Chapter 5

The Malay Dilemma: Reaffirmation and Counterpoint to the Colonial Perception of Modernity

> Cities are centres of civilization, generating economic development and social, cultural, spiritual, and scientific advancement which affect the entire human race. – Habitat Agenda 1996.

In 1970, almost seventy years after the two colonial officers left Malaya, the present Malaysian Prime Minister, Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad wrote a controversial book entitled *The Malay Dilemma.* In this book, the author argues that heredity and environmental factors are among the crucial influences that have caused the poor examination performance of Malay students. Such reasoning, of course, called for the controversy and disapproval from many quarters, especially the intellectuals, because it implies that the Malays are by nature, inferior. Surprisingly, while Mahathir argues that heredity plays an important factor in the development of a Malay race, Max Weber in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* also writes, "certain types of rationalization have been developed in the Occident, and *only there*, it would be natural to suspect that the most important reason to lay in differences of *heredity*. [Weber] admits that he is inclined to think the importance of *biological heredity* very great" (1904-5/1930: 31) (emphasis is mine). As opposed to Weber, Mahathir as an Oriental wishes to argue that such hereditary factors do not affect 'only there' in the West, but as the world progresses towards modernization, citizens of any country are beginning to face the same

biological change. Heredity, contrary to what is generally believed and Weber fails to acknowledge this, is not permanent.

While Mahathir does not dismiss altogether that being a newly independent country, Malaysia's educational policy, facilities and teachers would still be in the developing state, poor and inadequate respectively. The heredity factors especially, to borrow the author's words, "those which can be corrected" (1970: 1), must be duly recognized and overcome. In addition, when it comes to the environmental factors (in the context of this study, culture contributes as one of the major parts of the environmental factors), the author argues that after recognizing such "practices which are harmful, then it would be easier to suppress them" (ibid.).

As a multiracial country in the true sense of the word,[1] Malaysia and her "definitive people" (ibid., 153), are faced with new sets of problems other than just educational. Among other obvious problems being addressed in the book are the social-cultural and economic characteristics of the Malays, which are holding them back from enjoying the prosperity of their own country—the so-called Malay dilemma. While the book scrutinizes many aspects of Malay's life, making the race as a vulnerable object of study—a docile body, to be examined and analyzed—as does the writing of the two colonial officers discussed earlier, Mahathir's purpose is to make others understand these dilemmas, especially those who happen to share his Malaysian citizenship from a modern perspective. Therefore, in this chapter, we will examine closely *The Malay Dilemma* and the author's views as an educated, modern

and progressive Malay on his own people. We will come across, first, the good characteristics of the Malay both the colonial officers and Mahathir seem to share. Mahathir, however, offers different perspectives on the subject matters concerned. Secondly, we will also come across the elements in the Malays culture that need to 'be corrected' and 'harmful practices' which need to be suppressed, by making comparison with the points raised earlier by the two colonial officers. At this point, we will realize the intersections of the same concerns of the colonial officers' views of the Malays (i.e. their views on the Malay dilemmas) and of Mahathir on his own people, which make the colonial examination of the Malays important and relevant even to this present day.

Most importantly, we will notice the colonial officers' solutions to the Malays' problems, especially as guidance to the modern way of life, do echo in Mahathir's solutions, except that it now comes from a 'son of the soil.' As a local, Mahathir's suggestions encompass all spheres—be it the social domain, the rationality of economic life or the political development of the Malays. He takes into consideration the problems of tradition and the transformation of tradition before attempting any innovation. His analysis fulfills what Max Weber refers to as "the tasks of sociological and historical investigation...to analyse all the influences and causal relationships which can satisfactorily be explained in terms of reactions to environmental conditions" (1904-5/1930: 31). For that, Mahathir's work which involves the study of the problems of the newly independent country, has a reasonable chance of entering gradually into the opinions of the growing numbers of

educated masses or *ra'ayat*. What he is doing is to help the Malay to see themselves, and their problems in a perspective that is more comprehensive and more profound than those of the colonial officers during the colonial era. He also makes comparisons with Western societies, in order to provide the contemporary dimension (as opposed to the historical parallel employed by the two colonial officers) to the Malay problems.

First, Mahathir says, "The Malay is courteous and self-effacing. His world is full of nobility and he is never far from his rajas and chiefs. He gives way and he shows them deference. It is good manners to do so" (1970: 116). While Mahathir's statement here echoes almost exactly Swettenham's epigraph from *Don Juan,* which describes the Malay as "the mildest manner'd man," Mahathir even argues that it is out of their courtesy and good manners that the Malays are wrongly interpreted as weak and inferior beings. To Mahathir, at least, the fact that Swettenham addresses the Malay as 'man' instead of 'half-devil, half-child' as argued earlier makes no difference here. The British always regard themselves as masters and superior beings as compared to the Malays. This confusing scenario is further compounded by the habit of the Malays to address the British as "*tuan* or master" (ibid.), whereas such salutation is only meant to show their good manners. The same principle applies to the notion of colonial understanding, sympathy, devotion, friendship and trust that has been discussed earlier that may contribute to the colonial practice of obscuring the master-servant relationship. This could also be interpreted as the British exercising their hegemony over the native Malays.

Secondly, when Mahathir mentions that "he [the Malay] is never far from his rajas and chiefs," the author departs from an early understanding posed by Swettenham that the Malay "fears his Rajas" discussed earlier. The word 'fear' used by Swettenham above not only suggests the state of fearfulness of the common Malays towards their rajas, but of a distance or gap between the rulers and the commoners as well. Mahathir argues that the Malays are 'never far' from their Rulers, suggests both closeness in relationship and respect at the same time. He adds that the "vast majority of the Malays are feudalist and wish to remain so" (ibid., 104). According to Mahathir, such inclination of the Malays to respect their feudal leaders or appointed chiefs, helps them to create "an orderly law-abiding society" (ibid., 170). This is a continuation of Swettenham's notion of the Malays being "extremely particular about questions of rank and birth..." (1895: 8). In addition, Mahathir stresses, "politeness and formality engendered by close contact between different ranks thus become very much a part of Malay life" (1970: 170).

