

Original Research Article

The Discursive Legitimation of Capitalist Development in Colonial and Early Post-Independence Malaysia

Yunus Simsek & Kamal Solhaimi Fadzil*

Department of Anthropology and Sociology, University of Malaya, 50603 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

*Corresponding Author: kamal@um.edu.my

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Abstract: One of the most important influences of colonialism is the discursive construction of the meaning of economic development. While this construction marginalised non-Western alternative interpretations, it simultaneously legitimised capitalism as normal, rational, necessary, and desirable. This situation was further consolidated by the establishment of the Bretton Woods system and its institutions after the Second World War, which classified states into hierarchical categories such as "first world," "third world," and "underdeveloped". Malaysia, as a postcolonial state, is no exception. Under British colonial rule, capitalist institutional structures were normalised, rationalised, and idealised. After independence, Malaysia continued to legitimise capitalism. This article examines how the idea of capitalist development was legitimised in Malaysia by analysing the selected discourses of colonial administrators and early independence politicians. Employing critical discourse analysis, the findings demonstrate that British colonial capitalism employed different discursive strategies to legitimise its exploitative system, and that its effects continued to shape Malaysia's early post-independence economic trajectory.

Keywords Capitalism; colonial capitalism; discursive legitimisation; Malaysia; post-colonialism

Introduction

Capitalism, which emerged in Europe, expanded to other parts of the world by using both coercive and consensual mechanisms. Its transformative effect has reshaped societies not only in the economic space but also in the social, cultural, and political spaces (Keskin, 2011). More importantly, it has been aimed to present capitalism as the natural and inevitable order, reinforced by the pervasive narrative that "there is no alternative" for new modern states. However, since its inception, capitalist development has brought new forms of exploitation, economic instability, crisis, polarisation, and inequality, harming the lives of the masses (Wright, 2013). These contradictions raise a critical question: how does a system that generates suffering, inequality, and various forms of exploitation for the masses continue to sustain itself and maintain legitimacy? In this context, the ability of capitalist development to legitimise itself by using discourse at different times and places provides a partial but important answer to this question. It means that through discourse, capitalism integrates itself into diverse cultures and ways of life, generates consent, and provides justifications for its practices (Chiapello, 2013). In this regard, its legitimising discourse has a changing structure that constantly includes and excludes, legitimises and delegitimises. For instance, practices such as slavery, racialised colonialism, and child labour may be legitimised in one historical period and delegitimised in another (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005; Sohn-Rethel, 2020).

In the Malaysian context, traditional relations began to change rapidly during British colonial capitalism, and a new hierarchical division of labour emerged centred on the interests of the colonisers. In the discursive construction of this period, the Malay population, as well as migrant labourers from China and India, were portrayed as in need of education and guidance. In contrast, the exploiter was portrayed as bringing about the necessary capitalist economic development, which was presented as the "only way" for the local

population (S. H. Alatas, 2018). After independence in 1957, the capitalist structures inherited from colonial rule continued to significantly influence both discursively and institutionally (Shamsul, 1999). In this regard, Malaysian economic policies prioritised *laissez-faire* capitalism, emphasising material development without addressing significant inequality, limited state intervention, and the preservation of foreign investment and companies in the early independence period. As a result, foreign capital grew to the extent that it accounted for more than half of the national economy, and the local elite discursively supported this growth (White, 2004).

It is important to note that some scholars have effectively focused their work on the problems created by colonial capitalism and the discourses produced to legitimise it. Alatas ([1977] 2018), one of Southeast Asia's leading sociologists, introduced the concept of "colonial capitalism" in his work, *The Myth of the Lazy Native*, to distinguish the capitalism that emerged in the colonial region from European capitalism. His work clearly shows that the durability of the capitalist system does not rely solely on material exploitation but also on ideological construction. In this regard, he demonstrated that, to legitimise this system of exploitation, the natives were labelled lazy and backward, while the exploiters and their system were portrayed as advanced, normal, and civilised. Zawiah Yahya (1994) focused on the 'literary discourse' produced by the British. Using various examples, she attempted to show how these texts served the colonial administration's discursive construction, while also calling for intellectual resistance against the "seductive" nature of these texts. Kahn's (2012) study examined how colonial capitalism led to large-scale migration, ecological change, and social change in Malaya, while Gliniak's (2021) stressed that formal and informal institutions established under colonial capitalism were designed to maximise profit and reduce ambiguity in economic and political systems. These institutions have continued to influence everyday life after independence. Cham's (1977) earlier work highlighted that capitalism undermined the self-sufficient traditional economic system. For him, more importantly, since full capitalist development would be contrary to British interests, semi-feudal/traditional/old and semi-capitalist /new/modern structures continued to coexist in Malaysia.

