

**BUREAUCRACY  
AND RURAL  
DEVELOPMENT  
IN MALAYSIA**

**BY GAYL D. NESS**





GAYL D. NESS

Bureaucracy  
and  
Rural Development  
in Malaysia

*A Study of Complex Organizations  
in Stimulating Economic Development  
in New States*



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
Berkeley and Los Angeles 1967

PUSTAKA PERDANA



1006296



UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
BERKELEY AND LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
LONDON, ENGLAND

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LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CARD NUMBER 67-14115

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA



**FOR JEANNINE**



## Preface

In Southeast Asia the Federation Of Malaysia is unique in its modern development. All countries of the region, as indeed all new states of the world, have created national development plans and often new organizations to implement those plans. Of these countries, only the Federation of Malaysia and Singapore have achieved any success in their development programs. Malaysia and Singapore alone appear to have made serious and sustained attempts to translate their development programs into action.

For anyone concerned with the process of economic development, one of the most depressing experiences in this region is to make the rounds of government offices, to hear of plans and reorganization, and to come away with the certain knowledge that little or nothing that was said in the air-conditioned offices bears any resemblance to what will actually be done on the ground. It is easy to draft plans and projects; it appears almost impossible to move any project out of the office and onto the ground.

In this depressing scene Malaysia appears freakishly unique. In land development, irrigation, road-building, schools, adult education, and in many other specific projects one can trace the development of an idea, the mobilization of administrative and financial resources to give life to the idea; finally one finds it actually coming to life in the work that is being done.

This study is an attempt to understand Malaysia's experience. Reduced to its most fundamental element, we would argue that the delicate demographic balance of the country—the 50 percent Malays

and 40 percent Chinese—is the basic moving force behind this success in public investment. This delicate balance made the public investment program an urgent necessity to the new leaders. This balance, too, provided an outlet for revolutionary energies in the direction of public investment, rather than in the direction of a take-over of the private economy—a pattern that has already all but destroyed the economies of Burma and Indonesia.

It is important to analyze the manner in which the body of flesh and blood has been built on the skeleton. With every new move, with every reorganization, with every formulation of organizational goals and every decision to embark upon a new program, the pattern of development activities is built. At every turn there are many alternatives, some of which will lead to chaos, many of which will simply lead in different directions, perhaps to greater or lesser successes. Thus to understand Malaysia's unique experience in development planning and execution, we shall be concerned with the development of its total pattern, with the formation and operation of the organizations that have been responsible for the public investment program.

Malaysia's dramatic successes have been largely in public investment. Other indicators of growth, including per capita real income or product, are less encouraging. When measured in constant prices, they show a slight gain. However, since such a large part of the value of the product derives from the foreign sale of rubber, it makes more sense to measure product in current prices: here Malaysia has shown a decline in per capita product because of falling rubber prices. Nonetheless, the economy seems healthy and buoyant.

From this observation emerges the question of the relation between economic development—the continued rise in real product per capita—and public investment. What does Malaysia's success in road-building mean for the economy? The gestation period of such infrastructure construction is long; the full returns in any event are not obtained for years. In addition, it is not known what other changes such developments bring in their wake. To what extent do they extend the market, effect the commercialization of hitherto subsistence areas, and change the values, attitudes, and social organization of the country? There is some reason to believe that road-building, the construction of items of physical infrastructure, achieves these ends, but it is not known how long this takes and to what extent it is done. Within the next half century, it should be possible to use the growing body of data on the economies of Southeast Asia to discover, in comparative studies, the impact of public investment on economic development. As yet it is too early.

Individual biases and values will not be exorcised, no matter how powerful is the norm of objectivity in the social sciences. It is useful, therefore to state beforehand those biases of which an author is aware. In the first place, I agree with Colin Clarke that economic growth is economic progress—I think economic growth is a good thing. It pleases me to see it achieved, it distresses me to witness its failure, especially when the failure is due to misdirected policies. I can see little sense in the romantic argument that happy people in poor countries ought to be left alone, Whether they are happy is irrelevant, for the drive for economic development that causes such turmoil in the poor country is led for the most part by the elites of those countries themselves. The drive for modernization is a fact; there seems to be no turning back.