Of course, in the context of colonial discourse, the choice of the word 'fear' here serves Swettenham's purpose to show how barbaric the Malay Rulers are in their relationship to their subject people, the common Malays. The British, who regards themselves as champions in bringing justice to the darker place, consider their struggle as 'the new humanitarian'[2] effort to defend the helpless commoners against their evil proprietors. Such struggle, among other things, in the context of Malaya, is to become mediators between their Rajas and the commonly 'fearful' Malays.

In the same context of colonial discourse, the two colonial authors' discussion on amok, other than sharing their personal opinions on the matter, helps to further strengthen their view of the Malays' abnormal behaviour, despite their differences in opinion on what actually caused a (Malay) person to run amok. The Malays traditionally consider amok as untreatable phenomenon and it has become part of their culture. Towards the end of his discussion on amok, Swettenham proudly mentioned that with the introduction of the hospital, lunatic asylum and the European treatments, the amok cases have almost ceased. Clifford offers no solution to the problem except that the *sakit hati*—liver sickness, which causes a person to run amok, could be detected earlier and duly removed. Again, the matter remains the same; the British still have to come in, seek an explanation to the amok problem and to prevent such behaviour from further occurring. There might be some truth in the view that modern facilities do help eliminate amok, and by the time Mahathir wrote his book, he considers that amok "is only a legend" (ibid., 118). Amok, according to Mahathir, is the representation of "the external physical expression of the conflict within the Malay which his perpetual observance of the rules and regulations of his life causes in him. It is a spilling over, an overflowing of his inner bitterness" (ibid.) which closely resembles Clifford's *sakit hati*. Perhaps, it is treatable after all if the possible causes, which may lead to amok, are recognized earlier.

Mahathir, however, does not discuss the issue of *latah*, as do the two colonial officers. To Mahathir, *latah* is not really part of the Malay dilemma—at least, *latah* does not tarnish the Malay's dignity as does amok. More importantly, he

deliberately does not touch on the issue of *adat* or custom, which involves the animism or supernatural beliefs, as do the two colonial officers who really exploit the subject matter in order to uphold their civilizing mission on the 'dark races.'[3] To Mahathir, *adat* "is no longer the essential thing it once was. *Adat* is losing its grip on the Malays. It is no longer true that "It is far better that our children die than our *adat*." *Adat*, therefore can be changed or ignored in the process of progress" (ibid., 105). The only form of adat that should be maintained is the one that is proper or what falls in with the Kantian idea of uprightness, according to Mahathir. What is proper is "laid out in the strict religious code of Islam and of *adat*. To be well thought of is good for the community and is also good for the individual, but generally *the individual is regarded secondary to the community*" (ibid., 157)(my emphasis).

However, on the individual/personal level, Mahathir, whose knowledge of medical science is at the tips of his fingers, is encouraging the individual Malay to marry a person outside his or her clan because "intermarriages enriched Malay stock" (ibid., 28); in-breeding will result in "the propagation of the poorer characteristics, whether dominant or recessive, originally found in the brothers or sisters who were parents of the married couple" (ibid., 29). In the traditional Malay society, marriage, as we have learned from the lady in Clifford's "One More Unfortunate" dictates that Malay women are of the obedient type, and they would follow any arrangement of marriage, "a matter in which, of course, [they] would be the last person to be consulted" (1897a: 133). This line of thinking usually took place

within relatives or clans (in-breeding). Mahathir wishes that this may no longer be a dominant practice. Modern Malay men and women, who are not related to each other and work in the office or meet each other at some social occasion, may fall in love and choose to get married. The modern relationship, as Giddens argues, is no longer about keeping kinship together, but rather about sincerity, trust and loyalty between lovers. This idea was previously explored in earlier chapters.

Such acceptance and prioritizing of the community's interests over the individual's interests by the Malays, fits nicely with Durkheim's collective conscience, which helps to hold the traditional societies together especially by focusing on the nonmaterial social facts such as culture and other social institutions. However, the loosening grip of *adat* may be a sign of a decline in the strength of the collective conscience as *adat* is part of the Malay culture. This was exactly the dilemma even during Durkheim's time. The complexities of the modern way of life have brought about other 'pathologies' (Ritzer, 1996: 20) which inadequately holds society together. Mahathir's suggestion that not all *adat* is dispensable, as it may be used as a source of strength or in Durkheim's term, 'common morality,' would help the modern Malays to cope with the 'pathologies' that they are experiencing. Mahathir would agree with Giddens on the latter's statement that "even in the most modernized of modern societies, tradition continues to play a role" (1990: 38).

Other than the two mentioned above, the third good characteristic of the Malays is courage. According to Mahathir, courage is "equated with a willingness to

face up to a hopeless situation. It is facing up to overwhelming odds which could certainly lead to defeat and destruction. To take on an adversary when it seems to be beyond one's capacity is courageous" (1970: 160). This is one of the characteristics of the Malays, which has been fully manipulated by the British. One good example would be what Swettenham says earlier that the Malay is "courageous and trustworthy in the discharge of an undertaking" (1897: 2). Another example would be in Clifford's use of his Malay followers to fight other Malays in *Bushwhacking*.[4] In those two instances, the British manipulated their Malay followers and praised them highly (i.e. consider them to be very courageous), while at the same time considered such act as proof of loyalty towards the British. However, to Mahathir, the type of courage "which requires firmness and adherence to principle" (1970: 160), perhaps rare among the Malays, is the one should be highly praised.

