

SOCIALISM IN A MULTI RACIAL SOCIETY

A Talk to the University Socialist Club by J.J. Puthucheariy

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I believe that the experience of the last few years shows that a multi-racial society like Malaya poses a large number of problems that cannot be understood or solved by the experiences of Socialists in different societies. In fact, it may be more than a question of how we hope to achieve Socialism in Malaya. It may be a question of deciding what are the immediate tasks of Socialists in Malaya.

We Socialists hope to create a just and equitable society - a society in which man is not both the hunter and hunted. A society in which human resources are developed to the fullest extent and where our heritage of knowledge is utilised to make human life more purposeful. A society where the fruits of human endeavour are more equitably distributed. But these are only general socialist principles. Or even general principles of human conduct. I have no doubt that all of us or at least most of us, subscribe to these principles and try to practice them except when they tend to conflict with our self interests.

A Socialist programme of action is generally based upon what is called a class analysis of society. But I think that we must ask ourselves whether a class analysis ^{alone} is meaningful in a multi-racial society. Experiences of Socialists in other countries may not be completely relevant to us because much of these experiences are not derived from the problems of a multi-racial society. Could it not be that for us the task of building a nation is more pressing than building Socialism? Could it not be that we cannot embark on building Socialism until we have gone some way in the task of building a Malayan nation.

If that is so, then the first task of Socialism in Malaya is nation building - nation building as a precondition to Socialism. It is an attempt to examine this question of tasks

for Socialists that I have called this talk "Socialism in a Multi-Racial Society."

I want first of all to mention some relevant but probably obvious characteristics of our multi-racial population. Firstly, we have a rather evenly divided population. There are almost as many Chinese as there are Malays. The Indians, of course, form only a very small proportion of the population. The two large communities are different from each other in almost every way - racially, culturally and linguistically. Their religions are as different from each other as they could possibly be. Therefore, we get a situation in which the communities that inhabit Malaya have only one thing in common - that is they live in the same territory and must go on living in the same territory.

It is always very difficult to talk about the psychological make up of a large number of people. One tends to get involved in the metaphysical speculations and starts using terms like Volkgeist. It seems to me obvious that some of the psychological attitudes of the immigrant population are very important when we talk about a multi-racial society. Immigrants did not come to Malaya with the intention of settling here. They have not left the countries of their origin with the intention of making any permanent residence in unsettled territories. They have not been colonisers in the generally accepted meaning of the term. They came here or were brought here to do work. They sought to escape the poverty of India and China. They have come here to earn some money, and with hopes of returning to their fatherlands after they have done so. Therefore, they have always remained Indians and Chinese, forced into temporary exile from their countries because of economic circumstances. They have retained very strong emotional contact with India and China.

They have, in fact, only been Chinese and Indians living overseas. Their plans to return to India and China in many cases did not materialise for a large number of reasons. Force of

circumstances made them change their plans. But this generally did not lead to change in attitudes. They continued to live in cultural and emotional isolation from each other. They continued to dream of a return to fatherland which ceased to have any meaning. There was a continuous resistance to assimilation and there remain little pockets of Indians and Chinese spread throughout Malaya.

Geographically, the immigrants concentrated in little pockets all over the country. The Indians were mainly to be found in rubber estates and in the towns. The Chinese very large came to the towns and small numbers fanned out into the countryside. For a large number of reasons the Chinese did not go into the Malay villages, but set up villages of their own. Others like squatters were scattered over large areas without forming stable villages. Thus we have a medley of communal pockets isolated from one another.

The only Chinese that went into Malay villages was the trader representing one of the most rapacious forms of exploitation. Therefore, the end result has been that we have a society in which three separate communities - resisting assimilation - living in little pockets scattered over the country.

We are not a multi-^{national}~~racial~~ society like Switzerland or Canada at the beginning of their nation-making. In these countries, people of ^{different}~~direct~~ racial or linguistic groups lived in contiguous territories. The states that they formed were in fact or in effect federations of these 'nationalities'. They were multi-national states. Time has welded them into new nationalities.