The romantic argument seems unreal to me also in another sense. I cannot see that it is better to be hungry than to be well fed. I cannot see that high infant mortality, high morbidity rates, and the physical and intellectual isolation of the traditional village are features to be valued. Economic development means doing away with hunger, sickness, and intellectual stupor. To the argument that it also means stomach ulcers, mental diseases, and unhappiness, two answers are available. First, there is no unequivocal evidence that economic development or modernization does increase these social and psychological ills. Second, I would not accept the argument that economic growth ought to bring “happiness”; this is too elusive and unoperationalized a term to propose as the end of any action. I am with the later nineteenth century utilitarians who made the move from happiness to liberty as the ends of government. Economic growth provides more liberty, more effective alternatives to a population. It provides them with more ways to develop the talents they have—for good or for evil. This is an end I hold to be good.

Following from this bias for economic development, I have a bias for Malaysia because it has achieved success in public investment and in its accommodation of ethnic interests. All of this has made me probably a less than fully objective observer of Malaysia—I am perhaps too sympathetic with the nation’s problems and too impressed with the solutions it has achieved. I cannot be less. The reader will have to make the appropriate adjustments for himself if he is willing to wade through this mass of detail.

I spent approximately three years (1961-1964) in Malaysia. I used published documents to build up a picture of both public and operative goals, analyzing debates and statements in the legislature, budgets of the federal and state governments, and the organizations concerned

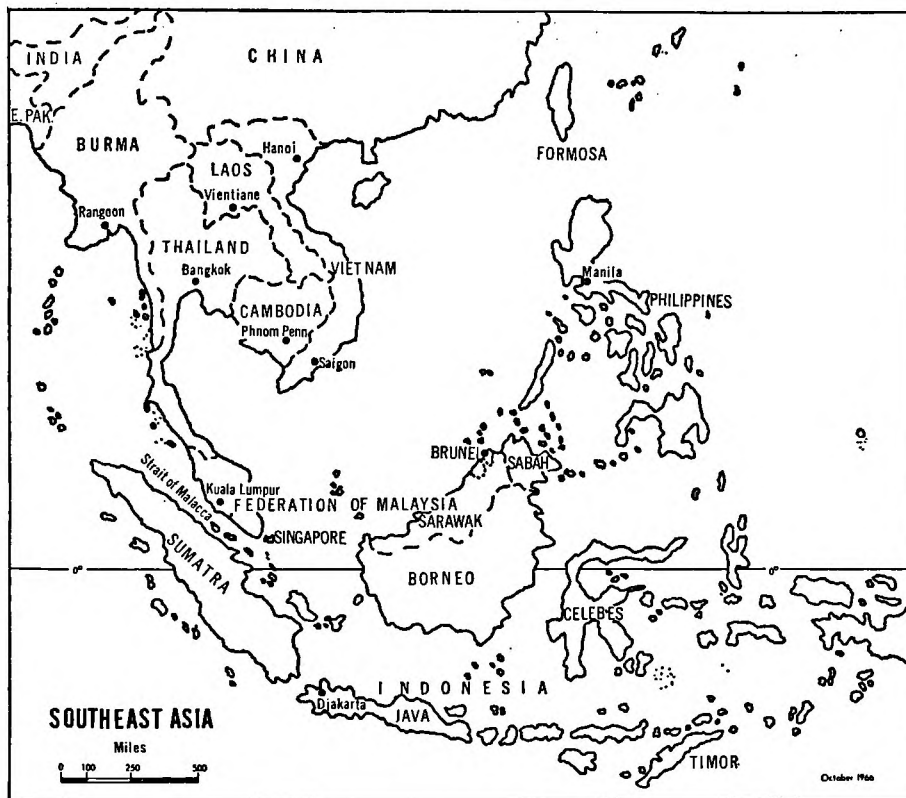
with development. The most important data, however, came from interviews with the officers concerned with the programs, and with other observers in Malaysia, foreign and domestic. Interview materials were gathered slowly during the entire three-year period. I attempted to develop a survey instrument that could be applied systematically, but abandoned the efforts. In general I found it necessary to apply an evaluation of what was being said in an interview, and I could work out no suitable method of applying such an evaluation to a survey instrument. Especially in an interview that stretches over more than an hour, and then continues over a “stengah” at the rest house or over cocktails at a party, people contradict themselves directly and indirectly, often more than once on the same subject. It is not that they lie or deliberately attempt to deceive the questioner, though this does happen. It is merely a reflection of the great human capacity for holding conflicting ideas with little strain. The survey instrument normally achieves something like a snapshot of ideas, sentiments, and knowledge. I found it more useful to attempt to gain a more lifelike, moving version of the same phenomenon.