The reason why such courage is rare among the Malays is due to their fourth characteristic, temperance. Temperance is a desire to lead a temperate life, which makes the Malay "always unobtrusive, and self-effacing, unwilling to impose his will if it conflicts with others, and ever willing to compromise" (ibid.). In other words, the Malays prefer to lead a happy life and are always willing to compromise in order to avoid conflict.

According to Mahathir, among the greatest single influence on the Malay characteristics and value system is their religion, Islam, which may explain their values system and code of ethics discussed above. A happy life, for instance,

constitutes a balance between what is worldly and what is hereafter. Their respect towards their Rajas as the religious heads explains such formalities involved. However, what is more important when it comes to Islam is "not so much of the religion, but the interpretation of the doctrines of Islam, which has the most significant effect" (ibid., 155) on the Malays. Out of their misinterpretation of the doctrines of Islam, certain rural communities spend most periods preparing for the hereafter, since life in this world is temporary while the hereafter will be permanent. To Mahathir, such is "of course a fatalistic attitude" (ibid., 162). For him, it "is a form of escapism from the realities of life, an insulation against the envy the Malays must feel for the prosperity of other races and other countries. The will to live and to struggle for a better life can never be very strong ..." (ibid.). Since Islam is their single greatest influence, many other aspects of the Malays' code of ethics and value systems suffer from the same misinterpretations of Islam. For example, working hard and accumulating much wealth are not too desirable, for it can keep them away from remembering God, as Mahathir writes of the Malays who believe that an excessive preoccupation "with the worldly things...is bad" (ibid., 157). A clear instance of both issues—escapism from the realities of life and falling into the wrong teaching of Islam, or to be more precise about it, Islamic fanaticism—can be seen in the character Saleh after his return from England and when he works with the colonial service in Malaya in Clifford's *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya* discussed earlier. The reality of life Saleh wishes to escape is the perception of his people that he, as the "Iang Mulia Raja Muhammad Saleh, a scion of a royal house, performs 'coolie work' is "ta' patut!" It is not fitting" (1926a: 204). Frustrated with his job as a tax

collector under the British administration in Malaya, Saleh, the son of the Malay Raja, finally agreed to head the revolt against the British, after being influenced by one fanatic Islamic leader. That he (Saleh) "was part of the greatest brotherhood upon earth; that he belonged to a faith which was religion, not of love, but of hate, which regarded all infidels [the British, in this case] as food for slaughter and for the fires of Jahennam..." (ibid., 157). The attempt to overthrow the British government in Pelesu, however, was unsuccessful and Saleh died. Ironically, he did so during his endeavor to seek help from his English friend, Jack Norris. Such misinterpretation and fanaticism are to Mahathir "foolish and lacking in merit" (1970: 158).

It should become obvious by now that while some of those value systems and codes of ethics are good in nature, they can still become the "impediments to their progress" (ibid., 173). Mahathir's solutions to his Malay dilemma—that "the Malays must be aware of their own faults as much as the faults of others" (ibid., 60). Just like eliminating the causes for amok could prevent the further occurrence of it, the Malay dilemma could be overcome by re-evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the Malays. Later, he adds, "There is no other way but to face boldly the pain of self-examination, the admission that one is wrong, and the acceptance that the cure lies in the rejection of some ideas and concepts no matter how dear to the heart they may be" (ibid., 172).

As I have lightly touched in the Introduction, the Malays do not regard time as important. Mahathir says,

> despite...[their]...reverence for life, the Malays do not seem to know what to do with it.... Life is related to time. To live is to exist for a period of time. Life and time are therefore inseparable. If life is valued, time must also be valued. Unfortunately, this relationship between life and time does not seem to be appreciated by the Malays. Life is valuable but time is not (ibid., 162-163).

This aspect of the Malays, which was also the same concern expressed earlier by the two colonial officers under study, seems to be a never-ending Malay dilemma since the colonial era. Mahathir even places the matter on a higher plane—to equate time with life when he says, "Time is wasted and so life too is wasted" (ibid., 164).

To bring this issue to our modern and technological era, Mahathir emphasizes that, "When there is no awareness of time, there can be no planning and work is never reliable. A time-table is an essential part of the life of modern man. Indeed, the more technologically advanced the man, the more he is bound to time" (ibid., 163). Even the notion of the laziness of the Malays from Mahathir's perspective has everything to do with time, which we will be discussed shortly. Mahathir reminds the Malays that,

> A community which is not conscious of time must be regarded as a very backward society. It can never achieve anything on its own and it can never be expected to advance and catch up with superior time-conscious civilizations. There is no doubt that the Malay failure to value time is one of the most important handicaps to their progress (ibid.).

There are only two choices given—to progress or remain backward. Now, we might want to recall the two instances related to time discussed earlier. First being Clifford's "Piloting Princes" where some of the Malay Chiefs, who after their visit to London, give the following remark: "Now *at last I understand*," said one of the

Chiefs to me, "*why time is valued so highly by white people*. In this country each day is so packed with living that if a man misses so much as a quarter of an hour, never again will he catch up the minutes which have escaped him" (Clifford, 1929: 188)(my emphasis). Second being the character Saleh in Clifford's *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya* going through torturous experience in coping with his daily routine and discipline in Mrs. Le Mesurier's household. In the end, he succumbs to the ideals of the white men and lives according to the "civilization of the Englishman of the twentieth century" (1926a: 40). It should be obvious that in the two instances above, the Malays are capable of realizing the importance of time, but to change and progress is not an easy task. Mahathir stresses, "a quality that [the Malays] must certainly be re-evaluated is their capacity for change" (1970: 59).