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We, in Malaya, do not have a multi-^{national} racial state if we accept a nation to mean 'a historically constituted, stable community of people formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life and psychological make-up manifested in a common culture'.

It must be emphasised that none of the above characteristics taken separately is sufficient to define a nation. More than that, it is sufficient for a single one of these characteristics to be lacking and the 'nation' ceases to be a nation.

A multi-lingual nation is on this definition a contradiction in terms. The demand of Chinese cultural rights in Malaya is similar to the demand of Bundists for the cultural rights of the Jews - the right of Jews to exist as a distinct national entity irrespective of the place where they lived. This is a refusal to be assimilated. ^A The demand to perpetuate communal fragmentation. The pity of it all is that this chauvenistic communal claim masquerades as a progressive and revolutionary principle.

There is an important distinction between a multi-national situation and a multi-communal situation.

~~This is a~~ distinction that we must not lose sight of. For if we do, then we begin to talk of 'cultural autonomy' as though it is the same as 'national autonomy'. We would then fall into the fallacy of supporting cultural autonomy which is an expression of a desire for separatism in a multi-racial society thinking that it is the same as the right of minorities in a multi-national state. Cultural autonomy would only perpetuate the fragmentism that exists in our society and destroy any hope of unity among our people. It would only impede the forces of history - common economic and cultural activity in time welding us into a nation.

Marx once said that capitalism is the greatest destroyer of nationalities. It breaks up old national groups to meet the requirements of its extensive production apparatus. But in the same process lays the foundations of new nationalities. This is exactly what capitalism has done in Malaya. In opening up Malaya to meet the requirements of the industries of the West, it broke up what existed of the Malay nationality, chipped bits of the Indian and Chinese nationalities and brought them altogether. It has broken up nationalities and set the stage for the growth of a new nationality - a Malayan nationality.

It is no use our hankering back and seeking identification with the nationalities of which our fathers were a part. We can with great effort and considerable chauvinism pretend that nothing much has changed. But the fact remains that the broken bits have all been mixed and when they are put together, the product will be different. It is because of this that cultural autonomy is an anti historical attitude - an attitude which can only lead to chaos.

The question for us is, "Where do we go from here? Do we wait for history and time to weld our people into a nation, or is there a compelling reason for taking all the measures

necessary to weld the three communities into a nation? I think it is criminal for us to allow the Malayan nation to be built by the process of the trial and error. ~~system~~ In various communities in the past, nation-making has always been a bloody business - civil war, famine and the domination of one community over another. A civil war (the normal process of nation-making) is a terrible thing anywhere. In Malaya, it can be catastrophic.

For a long time, we Socialists have assumed that the major obstruction to unity in Malaya comes from the British and right wing chauvenists. We assumed that if we would somehow explain to the people that we must all unite to fight the British for independence every thing would be alright. The more sophisticated of us assumed that exploitation is the basis of disunity and once the British exploitation is ended there would be unity. All this is too simple a view of the complex pressures that make group loyalties. Can we explain the unity of Muslim peasants and their exploiting landlords in the struggle for Pakistan by this sort of an analysis? Or for that matter, can we expect class loyalties to break through communal units by explaining class interests in simple terms. Probably economic interest is not the only factor that determines the relationship of an individual to a group, even if it may ultimately be the most important one.

Further, is it correct to assume that the exploitation by European capital is the relevant one in determining Sino-Malay relationships. It is true foreign capital exploits Malaya. They form the dominant group of exploiters but this capital does not exploit all the communities evenly. Very few Malays enter into exploiter-exploited relations with European capital. Only Indians and Chinese enter this relationship in large numbers.