In such a field situation, one learns much from conflict. The public policy of an official, proclaimed in a dozen statements, acquires a different meaning in one intemperate moment when the official gives vent to his real feelings. Both sets of data are important: the public stance and the personal sentiments. The survey instruments tend to pick up only the more tempered, public stance.

To a large extent, therefore, through long and unsystematic discussions with a wide variety of people I have built a picture of how the organization of development works. Those who know the Malaysian situation can judge this work by the degree to which it agrees with their own experience in the country. Those who do not know the country are able to judge only the extent to which the argument seems to make sense. I have tried to include sufficient detailed description to allow those not familiar with Malaysia to make a more independent assessment of this argument for themselves. To the extent that readers are able to use my own data to present counter-interpretations to my own, I shall consider my description useful.

I have found the analysis of organizational goals perhaps the single most useful analytical key for this study. This has provided at least three advantages. First, it provides a comparative framework, which gives the Malaysian experience and the Malaysian study broader and more powerful intellectual implications than those defined by its own national boundaries. I should argue that there are both operational and analytical lessons to be learned from the Malaysian experience—

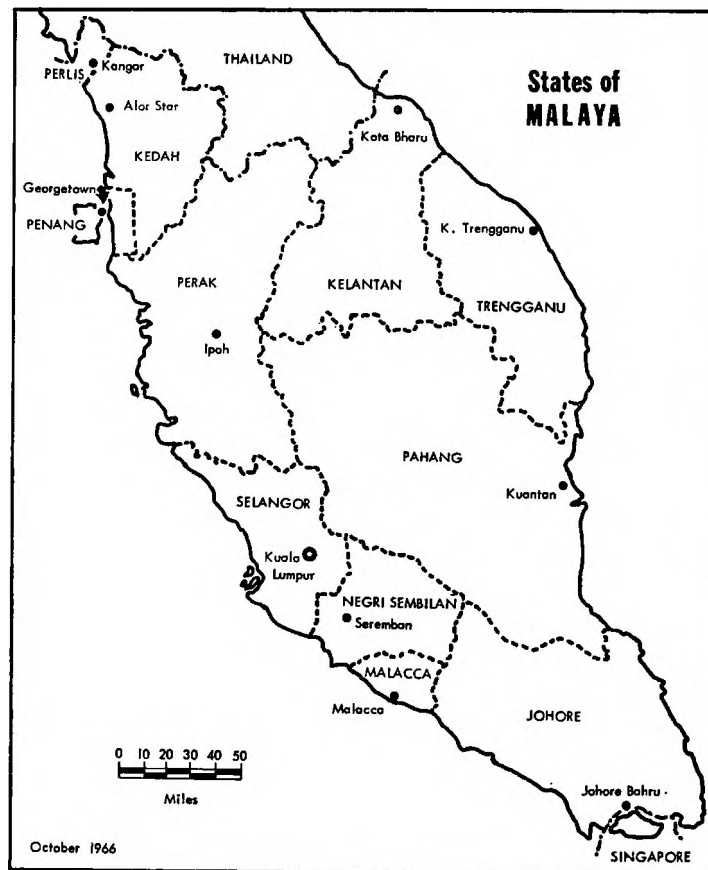
lessons that are applicable to other attempts to stimulate development and to other attempts to understand how development is stimulated. Second, this approach focuses attention upon both the work and the ideology or world view of the organization. Finally, and following from the second, this approach offers the most systematic entree into the important problem of the articulation of society and bureaucracy. That is, the dynamics of complex organizations in economic development in the twentieth century will be provided in major part by the manner in which those organizations come to terms with their environments. For major development organizations this



means that the goals must reflect the peculiar accommodation of social forces that has been achieved in the political arena. Thus I find the clearest understanding and the most powerful predictive concepts provided by the analytical strategy taken in this study: from broad social organization, through the articulation and balance of interest in the political arena to the formulation of organizational

goals and the allied issue of the power and competence available to achieve, of work toward the achievement of, goals.