To change, however, requires commitment and Mahathir sadly says, "The Malay is never committed to anything" (ibid., 161). As both Swettenham and Clifford said earlier, the Malay "looks askance on all innovations, and will resist sudden introduction" and "experience[s] less change" respectively. Mahathir goes on to say that the Malay always finds "a loophole somewhere for his escape" (ibid.), a way of giving excuses for his attribute of being non-committed. With respect to innovations, the Malays in Mahathir's discussion "are ever ready to use new products and the new skills of others" but he adds that they are not keen "to learn to acquire new skills themselves" (ibid., 57), which always make them the end user. Furthermore, "the rapid advances in mechanization and electronics have made matters even worse. The electric fan is a common in Malay houses. They have learnt

to switch it on and off, but know nothing about repairing or making it" (ibid., 58). In other words, while the Malays can easily accept change and innovations, as opposed to their parents and grandparents during the colonial times, Mahathir argues that the Malays must not only have the knowledge to use the products, but if possible, be able also to produce it.

Such a calling[5]—to have knowledge of the products and to be able to produce it— I think, should not be anything new to the Malays. The Malays 'unconsciously' acquired these two aspects when helping their parents on paddy fields. The same rules can be applied to limited modern products.

I say limited modern products because I want to be more realistic, or to a certain extent, practical but I do admire Mahathir for his optimism. The manufacturing processes of most modern products, electric and electronics specifically, are very sophisticated and require highly skilled personnel to operate the machine, therefore, they cannot be mended by any ordinary individuals. For that matter, Weber argues what this "modern rational organization of the capitalistic enterprise...[does is]... to separate business from the household" (1904-5/1930: 22). Even to the simple electric device, such as the electric fan, as Mahathir uses as his example, involves what we have discussed earlier, the division of labour. In this case the workers are divided into different sections and are only responsible for assembling certain parts of the fan. Therefore, they cannot, in the end, repair the fan in his or her own home simply because he or she does not have the knowledge of

how the fan works. Nevertheless, I believe what Mahathir is saying here is about the Malays as a whole. They should not only be the end users of the products, but a certain section of them should be able to produce and repair the products as well. To be able to produce would mean the Malays are actively participating in Malaysian economy rather than being passive end users. Again, no matter how optimistic Mahathir is, the Malays must be committed to change and work hard to achieve it. The latter, however, remains the stumbling block for the Malay to achieve progress.

Working hard does not seem to be what the Malays like to do the most. Mahathir argues that

> geographical considerations have made the Malays people of the lowlands. There was plenty of land for everyone.... The lush tropical plains with their plentiful sources of food were able to support the relatively small number of inhabitants of early Malaya. No great exertion or ingenuity was required to obtain food. There was plenty for everyone throughout the year. The observation that only the fittest would survive did not apply, for the abundance of food supported the existence of even the weakest (1970: 21).

Moreover, according to Mahathir, the nature of their traditional activities such as rice cultivation is in fact "a seasonal occupation" (ibid.). The actual hard work takes up only two months and the yield can last for the whole year. There was certainly a lot of free time and the Malays spend it on leisure for there seemed to be no reason to be hardworking throughout the year. As echoes in Swettenham's *Malay Sketches* (1895) that the "position he [the Malay] occupies in the body politic is that of the heir to the inheritance...[and that]... The land is Malaya, and he is the Malay" (37), his sense of security permits him to work less. To a certain extent, Mahathir seems to be arguing that there is some truth in the colonial allegation of Malay's laziness. Mahathir

would probably think that Syed Hussain Alatas' stance in his book *The Myth of the Lazy Native* (1977) is not entirely correct.

On top of that, Mahathir argues that farming, the activity that most Malays are involved in "does not lead to the establishment of large communities. Thus the Malays tended to live in small villages or on individual farms. Social contact was limited and so the development of community services was insignificant. Division of labour and specialization of skills were limited as most farmers could provide for their own needs" (1970: 22). Mahathir's statement here is almost exactly reflected in Marx's description of the ownership of the land in India (what Marx called Oriental despotism) and the conditions of each village as "a self-sufficient and self-contained microcosmos, autonomous, autocratic, inward-looking, cut off from the outside world and hence capable of serving as the basis of conservatism, immobility and stagnation" (Avineri, 1969: 8-9). Or, as Weber argues using his term 'traditionalism,' "a man does not 'by nature' wish to earn more and more money but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose" (1904-5/1930: 60). The struggles in the modern capitalist economic environment involve the encounters with the immensely stubborn resistance of the leading trait of pre-capitalist labour—capitalism versus 'traditionalism.'

Such simplicity of life makes Malay society remain stagnant, be it socially, economically or culturally as Clifford earlier says,

> the natives live more chastely than do the people of the capital; they ... *experience less change*, and are chiefly occupied in supporting

> themselves and their families.... *Their lives are entirely monotonous, dull, and uneventful, but the knowledge of other and better things is not for them*, and they live contentedly the only life of which they have any experience (1897a: 28-29)(my emphasis).

To make their economic situation worse, the old guiding principle of the Malay life, as Swettenham writes in his *Malay Sketches*, "sufficient for the day and improvidence is the heritage of the people" (1895: 50) is still prevailed. It is also interesting to point out here that Clifford is making a comparison with "the people of the capital" which will become important shortly when we discuss Mahathir's solution to the Malays' dilemmas.

