

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **A CRITICAL REVIEW OF MALAYSIAN MIDDLE CLASS STUDIES**

#### **Discourses on the Middle Class**

The subject of the middle class, in particular the new middle class, has been in both public and academic discourses for quite some time in Malaysia. The demand for the creation and expansion of the new Malay middle class had been in public discourse well before the Second World War, and, of late, the debate has gathered renewed momentum, especially after the Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad proposed the creation of *Melayu Baru* (the New Malay) during the UMNO general assembly in November 1991 (see Chapter 9), the Malaysian government has adopted a 'hands-on' approach in devising programmes to expedite the growth of what is called in popular discussion as the Malay 'entrepreneurial' middle class. (By the Malay 'entrepreneurial' middle class here is meant the old middle class as discussed in Chapter 1). Through this programme, the government hopes to turn some of the Malay entrepreneurial middle class elements into capitalists as they progress in their business activities.

The pre-independence discourse, however, was more general in nature. It was couched in terms of the need to expedite processes of modernization and social change in Malay society, which was to be achieved through educational reform, reform of Malay values and attitudes, including their religious world views, to overcome fatalism and blind faith, so that the Malay socio-economic status could be improved and be at par with the migrant communities. This discourse could be found in the writings of Malay intellectuals such as Zainal 'Abidin bin Ahmad or more popularly known as Za'ba, and Abdul Rahim Kajai<sup>1</sup> before the Second World War (Roff 1994), a debate which again surfaced in various Malay writings and congresses after the war. Some of these ideas, directly or indirectly, were translated into policies and programmes after independence, especially with the implementation of the NEP (1971-1990) and the National Development Policy (NDP) (1991-2000).

The current public discourse by government leaders and others, including the media, however, is more specific. It recognises that the capitalist class as well as the new middle class of all ethnic groups, including the Bumiputera, have been created through social transformation over the last three decades. The discourse differentiates between the new middle class and the 'entrepreneurial' middle class (read: old middle class). It argues that while the new middle class in the Bumiputera community is already quite large and expanding, the Bumiputera 'entrepreneurial' middle class has yet to develop successfully, and thus proposes the implementation of various policy measures to support its growth. For example, *Dataniaga*, a business monthly in Malay, in its June 1997 issue, focused specially on the Malay 'entrepreneurial' middle

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<sup>1</sup> See footnotes 7 and 8 in chapter 9 for a brief introduction of the two Malay intellectuals.

class, its problems and ways of promoting its development, including an interview with the Minister of Entrepreneurial Development who has been entrusted with this task (*Dataniaga*, No. 32, June 1997). The Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, as UMNO President, in his winding up speech to the UMNO general assembly on June 21, 1998 again drew attention to the importance of the creation of a Bumiputera entrepreneurial middle class (Mahathir 1998).

Compared to the public discourse, the academic discourse on the middle class is more recent, having started from the late 1960s, but gathered momentum only in the 1990s. During the last three decades, Malaysian social science research has justifiably tended to focus more on pressing issues faced in the immediate post-independence years, viz. development and underdevelopment (with particular emphasis on factors impeding development of the Bumiputera), culture, Islam, ethnic relations, inter-ethnic imbalances, national unity, etc. Most of these studies only made passing references to the middle class, and did not study it as a primary interest. Over-emphasis on some of these themes – particularly ‘studies of peasants, factory women, ethnicity and Islam’ -- led one foreign scholar to label it as ‘an outpouring’, suggesting that these studies ‘in their distribution (are) far from fully representative of current trends in the Malay community’ (Kahn 1996b: 49). However, the claim that ‘the growth of the middle class is ... largely ignored’, that ‘there has been remarkably little interest among social scientists in the phenomenon’, so much so that there has existed a ‘yawning gap’ (Kahn 1996b: 49, 67), and that the advertising industry discovered the middle class before the academics (Kahn 1996a), has to be examined critically against available evidence. While the middle class has not been given

prominent attention by scholars in studies of the preceding decades, there was no such 'yawning gap', for there was no absolute dearth of studies of the middle class in Malaysia even during those years. A survey of the literature will bear this out.