Several scholars have also focused on the early post-independence period. For instance, Syed Husin Ali (1964) focused on peasants and fishermen in rural areas from a critical perspective on the capitalist approach to development, whereas Tajuddin (2002) uses historical-comparative analysis and World-System theory to show how Malaysia and Singapore underwent capitalist structural shifts under colonialism and how they were forced into peripheral statehood. Lastly, Maaruf's book *Malay Ideas on Development from Feudal Lord to Capitalist* (2022 [1988]) explores how feudal and capitalist concepts have influenced the understanding of development and the beliefs of Malay thinkers and policymakers in Malaysia from the 16th century to the 1970s. Although several studies have examined this subject, a significant gap remains in the discursive mechanisms through which capitalism was legitimised in Malaysia during the colonial and early post-independence periods. In particular, there is limited attention to how key actors constructed and normalised capitalist development.

In this regard, this article aims to make a modest contribution to this gap by examining selected instances of discursive legitimation articulated by British colonial administrators and early post-independence Malaysian political elites. To achieve this objective, the study employs a purposive sampling strategy and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In this regard, the article is structured as follows: the article begins by exploring the relationship between discursive legitimation and capitalism. It then examines colonial capitalism in Malaya as the foundation for the discursive construction. The subsequent sections analyse the early post-independence period through selected discourse aimed at legitimising the existing economic system.

Methodology

The article employs a qualitative discourse analysis. The language used in public discourse directly shapes how we understand and interpret social and economic issues in our daily lives. It means that every emerging social practice that occurs at a given time and place establishes a relationship with discourse (Fairclough, 2001). More importantly, this process of interpretation, mediated through language-in-use, both spoken and written, is embedded in power relations and ideology. In this context, critical discourse analysis (hereafter

CDA) helps to understand how discourse creates power relations in daily life by providing what is “true,” “permissible,” and “possible,” while simultaneously producing mechanisms of standardisation, stigmatisation, or normalisation (Chilton, 2004, p.18; Wodak, 2002). This approach enables the study to highlight how specific actors construct, articulate, and sustain discourses of capitalist development.

The primary discursive data for this study consist of texts by British colonial and early-independence Malaysian politicians. In the data selection process, this article employed a purposive sampling strategy. Hence, in selecting spoken, written, and visual texts, the aim was to ensure direct relevance to the research objective and their explicit contribution to processes of legitimisation and delegitimation. Particular attention was given to actors (such as Stamford Raffles and Hugh Clifford as colonial administrators and Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak as early Malaysian political elites) who held influential political and administrative positions, since their power contributed to their discourse legitimising a form of capitalist economic system. While some materials were obtained directly from the original writings, speeches, and publications of these actors, others were accessed through secondary sources due to limited availability of primary documents. In addition, to diversify the data and enrich analysis, colonial-era propaganda posters, educational textbooks, and other visual materials were also used in the study.

For the analysis, the study employs five types of legitimisation strategies based on the frameworks developed by Van Leeuwen (2008) and Vaara et al. (2006). Van Leeuwen (2008) identifies four main legitimisation strategies, namely authorisation, rationalisation, moral evaluation, and mythopoiesis (narrativisation), each comprising various subtypes. Building on this framework, Vaara et al. (2006) introduce normalisation as a fifth category. In the text, these legitimisation strategies often appear simultaneously within the same discourse, reinforcing one another to enhance the overall legitimacy effect.

