in one electoral constituency, and Tan Beng Hui and Cecilia Ng’s analysis of the Malaysian women’s movement in electoral politics. Lim’s essay draws attention to the complexities of delineating electoral constituencies and its relationship to ethnic relations. He notes that in Malaysia the re-delineation of boundaries has been mostly consistent with ethnic fragmentation and party politics. Lim suggests that grappling with “the rules and practice of constituency delineation in Malaysia” will yield a better understanding of the struggle for power and representation among ethnic groups and political parties (44). He is able to support this contention well through a careful and attentive study of the history of constituency delineation and its contemporary effects on Malaysian electoral politics.

Saravanamuttu’s essay is one of the rare ones in *New Politics in Malaysia* that attempts to frame something of a research question or problematic. He begins by asking “whether there is an electoral ‘politics’ which typifies the concerns, interests, and tendencies of the Malaysian middle class” (178). In other words, what is the relationship between social class and voting behavior, and specifically how was this manifested, if at all, in the 1999 election? He is also interested in exploring the impact of reformasi on voters’ opinions and behavior. Saravanamuttu seeks to uncover an answer through his analysis of voters’ attitudes and opinions on the eve of the general election in an ethnically mixed but mainly middle-class constituency, which was subsequently retained by the BN ruling coalition. His use of a survey instrument to gauge voter sentiment on issues such as income, security, social justice, and ethnic relations reflects the social class and ethnic makeup of this constituency. He concludes that despite the survey results showing respondents citing social justice as high among their concerns, voters expressed their electoral preferences mainly along party, and hence ethno-political, affiliations (187-88; 192-94).

In Tan and Ng’s chapter we find yet another variable — gender — enter electoral calculations and electoral politics. The writers situate their discussion of two key initiatives put forth by the Malaysian women’s movement, the Women’s Agenda for Change (WAC) and the Women’s Candidacy Initiative (WCI), by relating them to the significance and implications of a politics of representation more generally. Leading from this, they ask whether it is “essential for women to enter formal politics in order to have their interests represented? Put differently, what would be the best approach to maximize women’s gains vis-à-vis the issue of representation?” (110). This study by Tan and Ng raises important points
about the merits of “formal,” as in the mobilization of women around party politics, versus the “informal” participatory dimension, where women remain in some sense outside the mainstream of political life, but are nevertheless important agents in the shaping of their own histories and destinies. Indeed, the coming out as it were of women into electoral politics through the fielding of an independent WCI candidate who “stood on a women’s issues platform” was a turning point for the women’s movement in its efforts to place center stage the problem of political representation and women’s rights (115). The strength of this chapter lies in the way it relates recent trends in the women’s movement in Malaysia to broader theoretical issues concerning gender, and power and representation. Although the authors do not delve into an extended theoretical discussion of feminist scholarly insights, they provide enough theoretical depth in the chapter to frame the analysis and thus save it from being merely descriptive. Unfortunately, this is not the case with several other chapters, which while providing valuable information — this would be acceptable if the book’s ambitions were more modest, tend to provide more of a descriptive recounting of various events and data around the 1999 general election. What is lacking are more richly textured and interpretive narratives that, as Hirschman would put it, invite speculation and understanding. It is also worth noting that a mainly empirical discussion may tell a part of the story, but will not typically help us put this story in a wider context or give us insight into deeper implications of broad assertions concerning shifts in cultural and political identity, which is an objective of the volume.

An admirable effort to provide the central theme(s) and an overarching analytical purpose may be seen in the last chapter by Francis Loh. He suggests that while ethnicity remains a formidable force in the calculations of Malaysians on who to vote for, it has been somewhat displaced by the “politics of developmentalism,” which links economic growth, rising incomes, and consumption with political stability in the form of the BN state (261). He attributes the electoral choices of a large percentage of Malaysian Chinese to developmentalism, which he argues was promoted by the BN and its component Chinese-based parties throughout the 1990s. He also suggests that based on the findings of various contributors to the volume it would be safe to conclude that while ethnicity remains an important factor in electoral politics it is also contested. He cites other considerations that should also be taken into account such as class and gender, although the influence of the latter may be felt more in the realm of nonparty politics. Despite the contributions of the chapter toward a rethinking of Malaysian politics, however, the reader is still unclear by the end of the volume about what the editors mean by one of its central concepts: the new politics. The concept comes up infrequently throughout the volume and when it is explained its meaning and content remain elusive. Loh provides this explanation:

the “new politics” alluded to is not that of participatory democracy, nor that of developmentalism. The “new politics” refers to the increasing fragmentation of the ethnic communities, on the one hand, the contestations between the discourses and practices of the politics of ethnicism, participatory democracy, and developmentalism, on the other.
He goes on to add that the "new politics is evident in the realm of non-formal politics especially in the peninsula" (278-79).