In general, studies of the new Malaysian middle class thus far can be grouped under two broad categories. First, earlier studies concerning the administrative middle class (i.e. the new middle class consisting of administrators) that developed since the colonial period as well as the early independence years. These studies cover such themes as the origin, growth and social composition of the administrative middle class, its role during the colonial period with regard to nationalism, its ideology and role after independence and with Malaysianisation (replacement of British expatriates with Malaysians), as well as the lifestyles of the administrative middle class who replaced the British administrators. These studies in the main were carried out in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Second, more recent studies which examine the impact of post-independence state-led modernization, including social engineering and export-oriented industrialization on Malaysian social structure, with particular reference to socio-economic transformations and growth of the new middle class. These studies examine the structural changes as a result of rapid industrialization and economic growth, the role of the state in class formations and in the expansion of the new middle class, ethnic composition of the new middle class, middle-class consciousness, politics and culture, as well as their impacts on national unity and democratisation. A number of

these studies also take up the critical question of the problematic of both middle-class conceptualisation and theorising.

In this chapter, I present a selective review of these studies, by focusing in particular on the more recent ones. The main arguments and findings of these studies will be highlighted, together with an evaluation of them. At the same time, I also attempt to locate my study in the context of the previous studies and show its relevance.

### **Contribution of Earlier Middle Class Studies<sup>2</sup>**

As indicated in Chapter 1, and as shall be shown in greater detail in Chapter 3, the new middle class in Malaysia, in particular the administrative middle class, had already emerged during the colonial period, from early this century, though their rapid growth and expansion only began with the NEP's social engineering and export-led industrialization since the 1970s. Unlike Western Europe, where the origin and growth of the new middle class had to do with the rise of cities into autonomous principalities, as well as the rising bourgeoisie and the Industrial Revolution (Alatas 1972), Malaysia's experience is very different. In Malaysia, British colonialism not only created a plural society with the influx of Chinese and Indian immigrants from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, living alongside but separate from the indigenous Malays, but also spawned a class of middlemen or compradors (mainly Chinese and, to a certain extent, Indian and Arab who served as intermediaries between the foreign

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<sup>2</sup> The review of the earlier studies of the Malaysian middle class is summarised from my paper entitled 'A Critical Review of Studies of Malaysian Middle Classes' presented at the International Workshop on

concerns and the local populace), as well as a small but growing intelligentsia on the other. While the early compradors could be regarded as the forerunners of today's business or capitalist class, especially among Chinese and Indians, the early intelligentsia -- educated either in English or the vernacular, and served as junior administrators, clerks, technicians, and teachers -- were the forerunners of today's new middle class or white-collar salariat, consisting of managers, professionals and administrators.

The most important component of the indigenous new middle class before Malaysia's independence until the 1970s was the administrative middle class, a group with immense power and prestige vis-a-vis the rest of the population. Khasnor's study (Khasnor 1984) on the origin and role of this administrative class, which was conducted in early 1970s for her Ph.D. degree in history at Monash University, was by far the most important on this topic. By sieving through historical records, Khasnor traced the origin of the Malay administrative class to the setting up, in 1910, of the Malay Administrative Service (MAS) by the British, which served as the stepping stone to the powerful and prestigious British-controlled Malayan Civil Service (MCS), the forerunner of the contemporary Malaysian Administrative and Diplomatic Service (*Perkhidmatan Tadbir dan Diplomatik* -- PTD). As argued by Khasnor, the scheme was an attempt by the British to re-integrate members of the traditional Malay aristocracy into the lower echelons of the British colonial administration, by becoming part of British officialdom. The key to social mobility was English education, which increasingly provided a new criterion of, and passport to, social distinction (Khasnor

1984: 5). Mainly educated at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar -- initially set up in 1905 for male children of the aristocracy -- the administrators came to be seen as the standard setters for Malays drawn into the modern world, especially apparent in the then new Malay attitudes to salaried employment. In absolute terms, the Malay officers comprised a small, but clearly bounded and highly status-conscious social group, increasing from 55 in 1916 to 78 in 1928, and 105 (including four on probation) in 1940 compared to 120 Europeans in the higher civil service positions in the Federated Malay States (the first four Malay states taken over by the British) (Khasnor 1984: 104). However, those promoted into the MCS were very much smaller in number -- only one in 1921, though on the eve of independence, the number had increased to 106. After independence and with the policy of Malayisation (1957-1963), and then Malaysianisation (from 1963 onwards after the formation of Malaysia), the ranks of Malays in the civil service rose dramatically to 706 in 1968, and to 1137 in 1974 (Nordin 1976: 146).