The first category is normalisation. It functions by defining who or what is considered “normal,” and labelling its opposite as “abnormal.” This discursive strategy conceals the ideological and power dynamics embedded within capitalist development and helps recontextualise capitalism as apolitical, technical, and neutral in the public eye. In this regard, normalisation has contributed to the naturalisation of capitalist relations. Furthermore, authorisation is legitimised through references to laws, customs, rules, regulations, authoritative figures, and specific policies (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p.108). The concept of the market offers a significant example for this context. By repeating expressions such as “the market's demand,” “the market estimates,” or “according to the market,” the term evolves from an abstract mechanism into a personified authority capable of making decisions and issuing demands (Vaara et al., 2006, p.799). Similarly, the institutionalisation of economics as a discipline rooted in capitalist development and its deliberate separation from the social sphere have contributed to the formation of an autonomous field of authority. This field includes figures such as “experts” and “analysts,” as well as institutions such as financial and educational bodies, which reinforce and legitimise this depoliticised discourse (Swedberg, 2005, p. 4).

Moral legitimisation refers to justifications grounded in value systems and ethical principles, while the rationalisation strategy emphasises functionality, utility, outcomes, and the scientific validity of particular actions (Vaara et al., 2006, p.801). For instance, modern states and large corporations frequently highlight quantitative indicators, such as growth rates, per capita income, and productivity gains through technological advancement, to rationalise their development agendas. At the same time, they frame such economic development as morally justified, appealing to collective interests across scales, from the family to the nation and religious communities. This framing positions capitalist development as more humanistic and morally beneficial than alternative or earlier systems. The final legitimisation strategy, narrativisation or mythopoiesis, plays a crucial role in sustaining capitalist development by constructing narratives that feature heroes, losers, and winners. By using these narratives, future projections are articulated, often beginning with phrases such as “if we (do not) follow this path of development, we will...” (Vaara et al., 2006).

The Findings and Discussion

The Establishment New Development Idea: Colonial Capitalism in Malaya

The origins of capitalism and its legitimising discourse in Malaysia date back to the colonial period, and their effects continue to shape the present. Colonialism, as a historically form of domination and exploitation, was closely related to the 'power' relationship created by Europe's technical and economic developments. This form of domination and exploitation is symbolised by a sophisticated, comprehensive and deeply transformative construction process that goes beyond the simple exploitation of one group's land and labour by another (Horvath, 1972; Tatar, 2011). In other words, colonialism refers to a comprehensive transformation process that involves the detailed mapping of the exploited land in accordance with capitalist interests of the exploiter; the collection and classification of certain information about the indigenous people; and ultimately the creation of information practices regarding who the indigenous people are, what is the meaning of development for the indigenous people and what is to be regarded as lawful, rational, superior, or valuable (Cohn, 2021).

In the context of capitalism, according to Marx and Engels, the desire to accumulate capital led to the expansion of the capitalist market, which has transformed non-capitalist spaces into zones of capitalist development. They underlined that "the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere" (Marx & Engels, 1992, p.36). In this regard, colonialism functioned as a significant mechanism in the spread of capitalism, enabling the acquisition of new raw materials, land, and labour. The strong relationship between capitalism and colonialism manifested itself in the fact that Western militarised companies, such as the East India Company, the Dutch East Indies Company, and the *Compagnie française pour le commerce des Indes orientales*, played a significant role in colonisation and establishing a global trading network based on their own interests (Noor, 2016, p.56).

In Malaya, the earliest regions to undergo colonial capitalist transformation were the Straits Settlements: Penang, Malacca, and Singapore. Penang became the first British-controlled territory following an agreement in 1786 between the Sultan of Kedah and Francis Light. This was followed by the founding of Singapore in 1819 through a similar arrangement between the Sultan of Johor and Thomas Stamford Raffles, and later by the acquisition of Malacca (Yahya, 1994, p.45). With the growing global demand for tin and rubber in the 19th and 20th centuries, colonial expansion moved into all of Malaya. In this context, the Anglo-Perak Pangkor Treaty of 1874 between Andrew Clarke and Abdullah, as the sultan of Perak, became a significant turning point. Then, similar treaties were applied to other places: Selangor in 1875, Pahang in 1888, and Negeri Sembilan in 1889 (de Micheaux, 2022).

