

Socio-cultural progress

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AS the New Economic Policy (NEP) period came to a close and we entered the last decade of the 20th century, the thoughts of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the problems of the Malays should be of great interest to us.

He is the one person likely to play the most important role in initiating the practical — and political — “solution” to the problem.

The questions posed by Dr Mahathir on the problems of the Malays in the final decade of the 20th century seem to me to bear great similarity with those raised by the German sociologist Max Weber with regard to certain European societies, especially Catholic ones, during the first decade of the century.

The central question that can be summarised from Dr Mahathir's frequent assertions on the subject is this: Why have the participation and integration of Malays in the modern capitalistic life (of commerce and industry) in this country not been satisfactorily achieved?

To my mind, the social symptoms of the problem (but by no means an adequate explanation of it) have also been indicated by Dr Mahathir.

On several occasions he alluded to the fact that the Malays failed to demonstrate convincingly that they have mastered the skills of modern management.

References have been made to Government initiatives in turning over the management of some Government and semi-Government business projects to Malays.

In most instances, however, the outcome has been rather disappointing, and assistance had to be solicited from non-Malays subsequently in order to salvage the projects.

I, nevertheless, find such assertions rather difficult to comprehend.

Modern management is not such a mysterious aspect of modern Western culture that it cannot be easily learned or internalised.

In fact, the learning and acquisition of such skills

among members of our society (especially among Malays with a long tradition of involvement in the administration of the Government sector) cannot possibly be that backward.

There must be thousands of young Malays who have graduated in business management from Institut Teknologi Mara.

Almost every university in the country offers programmes in business management (with one of them, Universiti Utara Malaysia, in fact specialising in management-oriented programmes).

The majority of students who are sent to universities overseas year after year (especially to the United States) are specialising in one management-oriented subject or another.

With such widespread exposure to the subject why is there no adequate and effective transfer of skill and technology in the field of management in our society? When thousands of our young men and women have studied management systematically and formally, how is it possible that

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we are still lamenting over the lack (and even the absence) of management skills in our society?

Weber, in his analysis, described the capitalistic stage in the history of Europe as the most advanced stage in the continuous process of the unfolding of human rationality.

He had in fact perceived the acquisition of management skills (he was specifically making reference to the art and practice of book-keeping and accounting) as a manifestation of the rationalistic ethos that made the development of modern capitalistic societies possible.

Is there a possibility then, that the sum total of management skills possessed by individuals in our society has not amounted to the creation of the ethos needed by society to enable it to be trans-

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formed into a modern capitalistic social system? (Hard work, systematic management of tasks and time saving for the purposes of capital accumulation are only some of the manifestations of the existence of such an ethos in a society).

A individual who has acquired new skills — but is still subjected to the social ethos that Weber called “traditionalism” — is not the same as someone who has imbibed the ethos that he called the “Protestant ethic”.

(The Protestant ethic typifies the social ethos that is likely to enable a pre-capitalistic society to

the problem of Malay socio-cultural modernisation, rather than merely as the problem of integrating Malay individuals into the system?

Secondly, if the problem is one of cultural modernisation — the problem of unaccomplished rationality or undeveloped Protestant ethics — could it also mean that our strategies for enhancing the economic participation of Malays have been wrong all along?

What is needed is really a shift of strategy from one of “development management” — with its emphasis on psycho-dynamic approaches to create the individuals needed for performing certain economic roles — to one of initiating a socio-cultural reform.

Thirdly, is there a possibility that efforts to expose Malay individuals to specific skills drawn out of the modern capitalistic culture (business management is one such skill) has not been very effective — despite the number of individuals with skills that have been created because the modern skills were subsequently practised in the context of a socio-cultural ethos that is in fact still pre-modern and pre-rational in nature?

By applying Weber's typification then, is it not possible that we have achieved very little, if at all, by way of the social and cultural transformation from traditionalism to modernity?

It is even possible to hypothesise, I would presume, that sociologically we have merely retained a whole generation of Malay traditional peasants who happen to have been given formal training in modern skills, such as management, engineering medicine, etc.

In our effort to spur Malays forward on the road of

evolve into a capitalistic one).

A member of a society characterised by a traditionalistic ethos who experiences a sharp rise in income would most probably simply decrease his output — to retain the existing level of consumption — or simply use the extra income gained for purposes of conspicuous consumption that would enhance his status or grant him some “irrational” forms of satisfaction (such as the performance of some religious rites).

A juxtaposition of Dr Mahathir's assertion and Weber's explanation could therefore raise a number of very interesting questions in our minds concerning the Malay problem.

Firstly, is it not more plausible to perceive the problem of Malay economic participation in modern Malaysia as a function of,

of Malays

modernisation, then, our concern should not merely be with the numbers and percentage of Malays in this or that profession (as some have done for the last three decades or so).

The presence of a certain number of Malay individuals with certain modern skills does not necessarily mean that the Malay society itself has been transformed culturally — or a modern, rational Malay society has been created.

To my mind, the urgent task at hand is really to conceptualise lucidly a notion and vision of a modern Malay society — and how a modern Malay who is a member of that society would be like.

Simply creating a number of brown-skinned professionals would certainly not do, because a modern society is not merely the sum total of individual members performing modern skills.

The "modernity" of a Malay individual cannot simply be measured by the level and type of his education or his profession, or even by the fact that he speaks English or has acquired the urbane mannerisms of the yuppies.

If he is a manager, his modernity could not simply be determined by the fact that he dresses the same way as a business executive in Wall Street does.

A person can only be genuinely, and enduringly modern by being a member of a modern society, having been socialised by that society into acquiring a certain way of perceiving the world around him and of his place within that world.

A policy and strategy of social reform with the intention of modernising a society would, therefore, be qualitatively different from a policy and strategy of providing certain skills to a certain number of individuals.

In view of this, there is a need to have a fresh look at the general underlying principle of current national policies and strategies and not merely at the mechanics of their implementation.

Consider for instance the education policy. What needs to be evaluated is not so much the implementa-

tion of the current policy, which is closely aimed at preparing our young citizens for the roles of industrial workers and consumers of foreign technology.

What really needs to be reviewed is its underlying principle, so as to reorientate the education system to be a tool of social reform capable of preparing the society as a whole for the great socio-cultural transformation it must undergo to be a modern, dynamic society by the next century.

That transformation should entail changes in all aspects of our social life, our economic system, our political culture, our artistic expressions, our national language, our literature our knowledge — even our religion.

It is from among members of such a society that we can hope to see the emergence of genuine modern social actors with genuine cultural self-awareness of a modern, rational man.

These actors should not be confined only to industrial workers, professionals, managers and entrepreneurs, but should also include artists, philosophers, musicians and *ulama* of the future.

And because they are genuine modern social actors they would not only be capable of maintaining their own modernity, but of society reproducing it through the socialisation of the coming generations.

On the other hand, the type of social actors that could accrue from current policies and strategies may be just creolised — even deculturised — traditionalistic peasants caught between a superficial imitation and consumption of Western popular culture and an unthinking commitment to only the ritualistic aspects of a medieval interpretation of his religion, inarticulate in his own language and illiterate in his own culture but capable only of parroting technical jargons and clichés in English.

There is simply no way that we can build an economically dynamic and intellectually vibrant industrial society in the 21st century on the foundation of a cultural crisis that we have created in the 20th century.