On 16 September 1963 the Federation of Malaya merged with Singapore and the British Borneo colonies of Sabah and Sarawak to become the Federation of *Malaysia*. In August 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia and became an independent state. Throughout this analysis, I have used the term *Malaya*. This is not to suggest that I judge the larger Federation lacking in viability. It is merely that my analysis is confined to the eleven states of the original Federation of Malaya, and is also confined to the time when that name was official. I have not considered it appropriate to attempt to discuss here the implications of Malaysia for the use of complex organizations in development. On the whole, I think that influence is not significant in this case. It was in the eleven states of the original



Federation that the politics of accommodation were developed, and it was there that the fundamental pattern of development stimulation was created. To be sure, Malaysia has had some effect. There has been an increase in military expenditures, indicating some return to order goals, and there has been some consequent cutback in development activities. This, however, has been a result of Indonesia's *Konfrontasi* policy, rather than an effect of Malaysia itself. And even that military threat, I should argue, has not fundamentally altered the relationship between complex organizations and economic development that these pages seek to expose.

I have used the Chinese form, common in Malaya, in rendering Chinese names—surname followed by given names—except in the case of H. S. Lee, whose name appears in this form even in Malaya. In the tables, a dash (—) stands for “not applicable” or “nonexistent”; three short dashes (—) for “negligible”; and n. a. for “not available.”

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This is my first major opportunity to acknowledge the myriad intellectual debts I have acquired. I am grateful to Professors Robert A. Nisbet and Kenneth E. Bock for first stimulating my interest in the sociological perspective. Professors Reinhard Bendix, Herbert Blumer, Wolfram Eberhard, and Philip Selznick in Sociology and Cho-ming Li in Economics provided sustained assistance and encouragement as well as excellent instruction through my graduate studies at the University of California in Berkeley.

I am also indebted to my colleagues and one-time fellow graduate students of the “subseminar.” Dorothy Anderson Mariner, William H. Friedland, and Ernest Landauer contributed to the early formulation of my ideas on social change and economic development. Robert Alford also joined in those stimulating critical discussions.

The field work for the study was done under a fellowship from the Institute of Current World Affairs in New York. I am deeply grateful for the freedom allowed by the fellowship and for the encouragement and stimulation offered by its director, Richard H. Nolte. I do not believe that scientific orientations are a license for bad writing. I have tried to write clearly and concisely and with the aim of conveying something of the real human lives and experiences involved in the situation I was studying. If I have achieved any success in this endeavor, much of the credit must go to Richard Nolte, who encouraged me and assisted me in effective communication.

In Malaysia I met the full cooperation of government officers. The Ministry of Rural Development was exceptionally helpful and open. I was allowed to follow on inspection trips, to examine records, and to question officers at will. From the minister to district officers and below, people were always willing to take time from the great pressures of their work to answer my questions, to discuss openly their problems, and to share their hopes and fears with me. I owe a great deal to their assistance and friendliness, and to the additional honor they did me by being genuinely interested in what I was doing.

In Malaysia itself Drs. Thomas R. McHale and Clifton R. Wharton, Jr. offered encouragement, assistance, and friendship. They read, and made pertinent comments on, an earlier draft of the manuscript.

Professors J. Norman Parmer of Northern Illinois University and Robert O. Tilman of Yale University also read and commented upon the manuscript.

My wife, to whom this book is dedicated, bore with cheerful courage the great burden of living with a research project. I shall hope this book will be some small reward for her efforts and for the difficult time during which she carried on alone because of it.

Of course, I accept sole responsibility for whatever follies, mistakes, and bad judgments appear here.

G.D.N.

*Ann Arbor*  
*June 1966*

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# I

## NEW STATES, ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND COMPLEX ORGANIZATIONS: A PARADIGM

The drive for modernization in the new Afro-Asian states is one of the major forces of the mid-twentieth century. All processes associated with this drive—the demise of colonialism, the rise of nationalism, and the creation of new sovereign states; the transformation of low-income, quasi-stable subsistence economies into highly productive commercial and industrial economies; the transformation of congeries of isolated agriculture-based communities into complex urbanized societies; and above all the waning of fatalism, bringing a demand for an end to the old order and an attempt to build a new society—all of these connote a revolution of major proportions from which no part of the world is isolated. Such a revolution could not fail to capture the minds of statesmen, journalists, and scholars. True to their reflective nature, mirroring the major social problems of the day, the social sciences have also made the new states a central object of study. The rapidly growing body of social science literature on the modernization of the new states shows both a fruitful application of new analytical tools and a pervasiveness of concern that extends analysis to almost every conceivable aspect of the problem.