Mahathir also argues that the Malays fail to "understand the potential capacity of money" (1970: 167), even though money is convenient to them. In a certain section of the Malay community, even the accumulation of wealth or being materialistic is against the teaching of Islam. Such misinterpretation of Islam hinders the economic progress of the Malays. Since the accumulation of wealth is usually proportionate to labour, the Malays should embrace the holistic understanding of Islam in that the pursuit of wealth as a duty, labour is not merely an economic means, but a spiritual end. Mahathir's argument here almost exactly coincides with Weber's argument that modern economic life is associated with the rational ethics of ascetic Protestantism. It also fits into Durkheim's conception of duty as a common support that binds society together. Religion, which in Mahathir's case is Islam, could provide positive influence of religious ideas on economic development of the

Malays. In other words, the pursuit of wealth, which once had been feared as the enemy of religion by the Malays, could now be welcomed as its ally.

Another aspect of the misinterpretation is found in the "local interpretation of usury includes even the smallest interest on loans. Needless to say, this interpretation blocks Malay involvement not only in money lending but also banking" (ibid., 168). Therefore, the Malays cannot appreciate the so-called monetary transaction such as "budgeting, savings, banking, investments, credits, growth, transfers and all the other refinements in the use of money" (ibid., 169). In other words, Mahathir says that the Malays are unable to comprehend the idea that money can generate more money and that their values, "with regard to property and money may therefore be said to be underdeveloped" (ibid.). Money, which is the representation of exchange in modern economy, is an essential part of and signifier of progress according to Simmel as reflected in his book *Philosophy of Money*. Mahathir says "A prosperous society depends very much on the ability of its members to manipulate money" (ibid., 169).

Other than commenting what the Malays' traditionally believe in, as a modern man, Mahathir's faith lies in facts and sciences where he states, "Old ideas, half-truths and adulation of form are giving way before the pragmatism of the modern approach" (ibid., 171). Mahathir's solution to the Malay problems can be summarized in one word—urbanisation. Mahathir stresses, "The importance of urbanisation in the progress of communities lies in the more complex organization which the town and cities provide" (ibid., 79-80). As a person who possesses a

modern worldview, Mahathir does not have problem in understanding the modern approach that has dominated the Western countries since the late eighteenth century, as reflected in the writings of Karl Marx. The Western civilization, or in Marx words, bourgeois civilization, is the most important driving force that helped to change the world, specifically in Asia. Marx might be referring to England as his basis for his bourgeois civilization and to India and China for his Asian civilizations. However, his observations could be applicable to Malaya as well. England, which Marx considers her as "the unconscious tool of history" (Avineri, 1969: 94), begins its task as the influential modern state by revolutionizing the instruments of production and constantly expanding its market for its products all over the surface of the globe. In his essay, entitled 'The British Rule in India' which appeared in *New York Daily Tribune* dated June 25, 1853, Marx writes "English interference...dissolved these semi-barbarian, semi-civilized communities, by blowing up their economical basis, and thus produced the greatest, and, to speak the truth, the only *social* revolution ever heard of in Asia" (emphasis in original). While Marx claims the Oriental civilization "is devoid of internal mechanism of social change" (Avineri, 1969: 13), Swettenham reiterates that the presence of the British in Malaya will bring "change, and the process of 'awakening' has in places already begun" (1895: xi). It is fair to say that Mahathir's urbanisation here should be the extension of the social revolution introduced by the English during the pre-independent era. Perhaps, even Mahathir understands that when it comes to his own people, the only impetus for change has to come from the outside to serve as the external agent of change.

Such a social revolution, which lies in the spirit of capitalism and the capitalist mode of production, has carried its own momentum to bring the whole world within its net of productive relations. These needs for expansion and the net of productive relations create what Marx calls a bourgeois society, of which Marx praises the most. For the pre-Marxian, the bourgeoisie

> draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization.... It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production...to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image.
>
> The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared to the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life. Just as it has made the country dependent on the towns, so it has made the barbarian and semi-barbarian countries dependent on the civilized ones, nations of peasants on nations of bourgeois, the East on the West (Avineri, 1969: 3).

Nonetheless, such extension is not necessarily in total, but is subject to a certain forms of modifications to suit the cultural background and need of Malaysians. Since urbanisation involves the rehabilitation of the Malays from their traditional environment where the old custom and *adat* are being practised, the new environment requires the Malays to learn new ways of thinking and a new system of values. This is inevitable and Mahathir asks the Malays to confront "the realities of life and ...to adjust their thinking to conform with these realities" (1970: 113). He later adds, "all the attitudes and values that have contributed to their present dilemma must be studied, assessed and where necessary, discarded or modified. Urbanisation, acquisition of new skills and the acceptance by the Malays of new values which are

still compatible with their religion and their basically feudal outlook, would constitute a revolution" (ibid., 114). At this juncture, Mahathir's approach is similar to that of Auguste Comte in early nineteenth-century France, whereby the latter "did not urge revolutionary change, because he [Comte] felt the natural evolution of society would make things better. Reforms were needed only to assist the process a bit" (Ritzer, 1996: 15). Having a pragmatic and a workable model to be emulated from the West is an advantage, especially when there seems to be a possible parallel between the progress of the Western countries and that of Asia, but the local needs to seek for the best examples available around and to do it at their own pace.

Mahathir finds urbanisation, the product of the Industrial Revolution in Western countries, is important in Malaysia because it provides a better platform for change. For him, "urbanisation alone involves a process of physical and psychological uprooting of the Malays from the traditional rural society. There can be no doubt that with this uprooting, old values and ways of life must give way to new" (1970: 113). We have already touched on the old values and ways of life of the Malays above. It goes back to the Mahathir's original argument that environment plays an important role for the Malays to change or to use Marx's way of explaining it, "it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness" (Marx, 1859/1968b: 20). In this case, the urban setting should provide the Malays with the social existence that will determine their consciousness and the general process of social, political and intellectual life, which would be very different from their rural settings. In other

words, this new social existence will 'compel' the Malays into the 'bourgeois mode of production' as Marx argues above.