These new treaties gave the colonial elite significant political and economic power. In other words, the resources of the Malay Peninsula were further exploited systematically for the British's economic benefit. To facilitate this process, British Malaya introduced new forms of labour division, institutional structures, and social hierarchies, radically transforming the region's demographic, ecological, and social landscape. The rapid expansion of tin mining, for example, demonstrates the scale of demographic changes. The discovery of tin deposits led to a surge in labour demand. In the Kinta Valley alone, the Chinese labour force grew from an estimated 4,000 workers in 1874 to approximately 45,000 by 1889 (Francis, 1988, p.2). As another example, the cultivated area of rubber in Malaya was just 350 acres in 1877, and then increased to 20,000 acres in 1914 and reached 2 million acres in 1940 (Narayanan, 2024, n.p).

Colonial administrators articulated different discursive strategies to justify their economic and political system in Malaya. By using authorisation and rationalisation discursive strategies, they often underlined the importance of attracting new capital, bringing cheap labour to the region, and the so-called 'development' of resources. For example, a senior British civil servant in the Federated Malay States (FMS) described the priorities of colonial governance as follows: "the general policy of the British Advisers has been...to attract capital - European, Chinese and others; to encourage the immigration of Chinese, Indian and other labourers; [and] to assist the development of the mineral and agricultural resources of the States" (quoted from Francis, 1988, p.9). A similar highlighting can be observed in Thomas Stamford Raffles' statement, which rationalised

the significance of opium for coloniser merchants by saying: “Opium is one of the most profitable articles of eastern commerce ... it is impossible to oppose trading in the same” (quoted from S. F. Alatas, 2023, p.56). In such discursive construction, by concealing the ethical concerns, social harms, and human suffering produced by opium, the capitalist ideological perspective normalises and naturalises on the basis of profitability. In other words, profit defines what is “(im)possible”.

Another key colonial capitalist development strategy was the moralisation and narrativisation of exploitation by using civilisational dichotomies between the coloniser and the colonised. In this discursive framework, Western colonisers were portrayed as civilised, knowledgeable, rational, and morally superior. For instance, Hugh Clifford, a colonial administrator in Malaya, romanticised British colonial expansion as a civilising mission by describing it as the triumph of light over darkness. In his narrative, the coloniser is portrayed as an “energetic explorer” who “illuminates the darkness and reveals what is hidden,” and as a member of a supposedly “great race”. He wrote in his article, A journey through the Malay States of Trengganu and Kelantan:

Africa has been explored and re-explored during the last decade to such an extent that it no longer merits the name of the Dark Continent; Central Asia, too, has been forced of late years to yield up many of its secret to energetic explorers; and all over the world the hidden things of darkness are daily being brought to light by adventurous spirits, not of a few whom, we may be proud to remember, are members of the great British race. (Clifford, 1879, p.1)

In contrast, the colonised were systematically drawn through negative stereotypes and racialised moralising myths. As Syed Hussein Alatas (2018) shows, the native was systematically depicted as lazy, indolent, irrational, and in need of discipline to legitimise why the native needed supervision by the white man. The place where the native is degraded in the eyes of the exploiter is that he is immoral, but cheap and effective labour, and that he needs to be disciplined more in order to maximise profits. As an important example to show racialised capitalist logic, a merchant’s work on Mining in Malaya for Gold and Tin said:

From a labour point of view, there are practically three races: the Malays, the Chinese and the Tamils. By nature, the Malay is an idler, the Chinaman is a thief, and the Indian is a drunkard. Yet each, in his special class of work, is both cheap and efficient when properly supervised (quoted from Noor, 2016b, p.185).