While Khasnor's study focused on the origin and development as well as the power and prestige of the administrative class, three other studies which examined different aspects of this class had already been published before hers. One was on the origin of Malay nationalism and the role of the Malay intelligentsia in the nationalist movement prior to the Second World War by historian William Roff (1967), while the other two -- on the ideology, role and lifestyle of the Malay administrative middle class in newly-independent Malaysia -- were by political scientist James Scott (1967) and sociologist Nordin Selat (1976).

Though Roff's pioneering work on Malay nationalism (1967; second edition 1994) was not on the middle class *per se*, it is related since it links the origin and development of nationalism to the leading elements of the Malay intelligentsia. His study -- hailed by Harry J. Benda as 'the first sociological history of modern Malay society' (see his 'Foreword' in Roff 1994: ix) -- identified the politicised middle strata of three 'contending' new elites in Malay society before World War II, viz.: the Arabic-educated religious reformists, the largely Malay-educated radical intelligentsia, and the English-educated administrators mainly recruited from the traditional Malay ruling class (the group studied by Khasnor).

As implied by Roff, during the colonial period in Malaya, anti-colonial nationalist ideology could neither be articulated by the peasantry owing to their narrow experience and outlook, as well as lack of literacy and organizational capability, nor by the feudal aristocracy who were largely allied to the colonial order. Others, i.e. those from the educated middle strata -- the intelligentsia -- whose education, social position, and ideology predisposed them to nationalism instead shouldered this task. The Arab-educated reformists and Malay-educated intelligentsia espoused anti-colonial nationalism, while the Westernised English-educated elite in the main was often the mouthpieces of more conservative nationalism.

What is significant is that for various reasons the Westernised elite was able to capture the leadership of the independence movement in the fifties to lead the country to independence (Jomo 1986). Though Roff's study only mapped out the development



of Malay nationalism until the outbreak of the Second World War, other studies show that this Westernised class of administrators formed the core of the leadership of United Malays' National Organization (UMNO), formed in 1946 and to whom the baton of power was handed over by the British in 1957.

Unlike the two historians who used an historical approach to examine different aspects of the administrative middle class of the colonial period, Scott and Nordin focused on the post-independence administrative middle class which assumed greater power and significance after independence, in particular after decolonisation and Malaysianisation. Their approach is sociological, relying not only on secondary data extracted from published records and other sources, but more importantly, on primary data obtained through their own interviews, questionnaires and observations.

Scott conducted interviews with 17 senior Kuala Lumpur-based civil servants (10 Malays, four Indians and three Chinese) drawn from a sampling frame of about 3,000 Division I posts in the 1964 establishment. Scott's purpose was to examine the ideology and political beliefs of the administrators with a view to investigate the basis of democracy and the conditions under which democratic values could flourish. Defining 'personal ideology' as 'an organization of opinions, attitudes and values - a way of thinking about man and society' unique to an individual, and differentiating it from formal ideologies such as socialism or liberalism, Scott (1968: 31) hoped that through in-depth interviewing and administering psychoanalytic tests on his respondents, he could grasp the essence of their ideologies and political beliefs.

To Scott, though this 'Westernising elite group of civil servants' were in effect 'indigenous-aliens' whose Western education and values created a great gap between them and the masses (Scott 1968: 16), nevertheless, in new nations like Malaysia, the bureaucracy has generally broader responsibilities than in the West. According to him, the civil service remains, often by default, the major body from which plans for a new society emanate and through which they will be executed. Given this continuing central role for the bureaucracy, the ideology of civil servants remains of crucial importance for the future of former colonies regardless of political changes (Scott 1968: 18-19). Making similar observations to Khasnor's, Scott observed that in a post-colonial society like Malaysia, popular acceptance of, and deference to, the Westernized elite -- particularly civil servants -- was the rule rather than the exception.