However, as I have mentioned earlier, it is not Mahathir's intention to emulate everything that is Western in his approach to improve the Malays, nor to accept everything that is Eastern. The process of civilization is itself, after all, a process of synthesizing some diverse political, economic and cultural materials while correcting, suppressing or rejecting other unproductive and harmful practices discussed above or what has been highlighted by the two colonial officers earlier. As such, Mahathir's approach is not a revolution, but to a certain extent, calls for a radical change.

The sort of change that we may expect from his approach (at this point, I am considering his ideas on urbanisation and modernization as almost an equivalent) ensures that the Malays' social system (and Malaysia as a whole) can constantly innovate without falling apart. He maintains that the Malays wish to remain feudal and that religion should continue to play an important part in their lives. While Weber stresses that "It was the power of religious influence ...more than anything else, which created the differences of which we are conscious today (1904-5/1930: 89), Mahathir believes that the religious movements would be able to provide positive influence on the development of material culture of the Malays. As Malaysia is moving from the traditional economic base into an industrial era that would drastically alter the pre-existing social framework, the sort of changes proposed by

Mahathir, will also help to ensure that the new social framework can provide skills and the knowledge necessary for living in a technologically advanced world.

First, urbanisation promises to bring about the social change to the Malays based on the demands of the economic factor. Mahathir argues that improvement in the economy of the Malays will help to improve their social well-being as well, especially in relation with other races such as the Chinese who seem to dominate the economic sectors of Malaysia, which will be discussed in a while. The demand for money is always there for the town dwellers, thus forcing them to work harder to earn a larger income, as opposed to the kampong dwellers that live without such pressures of a tight economy situation and could afford to work for only two months in a year. Under such economic pressures, the Malays are forced to save, albeit minimally. Some may involve in business, for example, the sundry shop where the wives help to attend it. In this case, Mahathir admires the hard working and business-minded Kelantanese women, recognizes earlier by Clifford. In short, with urbanisation, the Malays are always participating in economic activities, or as Weber puts it, in capital accumulation, where "the development of a rational bourgeois economic life...stood at the cradle of the modern economic man" (ibid., 174).

In their effort to improve the economic life as the urban dwellers, the Malays take care of the two most prominent negative characteristics of their race—laziness and time-wasting. As they are 'forced' to work in order to earn income to support their families, the urban Malays can no longer afford to be lazy. The Malays also

have to get rid of the misinterpretation of Islam that the pursuit of wealth is against its teaching. In this regard, Mahathir would agree with Max Weber who regards the pursuit of wealth as not merely an advantage but rather as a duty. Islam, as a religion, considers labour as sacred duty to be performed by Muslims and abhors laziness and time wasting followers. Islam too is not against the accumulation of wealth and the development of modern material culture as long as the means are right and do not cause human misery. Islam, in principle, has a positive orientation to worldly activities and gives religious legitimation and sanction for modernization.

Second, urbanisation ushers the Malays into the new cultural mindset, which is impinged upon by the demands in the economic sphere. In the new urban setting, the Malays have to expect some discontinuities in tradition, culture and social organization, as opposed to those extant in the rural areas. Mahathir says, "The rehabilitation will also break them [the Malays] away from certain *adat*" (1970: 113) and with the positive changes in the religious sphere, it will give rise to the correct understanding and practice of Islamic principle. The Malays should learn to let go of everything in their culture which is negative. Mahathir stresses in his statement earlier that 'certain *adat*' need to be corrected, the process of urbanisation will also witness the modernization of the traditional and the traditionalization of the modern. For example, the spirit of gotong-royong, which is practised during paddy harvesting season, may be transformed into the modern activity of esprit de corps—the cleaning of the residential areas.

Third, urbanisation promises the Malays will cope better with the changes that take place in the modern world because in the rural setting, the lack of contact with outside world has made, says Mahathir, "their will to progress never great" (ibid., 28). In town, the Malays can benefit from "better education, [and become] more sophisticated from mixing with other communities" (ibid., 28). In this regard, Mahathir's solution is to prepare the Malays with the reality that is facing their country—that they are no longer living in this country by themselves but with other communities as well. Their will to progress is the only way to ensure that they will continue to survive.

Truly, as Mahathir argues earlier in his introduction that during the colonial era, "the Malays lived physically apart from the Chinese and Indians" (ibid., 6), which explained the reason why there were no racial clashes. Prior to independence, the Malays realized that they were sharing the country with other communities. Independence constitutes not only the transfer of sovereignty from a colonial regime to an independent one, but, as Clifford Geertz argues, "is a transformation of the whole pattern of political life, a metamorphosis of subjects into citizens (1963: 119). The citizens of Malaya now included the Malays, the Chinese, Indians and other minorities as well. The transformation of 'the whole pattern of political life' here would mean that in the case of Malaya, all the races mentioned above will participate in an election process in order to set up a democratic government, and to run the government after winning the election.

Therefore, a newly formed government is more complicated than during the colonial period. The British in Malaya performed the task of administering the country through an autocratic government. They enjoyed the administrative convenience of the divide-and-rule policy, separating the three main races according to their geo-occupational tendencies—the Malays in their rural setting, the Chinese in their urban setting, and the Indians in the estates. The efforts taken by the British colonial officers like Swettenham and Clifford, to learn, understand and symphatise with the Malays, were very much for the purpose of administrating the Malays, or as this thesis argues, managing change in the Malay society. Recognizing the Malays as 'the son[s] of the soil," would ease the task of governing Malaya as far as creating policies are concerned. The British found it easy to influence the Malay Rulers since the Pangkor Engagement 1874 has obliged the Malay Rulers to listen to the advice of the British Resident. The Chinese and the Indians are regarded as the British subjects as we learn in Clifford's "At the Court of Pelesu," where the Malay King has no authority over Ah Ku's life. On top of that, Swettenham even considers the Chinese as "the hardest-working, most easily governed race on earth" (1899: 1), as opposed to, in this case, the Malays.