Such discourse similarly employs essentialised stereotypes of the entire community, morally degrading the native (‘idlers’, ‘thieves’, and ‘drunkards’) and narratively positioning the exploiter in a morally superior light. The narrativisation and rationalisation of technical and infrastructural development were also used to legitimise colonial capitalism. In this context, colonialism was portrayed as bringing prosperity and progress, whereas pre-colonialism was portrayed only as injustice, oppression, and misery. Such a binary discursive construction aimed to show why colonial intervention is necessary and materially beneficial. For instance, in a short story by R.O. Winstedt, a colonial educator in Malaya, a character named ‘Gula’ positively describes the transition from the old system to the new, which came from colonialists, as follows:

‘Yes, Dato,’ I laughed, ‘but the old order has changed a lot - hasn’t it? The Raja came here today in a motor-car; you came by train. Your grandson talks to me in English. Is the change for the worst?’ The peaceful life brought by the white man is very sweet to a tired old fellow, Tuan; and the young men like the novelties of the day. As you say, my grandsons are clever. They talk English, and earn good wages, and make more money out of a good deal in rubber than my father ever possessed (quoted in Koh, 2007, n.p.)

Such narratives did not merely legitimise colonialism in economic terms, by highlighting material gains, such as better wages or, in technical terms, through symbols of modernity like motorcars and trains, but also reinforced the supremacy of the white colonial subject and his language. As another example of the naturalisation of colonial capitalism and its administrators, a text in the Malayan Cambridge textbook emphasises the contributions of Thomas Stamford Raffles, as follows:

Over a thousand miles of railway have been built, and between two and three thousand miles of metalled roads. Tin mines have been opened up, and rubber plantations introduced. The material development of Malaya has been one of the economic wonders of the world. But the feature of the Protectorate which Raffles would observe with the deepest pride, were he alive is the happiness of the people. More prosperous than they have ever been, safe at last from the old haunting fears, the old perpetual insecurity, tyranny and wars, the Malays are unquestionably happy (quoted from Koh, 2007, n.p)

On the one hand, this legitimisation narrative uses quantitative figures (a thousand miles of railway, between two and three thousand miles of metalled road) to rationalise the system on measurable indicators; on the other hand, the colonial administrator becomes the saviour who rescues people from the tyrants and wars of the past within this moral narrative.

Although the Japanese occupation of Malaya temporarily interrupted British colonial capitalism, the British later returned to Malaya and attempted to set up a new political and economic order, the Malayan Union, to unite all Malay states, except Singapore, under a single administration. The primary goal was to establish more efficient economic exploitation to address Britain's post-war economic issues. However, after strong opposition and fear of the rise of communism and anti-colonialism, the Malayan Union was replaced by the Federation of Malaya in 1948. However, in the same year, the British declared a state of emergency on June 18 to protect colonial economic interests and to prevent the communist and anti-colonial struggle against them (Andaya & Andaya, 1982).

The colonial administration employed various propaganda mechanisms to delegitimise and subsequently eliminate groups deemed capable of threatening British colonial capitalist interests. Examining the following British colonial propaganda posters, for instance, the poster on the left (Figure 1) depicts a worker (in the centre) being controlled by a hand like a puppet. The image depicts the colonial subject in the background as being immature, unable to make judgments, and susceptible to manipulation by unidentifiable hands. This undermines the legitimacy of the calls for "freedom" and "strike" on the flags held by that individual. Furthermore, the poster's corners repeat the question, "Who Pulls the Strings?" in the languages of the several ethnic groups that lived in Colonial Malaya. A demonised skeleton figure in the middle of the second poster (right—Figure 2) stands in for "death-bringing communism." The poster's lower portion shows ethnic groups wishing to use their weapons to battle him. The poster in the background underlines that everyone must fight against communism and that it is immoral and foreign to the local population.



Figures 1 and 2. Propaganda posters issued by the British colonial administration during the State of Emergency in Malaya.

Source: Arkib Negara Malaysia, n.d.