From his study, Scott found that the basic value-orientations of the administrators were anchored in the belief that 'man is narrowly selfish and lacking in restraint, that economic life is a zero-sum game, and that only short-term gains are possible', 'that external control mechanisms are required to restrain man's natural rapaciousness' (Scott 1968: 247-249). As Scott put it, despite their commitment to democratic forms and ideals, these administrators felt that liberal democracy was not practicable for Malaysia. Instead, guided or 'tutelary' democracy appealed to them because its assumptions about the environment seemed to match much of what they themselves believed in or had experienced.

Hence, Scott concluded that the Malaysian administrative class was not predisposed to support liberal democracy but, instead, was more inclined to 'tutelary democracy', synonymous with elite rule. According to him, this is inevitable because on the one hand, the Westernized elite group had a monopoly over education, technical skills, as well as experience in managing a modern state, and the masses looked to them for leadership. On the other hand, there is also the view that popular rule may tear the nation apart because of racial antagonisms. Thus, 'post-colonial experience has, if anything, enhanced the attractiveness of strong, paternalistic rule' (Scott 1968: 251-2).

Though Scott's analysis is fairly sophisticated and theoretically informed, and he was careful in choosing his sample, the latter was far too small to warrant generalizations or claims of representativeness. Furthermore, a study of political attitudes and ideologies alone may not reveal much about behaviour owing to the perennial discrepancy between behaviour and attitudes. As admitted by Scott, the relationship between belief and behaviour is problematic, for behaviour cannot be predicted from beliefs alone. Nevertheless, his study provided a useful insight into the attitudes and beliefs of a segment of the administrative middle class during the early independence years prior to the implementation of the NEP -- a useful source for comparison with subsequent studies.

While Scott examined the ideology and political beliefs of the administrative middle class and their implications for democracy, Nordin's study (1976) attempted to provide a social map of the Malay administrative middle class, in particular their

socio-economic characteristics, intergenerational mobility, and their lifestyles including cultural values, consumption patterns, tastes, and habits.

Nordin's study was based on a slightly larger sample comprising 105 Division I Malay civil servants also working in the federal capital of Kuala Lumpur. Aged between 29 and 54, the majority were highly educated, with 74 per cent holding at least a first degree. They had experienced intergenerational mobility, two-thirds of their fathers (or guardians) only had vernacular education or no education at all. About a third hailed from rural-peasant backgrounds and a similar percentage came from families of clerks or lower-grade schoolteachers. Their humble origins could also be seen in the fact that almost half were the only university-educated ones among their siblings. Their family and class backgrounds were markedly different from the aristocratic origins of the pre-independence administrative middle class, a fact indicative of social mobility and the changes that had taken place in the social composition of the administrative middle class in the two historical periods.

Nevertheless, despite such changes, Nordin pointed out that the post-independence Malay administrative middle class also aped the West in terms of lifestyles. All married, the majority (70 per cent) had small- or medium-sized families with two or three children; an overwhelming majority (88 per cent) had domestic servants. Relieved of domestic chores, many of the respondents' spouses could pursue their own careers. As evidence of their affluent lifestyles, 41 per cent of respondents lived in government quarters in Kuala Lumpur, and about half lived in their own bungalows in the surrounding suburbs. All respondents owned cars, with 40 per cent

having more than one. Their reading materials consisted of English-language periodicals such as *Time*, *Far Eastern Economic Review*, and *Newsweek*, while very few read Malay magazines. Their leisure hours were filled with social activities such as playing golf (60 per cent were members of prestigious golf clubs), or going to the cinema. The majority were well-travelled, with 95 per cent having travelled overseas. Their topics of conversation often consisted of 'shop-talk' -- about promotion, golf, cars, travel abroad, etc.

