

Book Review/*Ulasan Buku*

The Malay Labourer: By the Window of Capitalism by Zawawi Ibrahim. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1998, 347 pages. Reviewed by Abdul Rahman Embong.

Studies of the Malaysian working class in the past either concerned Chinese or Indian workers, with hardly any study of Malay workers. This is to be expected as the Malayan (later Malaysian) working class – born out of economic relations developed by colonial capitalism that put in place an ethnic division of labour – was dominated by Chinese and Indian workers with only a sprinkling of Malay workers. Post-independence restructuring especially under the New Economic Policy (NEP) has changed the colonial set up, by creating multi-ethnic modern classes including members of the working class among Malays. This new development gave impetus to a number of studies of Malay workers, but most of these studies focused on Malay factory women in the industrialised west coast states of Peninsular Malaysia. Zawawi's study of the Malay plantation labour in Kemaman in the east coast state of Terengganu, is thus a different genre, a timely and welcome contribution filling this lacunae.

The study is about Malay proletarianisation, by exploring working class formation, as well as emerging proletarian consciousness and resistance in the context of experiencing and confronting capital in what Zawawi calls 'frontier capitalism'. The study traces the process of how Malay peasants became reconstituted as part of the 'working class' in Malaysia through plantation work relations. The study delves into the fact of working and living as a class – of experiencing and confronting capital at the level of subjectivity and the personal. Though conducted in the 1970s, the study is a vivid and sophisticated ethnographic description of the emerging plantation society, and of workers developing not only as an economic category but also as a moral community. Despite being moulded in the context of the time, the study contains important findings and propositions whose relevance transcend the perimeters of the plantation and its history.

What is refreshing about the study is its ability to provide insights beyond the scope of the micro-processes of the plantation work-relations and society, and to juxtapose neatly the question of class and culture. Besides showing how plantation workers are exploited as a class (economic exploitation), Zawawi gave a new dimension to the meaning of exploitation, i.e. status exploitation – something in the realm of culture and humanity. To a human being, what is more important than his/her *maruah* (dignity), though the person may be a lowly labourer? The author's juxtaposition of the 'class world view' derived from the experience as a labourer in the plantation to that of a 'Malay world view' derived

from Malay culture which upholds *maruah*, and their extensions in the political realm into trade unionism and UMNO politics respectively is well done.

The author notes that under peripheral capitalism, the proletarian journey is both ongoing and in a state of becoming, 'a journey still in the making'. Where will this journey end? Would the episode end when the whole of Malaysian society had become fully industrialised with a 'mature' capitalism to boot? Zawawi's contention that it is difficult to point to where the journey would eventually end is not only indicative of the care he takes before drawing conclusions, but also an acknowledgement of the complex realities and processes of transformation Malaysian society is undergoing. In fact, the plantation society generally, including the one Zawawi studied, is being reconstituted and transformed, a phenomenon noted by the author in the concluding chapter. If previously the plantation community was dominated by Indians, since the NEP, Malays had begun to enter the plantation sector. But since the 1980s, and more so the 1990s, with the lure of manufacturing and other urban-based occupations, the plantation sector has seen droves of foreign immigrant labour, mostly Indonesians, filling it as Malays and, to a certain extent Indians, began moving out of the sector into urban jobs. Under new conditions, the issue of class and culture again becomes relevant. Would the immigrant plantation labour – without recourse to trade unionism and political party affiliations – respond in the same manner the Malay labourer in Zawawi's study did? Or are they prepared to suffer in silence the exploitation of their labour and the down-trodding of their *maruah* because their ontological existence in the host society makes them see themselves as 'transient' labour whose principal objective is to accumulate sufficient income before returning home to their families? This question is a logical extension of Zawawi's research.

Zawawi's study is an important 'historical document' in the corpus of discourse and ethnography on the making of the Malaysian working class. The author's fault, if it can be said so, is that he took too long to have the study – a doctoral dissertation completed in 1978 – published only in the 1990s. He nevertheless 'makes up' in his introduction and, more so in his conclusion, by taking up important conceptual and theoretical issues, offering thoughtful reflections on 'the proletarian journey' beyond the scope of his study. Completing his study and turning it into a book in the present form is in itself a 'personal anthropological journey' for him as he modestly acknowledges. I share Maila Stiven's comments in her chapter contained in Louise Edwards and Mina Roces' edited volume, *Women in Asia: Tradition, Modernity and Globalisation* (Allen & Unwin, 2000: 32-33) that Zawawi's study despite being a "very sophisticated account of Malay plantation workers ... barely mentions either the issues of gender involved in the evolution of working class consciousness nor the ways in which both masculinities and femininities are implicated in the construction of

class situation.” I would nevertheless add that the neglect of the gender dimension does not make the book any less worth reading.

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