These posters, as visual discourses, show how narrativisation, moral evolution, and authorisation were used to normalise and justify the British emergency action in Malaya. Even though official discourse underlined the elimination of the communist threat in Malaya as the purpose, it aimed to abolish all anti-colonial and capitalist resistance (Arifin & Sukr, 2019). This is because, as mentioned above, the continued exploitation of Malayan economic resources, particularly tin and rubber, was significant to Britain's post-war economic recovery. In the United Kingdom Parliament, Lord Ogmore underlined these significances and needs as follows:

In economics, before the war, and to a large extent still, its eggs are, so to speak, in two baskets, the one tin, and the other rubber. Very fortunate it is for this country that those baskets are there, because they have very largely supported the standard of living of the people of this country and the sterling area ever since the war ended; what we should do without Malaya, and its earnings in tin and rubber, I do not know (Lord Ogmore, 1952)

As an example, Malaya's export-oriented economy generated approximately 400 million dollars in 1951; however, 83 per cent of this revenue was transferred to the Sterling Area pool established to support Britain's post-war reconstruction (Khalid, 2021). Hence, to protect its capitalist economic interests, during the emergency period, the British bombed a large area, imposed collective punishments, detained a significant number of Islamists, nationalists, and socialists without trial, and deported or resettled a large population in Malaya (Curtis, 2022).

Early Independence Years: From 1957 to 1970

Malaya achieved political independence on 31 August 1957. However, colonialism left a lasting legacy. Furthermore, Western-educated local political elites continued to use colonial knowledge systems, particularly in processes of categorisation, classification, policymaking, discursive production, and institutional formation in their discourse (Shamsul, 1999). In the context of capitalist development, Malaysia exhibited neocolonial characteristics in both discourse and practice during the early post-independence period. One of the primary reasons was that the British sought to establish a structure to safeguard their economic interests as Malaysia moved toward independence. In other words, the British sought to shape the postcolonial state into a reliable economic and political partner, primarily by ensuring favourable conditions for the continued pursuit of British economic interests. Therefore, Malaysia's early economic development policies were grounded in laissez-faire capitalism, characterised by minimal state intervention, a strong emphasis on material development, and the protection of foreign investments (Lee et al., 2012). In addition, global economic institutions were directly involved in preparing programmes suited to Malaysia's laissez-faire capitalist economic system. In this regard, the World Bank was invited to shape the First Five-Year Plan (or A Plan of Development for Malaya) 1956-1960. This plan aimed to promote capitalist accumulation and growth by safeguarding British foreign interests. Furthermore, both the Second Five-Year Plan (1961-1965) and the First Malaysian Plan (1966-1970) were influenced by international agencies (Salleh, 1992, pp.35-36).

As a consequence of this economic policy, foreign companies expanded their influence within the national economy. Between 1959 and 1970, foreign capital's share in the domestic economy rose dramatically from 38.5 per cent to 60.7 per cent (Gliniak, 2021, p.9). By the mid-1970s, 65 per cent of the directors of Malaysia's top 100 companies were non-Malaysians, with British nationals accounting for 30 per cent of that group (White, 2004, p.2). Moreover, such domination of the national economy by foreign companies did not pose a significant challenge to the Malaysian government, which was mainly composed of Malay aristocrats and powerful Chinese tokways. In fact, economic programmes emphasising the importance of foreign companies had been supported discursively by political elites. For instance, Dr Ismail Bin Abdul Rahman, as the Minister of Commerce and Industry, emphasised that the government would not impose any restrictions on the free movement of foreign capital and the transfer of profits from Malaysia, and that it would implement policies to retain existing foreign capital in Malaysia (White, 2004, p.59).

In the context of legitimising this laissez-faire capitalism, political elites continued to use a discourse similar to that produced during the era of British colonialism. First, general quantitative economic figures,

including 'per capita national income' and 'growth rates', and technical development were underlined to rationalise the economic system and to frame this system as successful. In particular, physical man-made structures, including roads and buildings, became mainstream discourse and were portrayed as developments that provide a good life (Larsen, 2003). For example, Tunku Abdul Rahman, as the first prime minister (1957-1970), once remarked: "What a change has come over our capital! We have so many fine and tall buildings, commercial firms, and banks... What a grand life we are having" (quoted from Maaruf, 2019, p.140). Here, urban physical buildings, banks, and commercial companies became symbols of progress and national pride. However, it is important to note that this rationalised narrative conceals how the income was distributed, how it contributed to income inequality, and how it was concentrated in certain hands. For instance, while the Malay population constituted the majority of the country, its share of the nation's corporate wealth was only 2.4 per cent in 1971. In contrast, foreign ownership accounted for approximately 63 per cent, and non-Malay groups comprised 34.3 per cent in the same year (Hamid, 1998, p.106).