One aspect of this modern development, however, has received rather little attention, despite its apparently great importance for the process: the relation between complex organizations and modernization. One of the most common features of the new states is the creation of new organizations specifically charged with planning and implementing

programs of development. It has become fashionable, even somewhat compulsive, to have a planning organization, a national development plan, and specific implementing organizations. Even in states with apparently little concern in government for modernization, as in Brunei or Nepal, one still finds planners and beautifully bound national development plans. In addition to the specific task of planning, a wide range of subsidiary and implementing tasks have been adorned with the status symbols of their own organizations. The myriad agencies for community development, for cooperative development, for enticing foreign and local investors, for social and technological advance of the peasantry, and for the coordination of all government agencies have become a natural part of the social landscape of the new states. A significant feature of these planning and developing organizations is that they are new. For the most part they have emerged only since 1945, or since the independence of the state concerned.

The recent use of complex organizations to stimulate modern development in the new states is thus the central observation that has motivated this study.

There are both common and unique elements in this observation. The faith of the new states today is, for example, not unlike the belief in progress of the nineteenth-century West. The drive for modernization, the great faith placed in political independence, the faith in industrialization and its temples of steel mills and atomic plants, and the faith in the ability of the new state to gain standards of productivity and living comparable with the industrialized nations is not unlike the belief in progress that accompanied Western industrialization in the nineteenth century. The parallel extends even to the rejection of modernization in the new states. In the new state's search for identity, in the attempt to recreate the indigenous "village socialism" of the precolonial period, in the desire to be uncommitted, and in the verbal rejection of things Western—in all of these can be seen parallels with the romantic utopian rejections of early industrialization in the West.

The organizational pattern of modern development, on the other hand, is unique. The current widespread use of complex organizations to stimulate development represents something of an inversion of the process of bureaucratization and industrialization observed in the West. Though the modern bureaucratic organization emerged in some forms before the nineteenth century, its development is closely linked with the process of industrialization in that century. The modern organization was strengthened by, became pervasive in, and in turn furthered

the development of, the modern industrial society.<sup>1</sup> In the Western experience bureaucratization was a function—in the pure mathematical sense—of industrialization or modernization. In the new states, on the other hand, bureaucratization preceded the major spurt to modernization. Bureaucratization came first in the colonial period, reflecting the transplantability of at least the formal structure across national and cultural boundaries and into a wide range of substantive fields. This occurred, to be sure, along with a period of economic development, but this was a development essentially of export economies, implying an unbalanced and incomplete kind of modernization. Today in the new states, previously established bureaucracies are being used to stimulate a more complete and balanced kind of modernization.

If the recent use of *complex organizations* to stimulate *modernization* in the *new states* is the motivating observation of the study contained in this book, its central argument is that these three phenomena are interdependent or interrelated parameters of analysis. The complex organization, modernization, and the new states go together naturally. This argument can be developed in greater detail in the form of a triangular paradigm, proposing a sociological affinity between the three phenomena,<sup>2</sup> considered in three pairs.

#### NEW STATES AND THE COMMITMENT TO MODERNIZATION

The category of *new states* derives its analytical power largely from the importance for those states of a recent colonial or dependent status.<sup>8</sup> This importance is especially compelling in the demand for modernization, itself a vague though useful concept. As generally used, modernization refers to the creation of a complex of institutions that resemble those of the industrialized nations. Politically, modernization

<sup>1</sup>See, for example, Max Weber's discussion of modern capitalism in *General Economic History*, London, n.d., pp. 275 ff.

<sup>2</sup>The sources of this paradigm are too numerous to be listed here. Useful summaries of the type of material from which it is drawn are given in the following: Max F. Millikan and Donald L. M. Blackmer, *The Emerging Nations*, Cambridge, 1961; Bert F. Hoselitz and Wilbert E. Moore (eds.), *Industrialization and Society*, New York, UNESCO, 1963; Edward Shils, "Political Development in the New States," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, I and II, Vol. II, pp. 265-92 and 379-411; and J. H. Kautsky, *Political Change in Underdeveloped Areas*, New York, 1962.

