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Never give in to blind admiration of the West

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S. JEEVARATNAM'S letter in response to my article about the globalisation of pop culture (NST, Jan 14), is indicative of a culture of defeatism and blind admiration for the West that has taken root in contemporary Malaysian society.

He argued that my concerns about the pace and direction of globalisation of the world economy is prompted by "envy" against the powerful corporations of the Western world. His misrepresentation of my argument has prompted this reply.

Those of us who feel daunted by the reality of international economics today do not feel any sense of "envy" at the so-called "success" of the media and business corporations of the West. There is nothing unique that they have produced that cannot be produced by any country in the non-Western world.

The real problem that concerns us is how a country like ours can tackle the problem of globalisation that is looming ahead.

There is still the trend of congratulating the "success" of the Western world without seeing that at the heart of it is the practice of unfair competition. What we need to remember is that the success of the Western media, manufacturing, financial and agricultural industries came about through the use of tactics which cannot exactly be called "fair" and "open" by any standards.

We must never forget that much of the wealth that the Western world enjoys was originally drawn from dominated and colonised societies such as ours.

Admirers of Western "success" may dismiss such accusations as "sour grapes", but the same charge of sour grapes was used by the West in the past when they colonised and exploited the wealth of Southeast Asia, China, India, Africa and the rest of the world.

When Britain bombed the Chinese into submission during the Opium Wars of the 1850s, they accused the Chinese of sour grapes as well. Sour grapes has always been the classic rebuke from the powers that be to those who complain about their injustice.

My main argument was against the unfair trade practices in the global economic environment today, of which the global media and entertainment industry is but a component. If Jeevaratnam seriously believes that we have failed to compete with the West because we are not able to meet international standards "while the West excels in everything it does", then he must find a way of accounting for why the Western world seems so preoccupied with the so-called threat of Asian economic, cultural and political resurgence.

Why is it that the Western political and economic elite continue to hinder, and sabotage every effort made by us in the South to achieve a fair and equal balance of power in the world? Why is it that the Western governments and multinationals have been going all out to ensure that the business interests of the West are given top priority at all levels of international commerce such as the World Trade Organisation discussions, the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs discussions, and others like them?

And why is it that the Western superpowers continue to use tools such as unfair trade practices, trade restrictions and embargoes on South countries that do not bend to their will? Doesn't Jeevaratnam think that

these measures have somehow helped the West in achieving the high standards that he praises them for?

Or are we to believe that the West succeeds simply because it naturally "excels" at everything its people set out to do? Have we already forgotten how several Western states tried to organise a campaign to boycott Malaysian products like palm oil in the past?

The threat that the present form of globalisation represents lies in the manner in which it is being promoted. As long as a handful of Western megacorporations and elite continue to dictate the standards, tastes and preferences of the world, there will be less and less opportunity for smaller, local industries to develop and cater to minority tastes and cultures (which, incidentally, is exactly what Jeevaratnam complains about as well).

Be it the loss of our local entertainment industry or the demise of our small producers such as the satay, rojak and tau-fu hawker, the effects of globalisation are still the same. The rise of powerful monopolies and corporations in the North and the spread of their economic clout worldwide make it increasingly difficult for us to maintain those tiny, particular economic, cultural and social practices that make us who we are.

Will we still be happy in a future when the only local delicacies, music, clothes and literature we can sample are to be found at some hi-tech museum? Can we not see how our social environment is becoming increasingly homogenised and uniform with the rest of the world's, and how the socio-cultural and socio-economic diversity of the world is being threatened by this?

This is why in many parts of the world today, local governments and industries are working to preserve and promote what is best in their societies.

The French film industry, for example, has not declared its surrender to the pervasive influence of Hollywood.

As a counter-response to the globalisation of pop culture, the Government of France continues to promote this industry and encourage its people to value their culture, language and history. Filmgoers in France can thus enjoy the best of both worlds without feeling that their film industry will be wiped out.

Jeevaratnam deftly employs the example of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a "shining example" thanks to his zeal and commitment. Jeevaratnam means to suggest that if we in the South work hard and hope for the best then we too can succeed.

But the one thing he forgets to note is that Dr Mahathir himself is one of the South's most consistent and vocal critics of the double-standards and hypocrisy of the Western elite who have tried their best to ensure that we in the South will never get to compete with them on equal terms.

The lesson to be learnt from this is that we in the South must never give in to fatalism, defeatism or blind admiration of the West.

The process of globalisation can be altered to serve our interest as well, provided we remain aware of its pitfalls and inequalities, and we continue to agitate, mobilise and keep up the pressure to see justice and fair play prevail. This means engaging in a political struggle and coming up with practical and pragmatic solutions to the problem, rather than blindly praising others and indulging in self-contempt.

We should not feel that "we must blame ourselves" solely if we have lagged in the international race for wealth and development. Malaysians work just as hard as the people of the West, if not harder, and under international economic conditions which are unfair to our efforts and dedication.

While it is true that we must always try to better and perfect the goods

and services which we produce, the other side of the picture is just as important: If the Third World and the countries of the South have been slowed down in the global race for development, then we need to look at our more powerful North neighbours to understand why.

Western tactics such as the use of crippling loans and debts, lopsided trade, unequal division of international labour, exploitation of South resources, vetos at the UN by the superpowers and even more violent measures such as subversion and espionage have all gone into the process of ensuring that the dominance of the North remains unchallenged in the fields of politics, economics, culture and even entertainment.

That is why I maintained all along that Michael Jackson is but a symptom of a serious problem which we in Malaysia must discuss seriously, cautiously and soberly.

London

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