However, Nordin's study was basically descriptive. He was content to leave it empirical, with little or no attempt at strengthening it conceptually, theoretically and methodologically. Nevertheless, despite such weaknesses, it is a valuable reference as a pioneering empirical study of the post-independence administrative middle class.

### **More Recent Studies: Social Transformation and the New Middle Class**

While the concern of the earlier studies had generally been with the administrative middle class and basically descriptive in nature (with the exception of Scott's), more recent studies have attempted to move beyond them not only in scope but also in terms of conceptual and theoretical discourses. These studies attempt to address several inter-related questions, including Malaysia's social transformation which has resulted in the emergence of the capitalist, middle and working classes; the historical forces that have shaped the emergence and growth of these classes; middle-class consciousness, politics, family, lifestyle and culture; and what conceptual and theoretical models can best inform or guide the study of the new Malaysian middle

class. Many of these are new research questions, which had not been specifically addressed, in earlier studies.

The socio-economic transformations of Malaysian society over the last four decades, from an agricultural economy into a rapidly industrialising one, from a rural society into an increasingly urbanised society, and from a poor country into a middle income country, and their impacts on class structure and formation of modern classes, have been described in many works; for example, Crouch (1981, 1993 & 1996), Husin Ali (1984), Jomo (1988 & 1994), Johan Saravanamuttu (1989), Mohd Nor (1991), Kahn (1991, 1992, 1996a, 1996b), Fatimah Abdullah (1994), Shamsul A.B. (1997, 1999); Abdul Rahman (1995a, 1995b, 1996, 1997a, 1997b, 1998, forthcoming); Norani Othman *et al.* (1996); Norani Othman (1997); Tan Poo Chang *et al.* (1996).<sup>3</sup> Some of these studies not only focused on the social transformation and the evolution of the class structure that have taken place since the implementation of the NEP and export-led industrialisation, but also engaged in a more direct critical discourse on the middle-class, utilising both official statistics as well as data from field research and observations. These works, especially the more recent ones, in varying ways, present preliminary class maps of the new middle class, analyses of middle-class consciousness, politics and culture in relation to national unity and democratisation, and clarifications of the term 'middle class (es)'. The divergent points of views -- theoretical, methodological and empirical -- expressed in the debate are

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<sup>3</sup> Due to space constraints, the review in this chapter is necessarily selective, confined to published works from 1989 to the present. Only one unpublished paper (Norani 1997) is included on the basis it offers a different approach to the study. Shamsul's works (1997, 1999), which are published, focus specifically on *Melayu Baru*; thus they are discussed in Chapter 9, which deals with *Melayu Baru* and the Malay middle class. So far, the recent studies only appear as articles in journals or chapters in books; a single volume specifically on the Malaysian new middle class has yet to be published.

not only a measure of the complexity of Malaysian class transformation, but also a reflection of the conflicting perspectives extant in the sociological literature on the middle class.

It is generally acknowledged that most studies of class, including the new middle class, have been developed based on Western experience, following either the Marxist or the Weberian tradition, or a combination of both. While acknowledging that such models are useful heuristic devices in guiding analysis, both Malaysian scholars and Malaysianists have often stressed the need to exercise caution when using them, in order to avoid mechanical application of fitting the models on widely divergent historical conditions.

A recurrent theme in the current discourse is the general agreement that the notion of the 'middle class' is problematic and difficult to define. Thus a number of these scholars (Kahn 1991, 1996; Jomo 1994) opt for the usage in the plural - 'middle classes' - rather than the singular to reflect not only the shifting definition of the term, but also the heterogeneity of the middle class as well as their lack of coherence, boundedness and self-consciousness. They also caution that the 'new' middle class is not really new since similar middle-class occupations -- administrators, doctors, teachers, technologists, managers, etc. -- though small in number, had already emerged under colonialism and before the export-led industrialisation of the seventies. They also noted that the growth of the *new* middle class has not caused the disintegration or elimination of the *old* middle class - the petty bourgeoisie - which

has increased in absolute terms too (see, for example, Jomo 1994; Abdul Rahman 1995a).