The independent Malaya, therefore, has transformed itself into a complex of modern institutions or organizations, to use Mahathir's term, which constitutes different races, ethnicities, religions, and languages as a means of identifying themselves, organizing their community, finding meaning for their sentiments, and expressing their community. Such modern Malayan society entails the inclusion of

the mass of the population into the society in the sense that both élite (those who received higher education in the British government school or in England itself, as in the person of Saleh in the novel, *Saleh: A Prince of Malaya*) and *ra'ayat* (which now include the Chinese, the Indians and other minorities) who regard themselves as members of the society, and as such, as of approximately equal dignity and greater participation in determining the values of society and in decision making. Hence, in the running of the government, Mahathir says, "decisions have to be made every day, and these decisions affect the country and the people" (1970: 11). All the sentiments of the race and the sensitivities of each community have to be considered in any decision-making processes, unlike before during the colonial era.

As opposed to most nationalists who instill hate as a common response to colonialism, Mahathir tries not make any such provocations in order to rally support for his arguments. In his writing lies the true effort of a person who wants to modernize his country, or at least, is inspired to do so. As opposed to what the two colonial authors have written about their efforts to understand the Malays, *The Malay Dilemma* seeks to do more than that. Other than seeking other Malaysian citizens to understand the Malay psyche and sentiments, the author shares in this book his ideas on the conception of modernity, the formation of a nation and the institutions appropriate to a national society. The book also urges the non-Malays to understand the author's conception of "constructive protectionism" in order to create a more equitable balance of wealth among the citizens of Malaysia, hence, to achieve racial harmony.

This principle of helping the Malays, according to Mahathir, "is not racialism but is actually essential for the stability of the country" (ibid., 41). In order to achieve racial harmony, racial equality must be achieved first. Mahathir says, "The only basis for racial harmony in a multiracial society is racial equality" (ibid., 95). Mahathir adds, "to be equal is to be accepted into every strata (sic) of society socially, economically and politically to a degree which more or less reflects the proportion of the population made up by various groups" (ibid., 68) in Malaysia. With the Chinese monopolizing the economy of Malaya right after Independence, and the Malays remaining backward economically and educationally, Malaya would hardly experience racial equality.

Mahathir is right to point out that the decision making process performed by the government would be among the hardest tasks in this newly independent country, especially when there is an imbalance of wealth among its citizens, let alone the sentiments professed by each race towards each other.[6] Tan Cheng Lock, the President of Overseas Chinese Association, openly acknowledged these challenges much earlier during the stage of re-occupation of the British into Malaya after the Japanese Occupation. In the Memorial Relating to Malaya submitted to His Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies, London in 1945, Mr. Tan writes under the Declaration of Policy number 13 which states, "His Majesty's Government on the re-occupation of Malaya will be confronted with immense problems, some of which are of an unprecedented nature, and in the resolution of which the views of the representatives of the people should be sought and given due consideration and

weight." This is followed by Declaration of Policy number 14 which runs as follows: "It is of the utmost importance that before and soon after re-occupation the declaration of a clear-cut policy and the intentions of His Majesty's Government that will take into account the needs, feelings and inspirations of the people should be made relating to the political future of the country and the task of its re-construction and rehabilitation..." (1947: 66).

Quite obviously, the transfer of colonial power into native's hands would also mean the transfer of the many unresolved and pressing problems, especially those that lie in the social and economic stratification of the country, as Mr. Tan anticipated earlier during the re-occupation stage above. We learned earlier that during the colonial era the Malays were encouraged to be paddy planters and fishermen, and later, in Swettenham's writing, to work in the low-rank government offices.[7] The colonial government found that the hardworking Chinese were indispensable as far as businesses was concerned.[8] Through hard work and great enterprise, the Chinese become wealthy. By being wealthy, the Chinese could afford to send their children to good schools and achieved more progress than the other races in Malaya had. These alone could be the source of social tensions, especially when the decisions made by the elected native government continued to favour the Chinese, at least that is what the Malays believed. However, Mahathir stresses that, "it would not be fair to blame only others for Malay economy [and other forms of] backwardness" (1970: 57)

Modern capitalist economic expansion, as Marx would argue, is not only necessary in economic system, but it can also create the economic and technological infrastructure which enable every member of society a free development according to his or her potential. However, in the case of Malaya, in Mahathir's view, the problems of increased productivity and material welfare, if it is allowed for the free development as Marx argues, will create the imbalance of wealth among the three main races. As we have learned above, the Chinese, who are recognized for hard work, have attained some form of material wealth, while the Malays, who work less are easily satisfied with what they have. That is the reason why Mahathir calls for the Malays to change, even more radically than what the two colonial officers had asked of them a century ago.

Nevertheless, to change alone is not enough. The Malays need to receive support from the government, as far as creating opportunities and getting protection in a free local and global market in the form of "constructive protectionism," or else, they will not be able to compete with the hard-working Chinese businessmen and their networks of business connections. On the one hand, Mahathir's "constructive protectionism" brings us back to Mahathir's original argument that places environmental factor as an important element in the process of change. We have come across how town and city environment help to change the Malays of urban areas.