<sup>3</sup>For this reason the Latin American states have been explicitly omitted from this discussion, though they share many of the characteristics of the non-industrialized societies with the new states.

implies an independent state or political community that has a government with some roots in the population, with at least an ideological commitment to the welfare of the population, and with rather extensive control over the population. This sets political modernity apart from absolutism in which the welfare of the ruler is the dominant consideration of government. It also sets political modernity apart from colonialism, with its dependent polities. Economically, modernization implies a mode of production and a set of economic institutions that bring continued increases in human productivity, and a widespread—though not necessarily equal—sharing of the increased product by all members of the society. Socially, modernization implies the predominance of a wide range of heterogeneous, limited-purpose groupings, a division of function and specialization of groups. Perhaps more fundamentally, it represents an extension of the base of concerted action.<sup>4</sup>

For the new states the economic aspects of modernization present a more explicit and visible, and therefore a more powerful, set of goals than do the political or social aspects. Independence implies the taking of power by indigenous leaders. This in itself is a dramatic and visible, if only partial, achievement of political modernization. The more intractable problems of the consolidation of power and the creation of a political community often continue to plague the new leaders, but these problems are not as visible and not as easily communicated as other problems. The problems of building a new society, of creating the base for new types of groupings, and of extending the base of concerted action are vague and difficult to define, and involve considerable ambivalence.

In contrast with these problems, the problems of economic modernization are readily visible, as are at least some of the goals. The great disparity between rich nations and poor nations, made painfully conspicuous by every automobile and transistor radio, and by the rapid spread of the fruits of modern productive economies, forcefully focuses attention on the problem of poverty and the rewards to be won through economic modernization. The existence of modern economic organizations or enterprises in the new states only serves to sharpen this focus. The persistent demand for steel mills or factories and for local ownership of the organizational means of production gives to the economic aspects of modernization a force and explicitness that is lacking in the political and social aspects.

The recent colonial past has wide ramifications for economic modernization or economic development throughout the new state. Three

<sup>4</sup>This is what Clifford Geertz calls the integrative revolution. See his *Agricultural Involvement*, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963.

considerations, however, are of major significance: the issue of opposition or struggle, the issue of democracy or a mass following, and the issue of the character of leadership.

First, the winning of independence involved a struggle against a metropolitan power. Regardless of how peaceful the struggle, and in many cases it was far from peaceful, it generated strong oppositional sentiments in the new leadership.<sup>5</sup> The emerging nationalist leaders became anticolonial leaders, often also anti-Western. Strength was gained for the nationalist cause by increasing the power of the anti-colonial sentiments. As the nationalist leaders began to see the world around them and to contrast the low standards of living of their own countries with those of the metropolitan countries, there emerged a strong tendency to blame this disparity upon colonialism and the dominance of the metropolitan power. Even more, there was a tendency to identify poverty itself with political dependence, and to argue that only an independent nation could direct its development inward for the benefit of its own people and thus effectively achieve the economic modernization that separated the metropolitan from the colonial populations.<sup>6</sup>

Nor did the new leaders have to turn exclusively outward to see dramatic economic disparities between rulers and ruled, or between free and subject states. In their own states the old colonial rulers were separated from the native ruled by a wide gulf that equated race or skin color with wealth and power. The insults of the color bar, manifested in “Europeans Only” clubs and in “bridge parties,” were pervasive and deeply wounding. Along with the sense of physical inferiority engendered by the color bar was the experience of economic deprivation. The Allied and Japanese slogans of World War II and the flood tide of the value of self-determination with the war’s end only served to strengthen the sense of insult and deprivation, to make it more intolerable, and thus to increase the oppositional character of the nationalist struggle and the nationalist leaders.

Thus the new commitment to modernization, in large part a commitment to economic modernization, derived much of its power from the oppositional nature of nationalism, from the demand to acquire what the foreign rulers of the past had allegedly withheld.