Nevertheless, there is no consensus among scholars on how to approach the question of the new middle class in Malaysia. Let us take, as an example, Giddens' theoretical approach on middle-class conceptualisation (Giddens 1980) as used by Saravanamuttu (1989). In his work, Giddens develops a three-class model of society, based on what he calls 'three sorts of market capacity' -- ownership of property in the means of production, which produces the capitalist or upper class; possession of educational and/or technical qualifications, which produces the middle class; and possession of manual labour power, which produces the working class. Following closely Giddens' model in the Malaysian context, Saravanamuttu suggests that the middle class comprise non-manual workers and non-peasants, i.e. salaried employees who possess qualifications and/or technical skills and occupy middle-class positions by virtue of their relatively advantaged market capacity.

Kahn (1991, 1996a, 1996b) -- a Malaysianist -- on the other hand is very critical of Saravanamuttu's ownership approach. Labelling it as 'trying to fit the middle class into a model of class established for nineteenth century capitalism', Kahn feels that we should opt for a 'revised concept' of the middle class. To him, the middle class should not be defined by reference to the relations of production, or even in terms of cultural capital, but to the processes of modern state formation both in the colonial and post-colonial periods (Kahn 1991: 56). What is significant in Kahn's approach is his stress on the importance of the state in middle-class formation and



expansion. As he puts it, the Malaysian middle classes did not so much owe their existence to the changing demands of capital, but more to the emergence of the modern state; to him, the 'middle class' identified by Saravanamuttu did not primarily consist of middle-ranking employees of private enterprises, but rather employees of the state (Kahn 1996a: 24). Kahn feels that recognising the role of the state is crucial because there is an important link between the constitution of power relations in the modern state and the emergence of both universalistic and particularistic political discourses among middle-class state employees. In a different article, Kahn disagrees with scholars who see 'an intimate relationship between market rationality and democratisation', and others 'who look to the middle classes to carry the torch of political modernism', because to him, 'the modernist agenda [in Malaysia is] being pushed from above, ... and hence a modernism must perforce be authoritarianism at the same time' (Kahn 1996b: 69).

In my earlier works (Abdul Rahman 1995a, 1996), I have adopted a third position. While agreeing with a number of points raised by Saravanamuttu and Kahn, I have argued that both authors have over-emphasised one side at the expense of the other, especially with regard to the question of 'What historical forces actually contributed to the expansion of the Malaysian middle class?' While Saravanamuttu emphasises capitalist development and does not give due recognition to the important role of the developmentalist state and its impacts on middle-class politics, I suggest that Kahn over-emphasises the state and ignores the role of capitalist development and expansion. In fact, both forces -- capitalist production and the role of the developmentalist state -- have been crucial in the formation and expansion of the

middle class in Malaysia. Malaysian experience shows that, besides capitalist development and the role of the state, the question of culture (i.e. possession of educational qualification, cultural attributes and lifestyles) also needs to be taken into account in middle-class conceptualisation as a means of delineating the middle from other classes (for details, see Abdul Rahman 1995a).

Related to the conceptual and theoretical problems, another contentious issue raised in the debate concerns middle-class consciousness, politics and culture -- on which researchers seem to have drawn conflicting conclusions. Given the increasingly multi-ethnic character of the various classes, especially the new middle class, researchers have posed the following questions: Has the new middle class developed multi-ethnic perspectives transcending ethnic sentiments? Also, has it developed democratic proclivities, becoming a new force championing universalistic values such as democracy and human rights? Answers to these questions have been varied, ranging from the affirmative to the negative, and mixtures of both.

