

injustice, and compare its outstanding features with those in other parts of the world.

The scale of the 1965–1968 killings is astounding. It is like a giant jigsaw puzzle that has thousands of pieces and only a small proportion of those pieces have so far been pieced together. This volume has contributed more than a fair share to the jigsaw-solving efforts, and in so doing continues the momentum unleashed since the demise of the New Order regime. One hopes that this momentum would be kept until most important parts of the puzzle takes shape to see even more clearly the contours of this tragic event.

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## **The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya** Tangled Strands of Modernity

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The main thesis of the book is this: There are “tangled strands” of modernity between the state (Malaya, but more of Singapore/People’s Action Party) and the socialist groups in the post-colonial Malaya and Singapore. The contest and convergence for being “modern” in the aftermath of independence (or separation of Singapore from Malaya) directs the book’s narratives and description for an alternative Malayan historiography. The authors’ frame of analysis is clear: Most, if not all, political actors—whether they are the British, Tunku Abdul Rahman, Lee Kuan Yew, Dr. Poh Soo Kai, Lim Ching Siong, or many others—were engaging in a politics of nation-building in its most rationalist sense, a *realpolitik* using strategies and apparatuses for power. Power in this aspect refers to both the structural construction of the state in lieu of Singapore’s quest for industrialization, as well as the making of Singapore’s history (a power relation at the discursive level). Modernity is conceptualized as a quest for upgrading the quality of life of citizens within the nation, based on “post-Enlightenment and rationalist principles”

(210)—namely, development, either based on the Fabian-welfarist-capitalist orientation or on socialist ones.

Upon reading the chapters and themes, the readers are constantly being reminded of the rationalistic and modernistic orientation of the University Socialist Club (USC, or the Club) and the state, such as in the 1959 National Language Seminar, “guided by a modernist approach to engineering a new nation-state’s unifying language (Malay)” (101), and the contextualization of the USC’s contests with the PAP and the parallel materialization of their modernist projects in the post-colonial period. In other words, “this book investigates the contestations, convergence and shifts in the making of modern Singapore and Malaya” (22).

This book is also about the history of the USC. It pertains to their ideological constructs under the rubric of the Malayan political set-up of the time (between 1953 and 1971), more than about the politics of the peasantry and workers in relation to socialist movements and history of socialism in Malaya. It consists of twelve chapters (including the conclusion) outlining the ebb and flow of the socialist movements in Malaya, their responses and reactions, or, more accurately coined by the authors’ words, the “conflict and convergence” with the post-colonial state/s that eventually shaped the political structures of Malaysia later on and Singapore’s modern political development.

A first glance at the book’s cover—Dr. Poh Soo Kai shaking hands with D. N. Pritt in 1954, while Lee Kuan Yew looks on—in my view reflects the authors’ emphasis of the non-linearity of Malayan historiography. That is, the political contestation for modernity is not formulated in a clear-cut manner between capitalists and socialists, or between a post-colonial state (Singapore) and socialist advocates (Barisan Sosialis/Socialist Front), or between Fabianism-cum-capitalism-cum-welfarism and purist Marxian socialism. The photo illustrates the paradox of the socialist movement in Malayan Singapore, which contains the Fajar groups’ (Fajar means “dawn”) triumph over the seditious charges by the British, with Queen’s Counsel D. N. Pritt and Lee Kuan Yew as the defense lawyers, who later became the main proponent of the Fajar groups and socialist movements in Singapore. The history of socialist movements and the Singapore state formation are *processes* of a series of contest and convergence embroiled in the emergence of Malayan Communist Party, decolonialization politics, and the Cold War context (22–25),

which complicate the binary of pro-/anti-socialism and capitalism in Southeast Asia.

On one hand, the book touches on the transnational nature of student movements in 1950s and 1960s. The active interaction between the USC and Students' Union to engage the issues on colonialism and imperialism was partly influenced by similar experiences around the world and within the region, such as the Dutch occupation of Irian Barat in Indonesia, the murder of former Prime Minister of Republic of the Congo, Patrice Lumumba, and the inefficiency of United Nations in upholding human rights and justice (108–9). In addition, members of the USC represented Students' Union and attend various conference and seminars, such as the leftist International Union of Students (IUS) in Prague, the involvement with International Union of Socialist Youths (IUSY), founded in Paris in 1946, and many others (111). The book reminds the readers that the coming of internet and the world wide web, the emergence of budget airlines, and the trans-mobility of the modern market that links the diverse organizations within globe, are not new phenomena. What is different between the old forms of *student activism* and present-day student protests is the length of time that information, which has increased, is shared and distributed, accompanied by the different mechanisms and tools to disseminate such information. Other than this difference, student activism of the past was as active and mobile as student activism of the present.

On the other hand, the authors expose the inactivity of the students' apathy as one of the challenges that the USC faced. It reminds the readers not to romanticize and generalize the students' activism during the decolonization period. Their analysis of the debates of the USC on the "student apathy" (128) is a case in point. Rather than to essentialize that the students were prone to socialism and politics, the readers need be aware of the pragmatism issue that concerned the students as well, which is familiar to present-day activism. The thread that binds the socialism tenets was essentially an effort of a few leaders.