Second, since the struggle for independence was a struggle against

<sup>5</sup> Shils, *op. cit.*

<sup>6</sup>One of the earliest references I have found to this argument comes from the Indian nationalists about 1900, who argued that Japan had achieved more industrial growth in one generation as a free state than had India in over a century of tutelage under the most industrial country in the world.

a physically superior metropolitan power in which the force of nationalist arms alone could not prevail, the colonial rulers' own political philosophy shaped the arguments and attack of the new nationalists. If they could not win by force alone, the nationalists could win by appealing to the legitimacy of their aims, both in the world at large and in the political centers of the metropolitan powers themselves.<sup>7</sup> This meant that the political philosophy of liberal democracy, developed in the metropolitan countries in the preceding two centuries, came to be used by the nationalists in their struggles for independence in the mid-twentieth century. This was the point at which the metropolitan powers were most vulnerable, for they had themselves long ago made the transition from the divine right of kings to the divine right of the masses. Because of the physical superiority of the metropolitan powers the new nationalists could carry on a more effective struggle in a foreign parliament or forum than on the battlefields of their own countries.

There were variations to be sure, and in some cases both moral and physical lines of attack were used. Great Britain and the United States gave up their colonies more readily and more successfully than did the Netherlands and France. Yet the legitimizing arguments of the nationalists were the same in all cases: the right of the ruled to choose their rulers. The differences among the metropolitan powers meant that the arguments of the nationalists would be presented in those centers of power where the value of self-determination was strongest. For British and American colonies, the nationalist arguments were presented in London and Washington. For Dutch and French colonies, the nationalist arguments were presented in Lake Success (and later in New York), and to a lesser extent in Amsterdam and Paris.

This form of struggle, determined by the values of the rulers, gave to the new states an early commitment to liberal democratic institutions (which, to be sure, many have since lost). It not only made them democratic in aspiration and ideology, it forced them to reinforce their arguments for self-determination with a visible mass following, a live indication that independence was indeed the wish of the governed.

One of the most effective, or at least most common, ways to mobilize a mass following was to play upon the sense of deprivation of the independent peoples. Where no sense of deprivation existed, it had to be created. Thus the new leaders expounded upon the great dis-

<sup>7</sup>The demise of gunboat diplomacy, we would argue here, has resulted as much from the change of world values as from the change in the world balance of power, though the two are difficult to separate.

crepancies between standards of living of the foreign rulers and the native ruled. Even more, the new leaders could promise that independence would eliminate this imbalance, would distribute the wealth more equally; or, more explicitly, that it would provide the population with the currently understood mechanisms of upward mobility.

This latter aspect of the promise brought education into the arena of aspirations for independence. More education, free universal education, has been a major aim of all new states and a major promise made by all nationalist leaders. It has also been a major force for mobilizing the masses behind the new leaders and the nationalist cause. To promise that all children regardless of skin color and wealth could receive an education was tantamount to promising all people that their children could have the good life. It was a promise that all could aspire to positions of honor and comfort, positions in the government service where one works with the mind rather than with the hands.

Thus, the commitment to economic modernization in the new states also derives its strength from the commitment to democracy or, more accurately, from the necessity to gain a mass following to legitimize both the nationalist struggle for independence and the continued rule of the new leaders in the post-independence period.

Finally, the character of leadership development has also strengthened the new states' commitment to economic modernization. Many leaders and parties that brought the country to independence are still in control of government.<sup>8</sup> For the most part the new leaders are of a new class and represent no established class themselves.<sup>9</sup> They are not of the class of traditional leaders with whom the colonial powers often made treaties and in whose name they indirectly ruled. Against the value of self-determination, which the new leaders have captured, the claim to traditional legitimacy of the old class of indigenous leaders is impotent.

Two factors strengthen the new leaders' commitment to economic modernization. First, they are generally educated parvenus. Not being of an established class of traditional leaders has meant that they have had little or no claim to wealth or status under the old system. Economic modernization means a destruction of the old economy—the old patterns of distribution as well as of production. In addition, a high premium is placed upon the skills of the educated elite. Thus

<sup>8</sup>This is partly because insufficient time has passed for the demise of the leaders for whom the achievement of independence was a great personal triumph, and partly a result of the widespread erosion of liberal democracy, or the advance of oligarchy, characteristic of the new states.

<sup>9</sup>Harry J. Benda, "Non-Western Intelligentsia as Political Elites," in J. H. Kautsky, *op. cit.*

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