Besides presenting theoretical arguments and providing a brief class map of the new middle class, Saravanamuttu (1989) also attempts to throw some light on the question of whether the new Malaysian middle class expresses ethnic or class-consciousness, and whether it is an 'agent of democratisation'. He is of the opinion that the multi-ethnic new Malaysian middle class should be regarded as a new force on the Malaysian political scene championing democratic ideals, and that this class is not affected by questions of ethnicity since it has transcended ethnic perspectives. However, his conclusion is drawn from a skewed sample consisting of 464

respondents (60 per cent Malays and the remainder non-Malays) who comprised mostly leaders of various organizations such as professional associations, trade unions, cooperatives, farmers associations, etc. -- in short, the organized members of the new middle class. At the same time, to support his conclusion of the democratic proclivities of the middle class, he cites struggles launched by various middle-class organisations in the 1980s against issues such as the Societies Act, the Official Secrets Act (OSA) and the October 1987 mass arrests under the Internal Security Act (ISA) -- which actually only represent some organised segments of the middle class.

Though one can agree with Saravanamuttu that tendencies towards multi-ethnic perspectives exist, particularistic tendencies are also evident. In his survey of the attitudes and perceptions of members of the new middle class with regard to ethnic relations and national unity, Mohd Nor (1991)<sup>4</sup> comes to somewhat different conclusions. According to him, the growth and expansion on the one hand, of the new middle class, especially among Malays, enabled them to acquire a new sense of confidence, enabling them to identify and relate on an equal footing with new middle-class non-Malays, thus reducing ethnicity as a basis for collective identification and action. On the other hand, Mohd Nor asserts that due to inter-ethnic intra-class rivalries, the growth and expansion of the Malay segment of the new middle class had

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<sup>4</sup> Mohd Nor's survey focussed on two questions: first, perceptions of members of the middle class concerning economic opportunities available to them through the NEP; and, second, their politics -- whether tending towards moderation and compromise, or towards ethnic polarisation. His sample consisting of 200 respondents -- 65 per cent Malays and 35 per cent Chinese and Indians -- drawn from six major towns in Peninsular Malaysia (Penang, Seremban, Ipoh, Alor Star, Kota Bharu, and Kuala Trengganu) surprisingly did not have any from the federal capital, Kuala Lumpur. By occupation, they consisted of white-collar employees from both private and public sectors, ranging from high-level professionals such as engineers, doctors, architects, and lawyers to administrators and school teachers and a few businessmen.

produced a negative reaction from among their non-Malay counterparts, who felt their interests threatened by this ascendancy and more generally by what they perceived as the pro-Malay policies of the NEP. Contrary to Saravanamuttu, Mohd Nor's study concludes that -- though successful in transforming Malays, particularly by expanding their new middle-class component and changing the ethnic mix of the new middle class -- the NEP has, in practice, made national unity more tenuous and problematic since it has 'increased and sharpened communal politics' (Mohd Nor 1991: 153).

Writing on middle-class politics and its impact on the state vis-a-vis the democratisation issue, political scientist Harold Crouch (1993, 1996) argues that rapid economic growth has made it relatively easy for the government to satisfy the material aspirations of the new middle class, thus turning the latter into a stabilising force appreciative and supportive of the state. He points out that the rapid growth of the new Malay middle class had not been directly at the expense of the new non-Malay middle class, which continued to expand, though it certainly would have expanded faster if special measures had not been taken by the government to ensure increased Malay participation in middle-class occupations (Crouch 1993: 142). But contrary to expectations, the changing class structure and the emergence and expansion of the new middle class in Malaysia did not produce strong pressures toward full democratisation.<sup>5</sup> In his later work, Crouch (1996) argues that on the surface, the

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<sup>5</sup> The usual argument is that since middle class people are more educated, more open-minded and more tolerant, they therefore possess a natural inclination for democracy. Crouch, however, maintains that the middle class tends to favour democratisation for different reasons. To quote: "Because middle class people are better educated and have a certain economic security, they are more prepared to stand up for their rights and to demand participation in order to further their own interests. They support democracy not because they believe in equal rights for everyone but because democracy gives them access to political power. Thus, a middle class 'chauvinist' Malay might not be particularly committed to giving rights to Chinese or workers, but he wants a system that will be responsive to his demands. To the

evolution of the Malaysian class structure seems to have progressed to a point where it could have been expected to strengthen the democratic proclivities of the political system, but 'the middle class does not constitute a coherent force because it is sharply divided along ethnic lines'. In fact, he suggests that 'it is more appropriate to examine the middle class within ethnic communities' (Crouch 1996: 192).