Loh’s definition raises more questions: Is the new politics about fragmentation and contestation among ethnic communities, or is it about the struggle between competing discourses driven by different social forces and interests? Or is it instead about the emergence of a nonparty politics in Malaysia? Elsewhere Loh refers to a "new political culture" that emphasizes developmentalism, but concludes that "new politics refers to this fragmentation and contestation in Malaysia's political culture." It would have been helpful if Loh had distinguished his definition from that deployed in the scholarly literature on new social movements in the 1980s and 1990s when the concept “new politics” was commonly used in reference to nonparty, noninstitutionalized social movement politics in Western Europe and North America. On its own terms, Loh’s explanation does not adequately address the significance of ethnicity vis-à-vis class or gender as constitutive of the identities of political agents, or developmentalism vis-à-vis participatory democracy as socially mediated spaces where politics gets played out. Perhaps the simplest explanation of the new politics is to think of it as distinct from an “old politics” in Malaysia, the latter driven by ethnic interests and class privilege. Yet this leaves this reader somewhat dissatisfied. Is it safe to assume then that the old politics signified a lack of contestation and fragmentation? Such an assumption would surely contradict earlier studies that document conflict and struggle over the terms and conditions of political discourse in postcolonial Malaysia, especially obvious in the first two decades of independence.

Despite these reservations, I would argue that *New Politics in Malaysia* succeeds reasonably well in accomplishing its general objective of providing an overview of changes in the electoral map and electoral politics and original research on electoral behavior. Its conclusions that events after 1997 have resulted in social and political shifts, even if not on a tectonic scale, and challenge a dominant discourse structured around ethnic politics and patronage are well taken. Where the weakness of the volume lies is in the accomplishment of the theoretical and conceptual significance of many of the findings generated in the various chapters, and implications for further research and future directions in Malaysian Studies.

**Politics in Transition**

Another notable contribution to the recent literature is also an edited collection, Edmund Terence Gomez’s *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform*. This collection includes chapters relating post-1997 developments such as the reformasi movement to Malaysia’s political system, “transethnic solidarities,” elections, and the nexus of politics and business. Gomez nicely sets the context for the rest of the volume in his introduction by highlighting the significance and implications of the reform movement for social and political change, government decision making, and social and economic policy in Malaysia. The introductory chapter poses the general question of why the reform movement, and here the comparison with *New Politics in Malaysia* is instruc-
Gomez explains that the chapters in the volume address two main issues: first, "why Malaysians have been reluctant to accept the new formidable opposition coalition led by Anwar despite their concerns about poor governance by Mahathir," and second, "the themes and conflicts that animate Malaysian politics and business, specifically the difficulties of maintaining large-scale, multi-ethnic political unions and creating sustainable domestic entrepreneurial enterprises" (19). One of the tensions that emerges in this volume, which could also be a strength, is between these two competing objectives, since the chapters do not consistently relate their purpose to the central question about the limited impact of the reform movement posed by Gomez at the outset. I shall take up this point a little later, but I would like first to address the significance of, and contributions made by, this volume to Malaysian Studies.