On the other hand, such protectionism puts some constraints on a free-flow capitalist market enterprise where Darwin's survival of the fittest no longer applies. In a real business environment, if Malay businessmen are allowed to compete against the giant Chinese companies, the chances for the Malay businessmen to succeed are too slim. In this context, the government, while being politically sensitive to the sentiments of the other races as mentioned above, has to identify and correct the economic disparity between the Malays and the Chinese, while at the same time avoiding any form of social tension. In Malaysia, the implementation of "constructive protectionism" is a controversial issue especially to the Chinese who feel that all communities in Malaysia should compete on equal footing. In his "Comments on the Association of British Malaya's Memorandum on the Reconstruction of Malaya," written in 1944, Tan Cheng Lock reminds the British Government that "while the protection of the interests of the Malays should be continued mainly because of their comparative backwardness, it should be done in a manner consistent with the recognition of the rights and the welfare, and not to the disadvantage, of the other communities, which will create racial disharmony" (1947: 57). However, in 1945, in the memorial to the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Tan Cheng Lock emphasizes that "a polity based on the exclusive or *preferential rights of the Malays* with the entire business of the country in the hands of the Malayans, whose energy, labour, capital and enterprise...*is an impracticable proposition*" (ibid., 1947)(emphasis is mine).

If Weber is known to be arguing against the 'ghost of Marx and Durkheim' in his writing, Mahathir's arguments in his book could be regarded as counter-argument to what Tan Cheng Lock wrote earlier in the 1940's. For instance, in the Memorandum on the Future of Malaya written in 1943, Tan Cheng Lock writes that the Malaya-born Chinese "have maintained the friendliest relationship with the Malays and others" (ibid., 22), whereas Mahathir states, "Under the British rule the Malays lived physically apart from the Chinese and Indians, coming into contact with them only for brief periods of the day.... People who live apart need not like each other" (1970: 6). Another good example would be Tan Cheng Lock's proposition that "In the future there is no reason why the Malays cannot collaborate with the Chinese in business to mutual advantage and thus also to develop their commercial instincts and raise their economic status. Will the Malays do so?" (ibid., 26) Mahathir, however, interjected by asking "But is it easier to compete with the Chinese as a community, since it was not easy to compete with the British during the colonial regime? Mahathir anticipates that it would be hard because "the Chinese through a strong interconnected system of chambers of commerce are... solely devoted to promoting and protecting Chinese business" (1970: 52-53).

There is no further use of stating the contradictions between the two authors above, except to validate the realities that there are racial problems to be faced in Malaya, which needed to be tackled effectively. Already, there are the seeds of tolerance, understanding and goodwill between the two main races in Malaya, even though we cannot deny altogether the dissatisfaction and uneasiness germinating in

certain quarters of all races in Malaya on the preferential rights of the Malays. At the very least, Tan Cheng Lock, representing the Chinese community, agrees with the fact that "the Malays should be helped in every way to rise to the level of the other communities in all spheres of activities" (1947: 57), as echoed in Mahathir's statement earlier that "to be equal is to be accepted into every strata (sic) of society socially, economically and politically..." (1970: 68). Such acknowledgement by Tan Cheng Lock that the Government should assist the Malays "in every way to accelerate their economy and educational advancement" (1947: 32) as long as the interests and rights of other races should not suffer, opens up the possibility of fostering amity, harmony and co-operation among its citizens.

It is not enough for other communities such as the Chinese, to acknowledge Malay backwardness, but to accept the policy of "constructive protectionism." According to Mahathir, these communities "must be confronted with the realities of life and forced to adjust their thinking to conform with these realities" (1970: 113). One of the first realities that the Malays need to understand is that they need to change. No longer can they afford to be too self-effacing and too courteous to the point that they are considered weak. The British had certainly manipulated these Malays' impediments to their upmost advantage. To progress, the Malays need to show that they are capable of expressing their own opinions as opposed to being courteous and unwilling to embarrass others when they express their opinions or concerns. Mahathir is sure that the Malays can change because "Politics have shown that the Malays can change" (ibid., 59). One good example would be when the

Malays were politically united in their fight against the establishment of Malayan Union.

Certain elements of Malay culture need change as well. The Malays' perception of religion requires a fresh outlook. In his book, Mahathir not only confirmed the importance of Islam as a religion of the Malays just as do the two colonial officers, but he also stresses the limit of the process of secularization in Malay society. He anticipates that Islam as the religion of the Malays is capable of hindering the element of social stress or modern 'pathologies' (Ritzer, 1996: 20) caused by the rapidity of social changes.

But most importantly, religious or otherwise, the Malays need to understand the importance of material possession in the modern world, which they seem to be lacking now, as well as during the colonial era. As extensively discussed above the opinions of Mahathir as a Malay and Tan Cheng Lock as a Chinese, seem to be concentrating on the issues of economic disparity and political power between the two races. Balancing the two would ensure racial harmony in Malaya. Ironically in Malaya/Malaysia, the Malays have the political power, and the Chinese, the economic. For a modern nation to progress and prosper, political stability and a strong economic foundation are the important prerequisites, of which the two races do not want to let go without having anything to gain. Such a situation, I argue, is much more complex than Marx's notion of the establishment of the classless society

for it involves the pride of each race, rather than to solely base it on each individual's ability or capacity.

Apparently, in the case of Malaysia, Marx and Marxist perspectives fail to foresee the force behind the issue of race and how it could shape a nation. It is no longer the division of labour or the means of production that determines who has the power. Both main races have the 'weapons' in each other's hands; the misuse of one or the other could destroy the country. Fortunately, the correct utilization of both 'weapons' would help the nation prosper.

For the time being, no matter how pessimistic Mahathir is with the little political power that the Malays have as the only remnant of colonial leftover, the Malays seek to get "some of the riches that this country [Malaysia] boasts of" (1970: 61). It is almost as if the legacy of Britain's divide-and–rule policy dictates the Malays quest for material wealth that the bounty of their country offers. It is the ability of each individual race that matters in Malaysia, and not the individual. Nevertheless, Mahathir is hopeful that "understanding, goodwill and time" (ibid., 97) can bring about racial equality in Malaysia.