Furthermore, the struggle against the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) continued after independence, and anti-communist rhetoric remained important among political elites due to the Cold War and the MCP's presence. It can be said that even though the narrative was framed as a security issue, this rhetoric indirectly contributed to the legitimisation of the pro-capitalist government and economic system. In this regard, the business-oriented leaders of the Malaysian Chinese Association, a key component of the Alliance political coalition, consistently emphasised in their discourse the importance of free enterprise and laissez-faire capitalism, while simultaneously highlighting the dangers caused by communism. In particular, Lee Hau-Shik and Tan Siew Sin, as Malaysia's first finance ministers and the leaders of the MCA, emphasised in their speeches the dangers created by the threat of communism to a stable economy (Morais, 1981; Ooi, 2020). A similar discursive pattern was also followed by UMNO's political elites. For example, Tun Haji Abdul Razak bin Hussein, as deputy prime minister, in his speech in 1963, portrayed communism as a threat, destabilising the economy and politics, and hindering development, while (capitalist) economic development was portrayed as rational, neutral, and the main way to fight communism, as follows:

They (communists) drained our resources and delayed our development. We fought them and defeated them and we are now determined that this period of our national history will not repeat itself. Therefore, the greatest safeguard against Communism is sound economic development, and that is what we are doing in Malaya (Tun Haji Abdul Razak Bin Hussein, 1963).

Such discourse narrativised through their/us binaries and portrayed "we" (the nation, the government, the people) as both victim and hero. Moreover, capitalist economic development was rationalised as a necessary instrument for combating communism and providing stability. As another example, Tunku Abdul Rahman emphasised that the transformation of Labour Day demonstrations and their slogans into expressions of communism was an obstacle to them being considered something positive. By using negative moral evaluation through lexical choices, anti-capitalist or communist slogans as unacceptable and dangerous, he said:

This day (Labour Day) is celebrated throughout the world. In many countries, the workers hold demonstrations, displaying banners and placards which should extol the achievements of the labour movement. That would be good, but the shouting and the slogans displayed in the procession often show very strong leanings towards communism. There are shouts and slogans decrying capitalism, such as "Down with capitalism! Up with the workers and communism" (Tunku Abdul Rahman, 1981, p. 117).

An attempt was also made to discursively undermine concepts such as anti-imperialism, justice, neo-colonialism, and collective ownership, which leftist movements use to describe and critique structures of economic dependency. In the same speech, for instance, Tun Haji Abdul Razak attempted to delegitimise the concept of neo-colonialism by reducing 'neocolonialism' to 'neononsense', following:

I would like to say, Gentlemen, that these slogans and terminologies are now completely out of date. Goodwill, understanding and decent relationships between nations are being completely misinterpreted by using such words as neo-colonialism. I would like to say here, categorically, that people who talk about neocolonialism are talking neo-nonsense (Tun Haji Abdul Razak Bin Hussein, 1963).

An important consequence of this rhetorical emphasis in Malaysia was that trade unions, class-based organisations, leftist political groups or parties were delegitimised, marginalised, or banned. More importantly, this discursive construction has played a significant role in shaping political organisations along communal rather than class-based lines and in rendering class relations less visible. However, it is important to note that colonial capitalism in Malaya produced a new class-based social order that continued to shape social life across all spheres after independence. In other words, on the one hand, there was a large rural Malay population whose livelihoods depended on small-scale paddy cultivation and fishing; on the other hand, there was a substantial Chinese and Indian working-class population employed in factories, plantations, and mines. At the same time, an urban-based stratum emerged, comprising Malay administrative elites and a growing middle class, alongside Chinese and Indian capitalist businessmen (Weiss, 2020, p. 518).