The Malaysian political system has been widely described as "semi-authoritarian" or "soft authoritarian" in the scholarly literature. Deploying a similar terminology, the chapter by Case in the *The State of Malaysia* refers to the country as a "pseudo-democracy." According to Case, Malaysia's "pseudo-democracy involves a pattern of limited civil liberties, but at least moderately competitive elections, driven by, yet in turn helping to sustain, a government that centres on a single dominant party" (29). Case's chapter is an ambitious attempt to trace the origins of Malaysia's so-called pseudo-democracy, the stresses it faces, and the reasons for its long-term stability (30). Case argues that the ruling BN has been able to keep its hold on power despite the political challenges emerging after 1997 in part due to finessing its patronage politics, dissension among the opposition ranks and the rise of Islamicists, and the historic loyalty of military and other security forces. Applying theoretical literature on democratic transitions and democratization, Case measures the Malaysian experience in light of claims concerning the survival of authoritarian regimes, and finds support for several key theoretical assertions, albeit with some modification. Among them is the link between regime survival, on the one hand, and elite cohesion, clientilism, and coercive capacity expressed in the allegiance of the military and police, on the other. Although Case addresses some anomalies in the Malaysian case, which make it difficult to neatly replicate theoretical claims of the chosen model, he nevertheless makes some rather sweeping assertions about the pseudo-democratic character of the Malaysian political system that bring to mind the cautionary example by Hirschman of work that might provide us the "key" to discovering the "truth" of a particular situation.

Driven by a similar interest in democratization post-1997 Jason Abbott and Claudia Derichs in two separate chapters in the Gomez collection explore the role of the *reformasi* movement in shaping democratization. Abbott's concern is with the relationship between the internet and the growth of *reformasi*, while Derichs explores how intellectuals and other key figures belonging to think tanks, the mass media, parties, advocacy or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and academia view political reform, and the constraints shaping "idea travel" into the policy realm. Abbott suggests that despite its promise in the first flush of the *reformasi* movement, when organizations and individuals used the...
internet extensively to post and promote news and information about the movement, the potential for democratic change occurring vis-à-vis the internet was shaped by other critical factors including the limited impact of a split in the ranks of the ruling elite signified by the expulsion of Anwar Ibrahim and by political repression. He also suggests that the ability of the internet to impact democratization is hindered if reform or independent civil society groups are not better mobilized on the ground. Abbott’s chapter contains some important insights on the relationship between utilization of alternative media and democratization by social forces and groups invested in political and social change in a country such as Malaysia where access to conventional media sources is restrictive and generally severely constrained. Abbott’s analysis suffers, however, from his effort to also address the broader problematic of democratization and civil society in Malaysia, which is not adequately developed in this chapter. His chapter contrasts with another by Mustafa Anuar on the role of Malaysia’s mainstream media in New Politics in Malaysia. Anuar draws our attention to the propagandistic nature of media coverage of the ruling BN government’s record with a silencing of key issues raised by the opposition Barisan Alternatif (BA) or Alternative Front and its negative depiction. Both essays highlight the difficulties in articulating demands for democratization from the margins, although Anuar’s essay would have benefitted from a deeper discussion of the relationship between media control and ideological hegemony, which are only vaguely alluded to in the essay (56).

In the chapter by Derichs the role of ideas, their influence and impact on policy, is foreshadowed by a theoretical discussion of “idea travel,” presumably the conversion of ideas into policy, and the role of “opportunity structures” in shaping idea travel. The strength of Derichs’s chapter in The State of Malaysia lies in original primary research, which consists of interviews with about twenty informants drawn from the groups mentioned above. These interviews elicit interesting responses on questions about the kind of political reforms respondents would like to see in Malaysia, their contributions to political discourse, and how they view their role in shaping public policy. One of the weaknesses is that Derichs does not explain well enough why idea travel is a necessary condition for democratic change, or why democratic ideas, in this instance, are dependent on opportunity structures — a concept Derichs does not define or explain in her chapter — for their wider dissemination? She also relates idea travel to the premise that a maturing middle class will typically support ideas about democracy and political reform, which would appear to fit well with a central claim made by modernization theorists about the positive correlation between economic and political development, a relationship that is challenged elsewhere in the volume (see Abbott, The State of Malaysia). Derichs concludes that the failure of the “economically developed middle class” to support the reform movement stems in part from the salience of ethnic and economic interests protected by the status quo (125).