The exploiter that the Malay peasant knows is the Malay landlord and the Chinese trader, - the small but often rapacious capitalists. The Malay landlord exploits the Malay tenant farmer, that is about half the Malay peasant. The Chinese trader who probably exploits the peasant less intensely than the Malay landlord, however, covers a very much larger area. Almost all the peasant-Chinese and Malay have dealings with the trader.

The relevant exploiter-exploited relationship to ~~the~~ Malays is one that increases communal separatism. Exploitation by European capital cannot become the basis of class unity among Malays and Chinese. A struggle against Chinese capital which exploits Malay and Chinese peasants and workers could become the basis of this unity.

It seems to me that the situation is one where there are very few forces for unity. We have no grounds to imagine that there is a natural momentum that would lead to unity if minor impediments are removed. The task of nation-building would require all the energy of all of us. It is a task to which we can well dedicate ourselves.

You may say, Well if the most important task facing us now is nation-building, what has it to do with Socialism? Does Socialism offer any particular advantage in the task of nation-building?

I will be foolhardy enough to hazard some political propositions about the present situation in Malaya. I think given the communal isolation that exists, given the desire to live in peace it is inevitable that some form of an alliance of communal parties has to work. A party of the Malays, a Party of the Chinese and a Party of the Indians would come together in order to find a peaceful working solution. But the basic political interests of the communal parties prevent them from breaking through their communal ~~unity~~^{limits} and becoming a national party - a party effective for nation making.

Built on communal lines, appealing to communal interests the different constituents sooner or later must fall out on communal issues. History of political parties in the Federation can leave us in no doubt. Attempts to unite non-communal parties out of communal parties have failed. Communal murmurs don't seem to end. This is inevitable. A party built on communal lines must respond to communal pressures. Leaders of

communal parties are often forced to indulge in chauvenistic postures to maintain their position. They must periodically pander to communal passions.

The appeal of a Socialist party is different or at least should be. A intelligently lead Socialist party has no need to pander to communal demands. And consequently, a Socialist party has the best possible chance of taking the existing desire for peace a step further along the path of nation building. That is why I believe that Socialists have a particularly important role in nation making in Malaya.

The past is probably not very encouraging. Socialists have been caught in the quagmire of cultural autonomy. For years, the question of a national language and national education policy has plagued us. We have often found ourselves in the same camp as communalists resisting all attempts to make Malay the national language. There is no need now to go into the struggle of getting Malay accepted as the national language. The left wing position is quite clear. We stand for the Malay language as our national language - the language that will help to unify the people of Malaya. In Singapore, the P.A.P. is going on with plans to implement this policy. But it is still a long way away from the time when Malay, Chinese and Indian children will go to common schools all over the country. To me, the schools are about the most important instruments in nation-making. We cannot expect to become a nation, if our children in the most important formative years of their lives are communally separated. This must sooner or later cease. Socialists have a vital role to play in convincing the Chinese and Indians that a common school system is one of the most important instruments of nation-making. We can help to bring this about speedily and without allowing chauvenism to masquerade as a revolutionary philosophy.

Socialists are the only people who can end the exploitation of peasants by traders without making it a communal issue. Only we can effectively present exploitation and poverty

as class problems which they are and not as communal problems.

The English speaking have, I think, a very important role to play. Of all the groups we have broken away most from the communities. In many ways, this has been a disadvantage. We lost much of our contact with the people to whom we belong. I don't want to talk about the disabilities and weaknesses of our education. This ~~has~~ been discussed at length in recent years. We have an advantage. And that is what I want to emphasise. We are drawn from the different communities. We have some common experiences. We have the means of communication with each other. We are the forerunners of people drawn from the different communal groups that live in this country, who have gone to common schools and speak a common language. True, we speak a foreign language today, but there is no reason why we cannot learn the national language and go among the peoples of this country helping towards unity. If we can bring the dedication and capacity for sacrifice that the Chinese educated have we the English educated Socialists can contribute more than any other group to nation-building.

If we Socialists fail to understand the urgency of our task in Malaya, I shudder to think of the consequences of our failure.