Moreover, stability and order were highlighted to legitimise and normalise the economic system. Especially, the dual economy, which established British colonialism based on the fact that Malays were concentrated in rural economic activities, such as paddy farming, fishing, and coconut growing, and non-Malays were part of a more urban or global capitalist economy centred on products, was maintained between 1957 and 1970 (Huff, 2023). Hence, political elites continued to use the same legitimisation discourse, including a similar strategy based on racial stereotyping and the essentialisation of characteristics of large social groups, as well as cultural determinism, in the early years of independence. These statements also emphasised the need to provide order and stability. For example, Tunku Abdul Rahman normalised this dual economic activity in these words:

The Chinese are materialistic as a race and a practical-minded people. Generally, they were not interested in local politics; they liked to live in places where law and order reigned and with a minimum of interference, so that they could go about their business, merely to make money. The Malays, on the other hand, are a simple and contented people, used to their own way of life, their distinctive traditions, their deep Islamic belief in God and the Hereafter, and respect for their Sultans. Sons of the soil and the sea, they lived close to nature in a bountiful land. Why bother to work so hard? (cited in Maaruf, 2019, p.142).

In the above discourse, the structural inequalities created by colonial capitalism, which continue to affect the post-independence period, were rationalised through cultural differences.

As a result, the economic system inherited from colonial capitalism was invoked in the rhetoric of the political elite during the early independence period, with a similar legitimisation strategy, and this persisted until the end of the 1960s. Although political economy did not always occupy an explicitly central place in elite discourse during this early independence period due to the influence of laissez-faire, political elites discursively underlined the significance of material growth, the dangers of communism and some leftist ideas, and the need for stability and order to rationalise, moralise, and normalise the existing economy.

Conclusion

This article explains how capitalism in Malaysia was discursively legitimised during the colonial and early post-independence periods, focusing on selected examples. As a dominant political and economic ideology, capitalism seeks to sustain its existence through both coercion and the production of consent. One of the most important components of this effort to generate consent is the production of discourse that legitimises the system and recontextualises it as natural and necessary. In this regard, British colonial capitalism in Malaya created systematic demographic, ecological, and institutional transformations in line with its own economic interests and produced discourses to legitimise the system.

During the colonial period, the attraction of capital and cheap labour to the region, the more efficient exploitation of plantations and mines, and profitability were emphasised as the primary objectives of colonial administration. The rationality and validity of economic action were justified by these goals. The exploitative relations generated by this system, the inequalities that emerged between the coloniser and the colonised, ecological destruction, and the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few were excluded from the dominant discourse. As another form of discursive legitimisation, a civilisational narrative, common to many colonial contexts, was also emphasised in Malaya. Colonial capitalism under British rule was framed as progressive, normal, rational, and morally superior, while simultaneously being portrayed as a system that would rescue the natives from backwardness, indolence, and the tyranny and oppression of the past. Moreover, oppositional movements, including communism and anti-colonial activism, were delegitimised through visual and textual discourses that represented them as immoral, destructive, and dangerous.

These discursive legitimisation strategies significantly influenced the early post-independence period as well. In other words, local political elites employed similar discursive strategies to legitimise laissez-faire economic policies that continued to protect British economic interests. In this regard, quantitative data and structural indicators, together with technocratic economic language, were used to rationalise policy choices in the early years of independent Malaysia. Moreover, the importance of anti-communism was sustained within a moral narrative, and leftist thought was marginalised. Significantly, “order and stability” were consistently emphasised to normalise the existing structure of the economic system. The findings suggest that the discursive legitimisation strategies of colonial administrators and early post-independence political elites sought to naturalise, normalise, rationalise, and moralise the capitalist system. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that this discursive construction obscured the inequalities produced by capitalism as an ideology, its mechanisms of exploitation, and the concentration of capital in the hands of a limited elite by depoliticising and naturalising the system.

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