The role of ethnicity or, more commonly, “race” in confounding the process of democratization is a familiar and recurring theme in the volumes under review. Consequently, it is refreshing to find work that challenges these presuppo-
sitions in the literature. The chapter by Sumit Mandal suggests the need to "explore the ways in which transethnic cultural politics has been erased from history in Malaysia" and to trace "transethnic solidarities" (53). This chapter confronts the assumptions underlying the mainstreamed, modernization-driven studies of Malaysian society, culture, and politics. Mandal writes that the "tendency towards modular approaches in this literature attributes a false stability to race by affirming its apparently primordial character. This in turn reinforces the premise that multiethnic societies are unstable polities. By claiming the salience and universality of race, the literature attributes far too much of consequence to the 'racial' rather than the social, cultural, and political dynamics that give shape to the category in the first place" (61). Mandal's reflective essay suggests that the process of racialization emerges out of political and public discourses that deploy ideas about race or ethnicity. While he does not claim that race-based thinking is not significant in the Malaysian context, Mandal attempts to show how that thinking has evolved through the historical erasures of intra-ethnic difference and the proliferation of transethnic identities and solidarities that are an indelible part of the Malaysian experience even predating colonialism. Mandal revisits and interrogates a widely held assumption about the immutability of ethnic identity (typically used interchangeably with race in the Malaysian Studies literature and in popular discourse) in Malaysian politics, and moves us toward a complex understanding of the interplay of ethnicity, culture, and identity in postcolonial Malaysia.

Other chapters in this volume, which unfortunately get only a brief mention here due to constraints of space, also contribute much through original research to the portrait of a post-1997 Malaysia where democratic reform, ethnic identity, and social justice converge in ways that challenge simplistic analysis. The last three chapters by Gomez, Salazar, and Hamayotsu deal with key questions concerning the relationship between government economic policy and the corporate sector and the implications of this relationship for ethnic and class relations and governance. Hamayotsu's study makes some interesting observations about the influence of Islamization on economic policy and the contradictions engendered by the state's uneven implementation of Islamic principles in the public sector. However, while these chapters stand on their own merits it would have been useful if the authors could have related their essays more clearly to the question posed by Gomez in the introduction about why the reform movement failed to make an impact. This would have given a sense of greater thematic continuity to the volume. Despite this omission, The State of Malaysia is a valuable contribution to the literature, presenting original, analytical, and contemplative research on contemporary Malaysian politics and political economy.

One of the commendable features of Malaysian Studies is that it is an eclectic field, one marked by a diversity of disciplinary approaches and methods and modes of inquiry. The works reviewed here, by no means exhaustive or exemplary, suggest that it continues to evolve as a field, although there is clearly a preoccupation with questions concerning governance; political behavior; Islam; ethnicity, social class, and politics; and democratic change or transition. The lit-
erature reflects this diversity of perspectives evident in studies that draw our attention to the unexpected and contingent, to those favoring modular explanations, and yet others whose descriptive narratives are informative but generally tend to be light on theoretical and conceptual content. This sample of the recent literature suggests that we need to see more work that combines in-depth, original research with an attentiveness to theoretical debate and analytical depth. There is no shortage of work that explores very similar themes by scholars studying Malaysia and other regions, and engaging these would make for an exciting and rewarding debate over some of the issues raised here. One of the problems may be a sense of urgency, understandably, in publishing work that is timely and quickly captures the moment, but the downside is scholarship that may reflect the haste and speed at which materials are put together. A collection of descriptive case studies may generate factual knowledge, but will fall short of telling us why we should take seriously or be compelled by the information provided. In other words, to what use can we put this information, and how does the information enhance our conceptual and analytical tools and understanding? Alternatively, work that relies mainly on secondary sources and purports to provide a holistic or modular approach will tend to reflect a lack of nuance or deeper understanding of the complex interspersed layers of Malaysian history, politics, religion, culture, economy, and society.

On this score, I must mention two other recent contributions, Vidhu Verma's *Malaysia: State and Civil Society in Transition* and Khoo Boo Teik's *Beyond Mahathir: Malaysian Politics and Its Discontents*, to the Malaysian Studies literature that illustrate some of these points well. Verma expresses the purpose and objective of her ambitious book as describing and analyzing "the role of state and civil society in two contexts: Globalization and changes in the concept of nation-state." The rest of the volume vainly tries to maintain a coherent framework for analysis that brings these contexts into focus as the author addresses "five central themes": nationalism; citizenship; Islam; democracy and authoritarianism; and human rights (10). Verma's research question is this: "What has propelled these five themes to center stage given so many divergent political agendas?" By now the reader may be excused for being a little perplexed about how the general purpose of the book and the primary research question are related and how Verma expects to develop those connections. However, even more vexing is the argument Verma offers early on in the introduction where she suggests the following:

Two processes have occurred together simultaneously in the past decade: on the one hand, democratic aspirations have been raised; on the other, the PAS [Islamic Party of Malaysia] has emerged as a major political force in Malaysian politics. I argue that these processes are determined by the interaction of three factors: state developmental capacity, globalization processes, and the historical legacy of religious institutions. (11)

Suffice to say that much of this volume suffers from a disconnect between the author's initial statement of her research objectives and argument and the narrative laid out in subsequent chapters. Verma's study would have benefitted from the citing of primary source material (e.g., interviews), which is notably
lacking in this volume; the book appears to rely heavily on secondary writings for a reconstruction of contemporary Malaysian political discourse. The heavy reliance on secondary materials does not of course invalidate this study, and Verma attempts to balance this shortcoming with the inclusion of speeches by Mahathir Mohamad and news stories. Yet the absence of the voices of the very civil society actors the author seeks to theorize — and are presumed in the title of this volume — is painfully obvious especially in the chapters on “Debating Human Rights” and “Islam and the Malay Community.” Despite these reservations, Verma’s study should stimulate debate about future directions for Malaysian Studies and the need for more reflective and interpretive approaches.

By contrast Khoo Boo Teik’s study of Malaysian politics “beyond Mahathir” is a compelling study of power and ideology in Malaysian politics and popular discourse. Khoo’s work draws our attention to the politics of a nationalist vision and project underwritten by a capitalist logic conceived and promoted by Mahathir Mohamad during his term as prime minister (1981-2003). Mahathir’s remarkable political and ideological trajectory and longevity have been chronicled elsewhere by Khoo, but in this volume he seeks to uncover the implications of what he calls a “Mahathirist programme of socio-economic development,” which “can be regarded as a nationalist project driven by capitalist impulses or a capitalist project imbued with nationalist aspirations” (Beyond Mahathir, 5). Khoo’s central objective as he outlines it in the introduction is to give the reader “a sense of social and political change that departs from mainstream interpretations and standard perceptions of politics in Malaysia as the ‘ethnic politics’ of a ‘divided society’” (14). Khoo’s volume illustrates that it is possible to undertake work that elicits theoretical insight without indulging in sterile paradigmatic thinking that can get in the way of meaningful analysis and interpretation. Indeed, Khoo demurs that he has avoided academic and theoretical debates with a view to reaching a wider audience and readership. Still, one may glean from the pages of this study useful theoretical and conceptual arguments that contribute to the scholarly literature reinforcing this writer’s view that self-consciously employing theory is not at issue here, but instead how theoretical presuppositions are in turn informed and shaped by one’s research.

**Conclusion**

Malaysian Studies today may arguably be described as a tapestry, richly textured and illuminated by boldness and brilliance in places, but somewhat unimaginative and predictable in other areas. Much good work has been and is being done in this field by scholars working in Malaysia and beyond. Yet there remains room for more reflective and critical inquiry that takes apart conventional categories and makes more explicit the scholar’s subject position — not merely in the conventional sense of contrasting one’s theories and methods with those employed in similar work, but also in the sense of clarifying one’s epistemological and ontological commitments. Foucault’s critical assessment of philosophy captures these sentiments nicely:

> The critical ontology of ourselves has to be considered not, certainly, as a theory, a doctrine, nor even as a permanent body of knowledge that is
accumulating; it has to be conceived as an attitude, an ethos, a philosophical life in which the critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them.\(^{10}\)

Perhaps, it is this consciousness and imagination of the "possibility of going beyond" that needs to be given clearer expression in Malaysian Studies. There is much at stake if scholars of Malaysian Studies remain cocooned from the vigorous critiques in social and political theory and cultural studies that are ongoing in the social sciences and in the humanities on a global scale. Without indulging in unnecessary navel-gazing, Malaysian Studies has to be mindful of the intersection of the experiential and theoretical without which good and consistent argumentation and critique are difficult. There is a widespread tendency to view the Malaysian experience as somehow unique, demonstrated in the few genuinely comparative studies available that challenge or address that assumption. While there is much merit to good, single-case studies, it would be very helpful if Malaysian Studies could be more attentive to how that experience is situated in a wider temporal and spatial context. This is an argument for making Malaysian Studies speak to those outside its confines, as well as for developing and defining its identity beyond the minutia of the empirically driven study.

**Related Works of Interest**


**Notes**

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 10.
6. Ibid., 182
7. Ibid., 179.