In 1953, Lee Ah Cai (the Club's Publication Secretary and editor of *Fajar*) has lamented that the Club's "sleeping members" were a serious problem . . . with only very few of the near seventy members taking "any real interest in the affairs of the club." Ironically, he would later leave the Club

due to pragmatic personal and family concerns. The real issue, . . . there were only a few leaders willing and able to find time to be actively involved and lead the Club (130).

In my opinion, chapters 1 and 11 are chapters that frame the book's paradigms. They illustrate the working definitions of the modernity thesis within the context of historiography debates. The former locates the ideological vision of the nation under the rubric of post-colonial modernity and citizenship. Going back to chapter 1, the authors categorize the political actors as modernists whose struggle for independence is "better understood as diverse forms of non-Western nationalism which are 'derivative discourses' of Western modernity" (25). In other words, using the work by Partha Chatterjee, the authors are arguing that the modernist "rejects the colonial edifice" but "shared with colonialism the fundamental belief in Western concepts of reason and science" (25–26), which "ultimately marginalizes indigenous ways to determine the shape of the nation" (26). Modernist ideas also apply to the undertaking of the development of the nation. Whether it is the PAP pursuit of foreign capital investment or the left's aim to subjugate capital for an equal distribution to the masses, they both are "high modernist(s)" (p.27), which is, using James Scott's term, "a mature of modern social governance based on scientific-rational principles, which sought not only to transform nature, but also human nature" (ibid.).

The later chapter reflects the authors' "in-between" position on the claim of "truth" about the history. While critically analyzing the PAP's emplotment of official history, they are simultaneously not sympathetic to the USC's "countermemories." (See especially pp. 235–52.) The chapter's main contribution is its attempt to rewrite history by tracing the life of the agencies through the collage of past events and present-day interviews (239–43) in making sense of the "contest and convergence" of the history of modernity in Singapore and Malaya.

The readings above are well fitted with chapter 6, which narrates the ideological constructs and multifaceted socialism among the socialists groups. Similar to other forms of "-ism," the ideological constructs of the Club and its discursive practices are contextual, constantly shifting between "anti-Western liberalism or social democracy" and "purist Marxian formulation" (132), and simultaneously situates its existence at multiple sites of the nation-state.

While it is great to have a detailed work on the historiography of the USC's role and socialist movement in Malayan Singapore, the "modernity" claim is somehow unclear. The unclearness derives not from the conceptual aspect but from an absent comparison between what constitutes "modern" and "tradition," or the fluidity of these realms in the context of Malayan Singapore.

First: Why were socialist movements, at one point (especially during the Barisan Sosialis time), so appealing to workers and laborers? How did the wide spectrum of socialist groups during the mid-1950s negotiate the discourse on modernity with various audiences (which include the peasantry and the workers)? These are interesting comparative aspects of the multi-sited frames of "modernity," "development," "nation," "freedom," and "emancipation."

Second: How different were the socialists' ideas of "being modern" from the "traditional" or millenarian visions of the peasantry, or even of the workers? Thongchai Winichakul's "Maps and the Formation of the Geo-Body of Siam" (in *Asian Forms of the Nation*, ed. Stein Tonnessen and Hans Antlov, 67–91; Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1996) reveals to us the imposition of the modernity, using Western science, a map, as the demarcation of "mandala" order and modern territory, which was adopted by the Siam monarchy in generating Thai's nationhood to rival with the other kingdoms. Both Reynaldo C. Ileto's ("Religion and Anti-Colonial Movements," in *The Cambridge History of Southeast Asia*, vol. 1, pt. 1, 193–244; Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and Sartono Kartodirdjo's (*The Peasants' Revolt of Banten in 1888: Its Conditions, Course and Sequel: A Case Study of Social Movements in Indonesia*; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966) studies on the peasant revolutions, critically excavate the religious ideas of liberation against the colonial powers led by the "Popes" and *ulama* (Islamic religious teachers), respectively. These works provide the readers a clear comparison between "modern" visions and "tradition" desires. A comparative case with the millenarian visions of revolution may help to make the thesis of contested modernity more perspective sensitive.

In sum, the book is significant in a way that it does not analyze social change in an "either-or" paradigm, but looking it as a process. Their critical analysis on the anti-ism of the socialist groups does not mean a dislocation of socialist ideologies with the PAP state (and Malaya) for a vision of modernity. The "conflict and convergence" approach is a case in point to direct the readers to the non-linear

development and change of these modernists' struggles and identities. In addition, the book provides detailed empirical data and puts them in different themes chronologically, which enable the readers to judge and review the history of Malaya, especially during the transition between Federated Malaya into Federated Malaya minus Singapore. To non-historians, this book also gives them a perspective on the construction of historiography, not only by the historians but those who are in the history. This reminds me of the "Fajar Generation" book launch held in Penang in on 9 January 2010, when Dr. Poh Soo Kai was responding to Lee Kuan Yew: "We are not re-writing history, we write history." Finally, this book perhaps can be a historical reference for the readers to comprehend the complex dynamics and the politics of the Occupy movements and the Arab Spring movements: Who exactly are making history, the winners or the losers?

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