Kahn, however, goes beyond Crouch. Critical of the current middle-class theorising and relying on his ethnographic observations, he argues that there is no logical reason to expect the middle classes to articulate 'enlightened' or universalistic ideals like democracy. According to him, the new middle classes, especially the Malay component, have been particularly ethnicised, imbued with ethnic consciousness and heavily involved in the construction of ethnicity. He feels that if we want to examine the issue of 'middle-class consciousness', we must look at the conditions in which middle-class groups come to articulate or practise one or other of the discourses imputed to them. He maintains that members of the new Malay middle class were actively engaged in the construction of culture and ethnicity (Kahn 1992) -- hence, particularistic values -- and implies that they were not engaged in championing democratic issues. They had no modernist agenda, for the latter came 'from above' (Kahn 1996b: 69). Kahn too contends that 'the new Malay middle classes constitute a breeding ground for new forms of anti-Chinese sentiment' (Kahn 1994: 39).

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extent that democracy meets his interest, he will be inclined to support it. But democracy is not necessarily the only system that will meet personal requirements." (Personal communications, September 20, 1995).

While a number of the above studies have focused on the historical formation of the Malaysian middle class, post-independence social transformation, and middle class politics, by examining the thesis of the new middle class as 'champions of universal values and democracy', another dimension studied by researchers is the cultural transformation of the new middle class and their role as bearers of modernity. In 1995, Norani Othman together with three other scholars, including myself, attempted to examine the new middle class, by posing the question of whether members of the new Malaysian middle class, as products of modernization, are themselves bearers and agents of modernity. In a paper subsequently written based on the study, Norani (1997), for example, argues that in order to understand the new Malaysian middle class, one needs to take 'a different route' -- not defined by the material standards of living alone, but defined qualitatively, that is, by looking into the 'more profound and deeper change within the cultural milieu and within the world view of its bearers' (meaning, members of the middle class). The study by Norani *et al.* covered 586 new middle class respondents in the Kelang Valley, comprising 60.6 per cent Malays and 39.4 per cent Chinese and Indians, with 65.6 per cent drawn from the government sector, and the rest from the private sector (including 3.4 per cent self-employed). From the study, it is found that despite their high education and their facility in at least two languages (their mother tongue and English), only a small number appears to have a sustained interest in the 'higher and finer aspects of life', while most members of the middle class have not developed a strong intellectual and cultural tradition, lacking in strong reading habits and sophisticated cultural tastes. Many are basically consumerist in orientation, involved in material pursuits and acquiring status items as symbols of 'having arrived'. Therefore, they are rather poor

'bearers and agents of a culture of modernity' in Malaysia. Nevertheless, in terms of attitudes and perceptions about work relations, the study found that members of the new middle class have developed cosmopolitan and rational outlook, and are prepared to work under bosses, irrespective of the latter's ethnicity, sex, age and level of education. Even among the new Malay middle class component, there is little indication that they have become breeding grounds for strong anti-Chinese sentiments.

### **Conclusions**

This chapter has shown that a number of important questions on the new middle class have been or are being addressed by scholars in their works. In the main, the above studies have significantly enriched the literature on the new Malaysian middle class. They have indicated clearly that the new middle class has come to stay and that the historical trajectory of Malaysian society in future will be shaped or influenced more strongly by the expanding multi-ethnic new middle class.

Nevertheless, these and other questions, especially the problematic of middle class theorising and conceptualisation, the historical forces that have influenced the formation and expansion of the new middle class; inter-generational mobility, affluence and work culture; new middle class family, community, religious activities, class reproduction, lifestyles and value orientations, as well as middle class politics, democratisation and ethnicity, still require further research and analysis. At the same time, to avoid the peninsular bias, the scope in the Malaysian middle class studies has to be widened to include Sarawak and Sabah. New questions such as gender and the

new middle class also need to be addressed seriously. These questions are too many and complex to be addressed effectively in one study. As the various chapters will show, my study of the new Malay middle class is a modest attempt to answer some of these questions.