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Mahathir's Speech at Oxford: Reasoning About The West

On April 9, 1985, the Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir bin Mohammad, took time off while on a European tour to deliver a "hard-hitting" (Department of Information, Malaysia, 1985) speech at the 400 year-old Trinity College, University of Oxford, England. The speech entitled "Holier-than-thou: A mild critique," garnered mixed reception from the west, but was definitely lauded by fellow Malaysians and some Third World leaders. This is one of Dr. Mahathir's earlier speeches that has become a trademark of his reasoning about the west.

Dr. Mahathir was addressing a gathering of Oxford deans, academics and students, and of course, members of the media. Apparently he felt that the time and place was right to engage in what he termed as the "exchange of some home truths" with the western world. It is probable that Oxford symbolizes an epitome of western intellectualism to Dr. Mahathir (and presumably, to many Malaysians and other third worlders), since he chose this as a "good place" to express and make public his reasoning about the west.

This analysis is an attempt to explicate Dr. Mahathir's reasoning about the west by analyzing arguments found in the speech. No particular method of speech criticism is used in this attempt. However, at certain times, the ideas of Perelman seem useful to be applied as a method of thinking about the speech. Perelman's treatise on argumentation is indeed apt as a tool of analysis here even though it is not meant as one. The basic proposition of this paper is that Dr. Mahathir's speech at Oxford reflects a particular way of reasoning about the west, and this particular way is a value-filled thesis which needs to be heard and gained adherence of.

The background

It seems appropriate now to say a few words about the speaker so that his position as the arguer here may be comprehended in the relevant context. Dr. Mahathir became Prime Minister in July 1981, and is currently in his 16th year of office. His accession heralded a major change of direction in Malaysia. As one author aptly observes , it is the "guts and gumption" of the Mahathir-style leadership which inspired many to label the 80s and 90s as the most dynamic period in Malaysia's history. While in the final analysis, only history can tell, the "general consensus in knowledgable circles" is that Dr. Mahathir is a "renaissance man" who " deserves support." He has given Malaysians the needed push to "reimagine" themselves and to ask what was possible in Malaysia for Malaysia. It is clear that he wants Malaysians to have a prouder and fervent view of Malaysia and its place in the world (Kanapathy, 1989).

All along in his tenure as Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir shows keen interest to bring a new positiveness to Malaysia's standing in international affairs. He entered into a dialogue with the South nations and placed the Malaysian stamp on some major world affairs. For the first time in the country's history, forty-eight heads of government from different parts of the world convened in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city, in October 1989 for the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting. Malaysia was also successfully elected to the United Nations Security Council, which gave Malaysia greater argumentative opportunity to engage in issues such as war and peace in Kampuchea, the concept of a common heritage in the Antarctica, and elimination of the global drug problem. Prior to this, Malaysia had adopted a low profile on international matters, which to a considerable extent explains for foreigners' ignorance of the country and its achievements (Kanapathy, 1989).

In the 1990s, Malaysia under Dr. Mahathir moves more confidently as a global player in many arenas. A Malaysian is now the President of the United Nations General Assembly — another global recognition of Malaysia's capability. Malaysian troops have also done their share in UN peacekeeping efforts in Mogadishu and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In the sphere of information technology, Malaysia has now two satellites in space. Still, the most remarkable development in Malaysia now is the

Multimedia Super Corridor (fondly called MSC) which Dr. Mahathir first announced in a speech in August 1995. The MSC is being planned and built as a15-by-50km zone that encompasses Kuala Lumpur and four mega infrastructural projects: Kuala Lumpur City Centre (the world's tallest building), Putrajaya (which will be the new government administrative center), Cybercity (a new cyber township), and the Kuala Lumpur International Airport. These places will be connected by a digital optical fiber backbone with 2.5 - 10 gigabits per second capacity. World-class multimedia corporations are invited to locate their businesses and research and development facilities in the MSC. This will be a springboard to create, distribute and serve the regional and world markets for multimedia products and services. Dr. Mahathir has managed to rope in world-class multimedia corporations leaders to be members of an International Advisory Panel to the MSC, including Microsoft's Bill Gates, Acer's Stan Shih, Apple's Gilbert Amelio, and Sun Microsystem's Scott McNealy. This is the most ambitious project the country has undertaken in the 40 years of independence to which she is highly committed (Abdul Azizal & Fuziah, 1997). The MSC is another forward-looking vision of Mahathir's Malaysia.

Dr. Mahathir is the first Malaysian Prime Minister who did not receive a British education (Clutterbuck,1985). Remarkably, his career as Prime Minister indicates a strong desire to shake complacent and paternalistic British attitudes, in particular, and the western world, in general. It is apparent that Dr. Mahathir believes the greatest hindrance to the development of the Third World nations is the constantly superior attitudes of the former colonial "masters" and the western world in general. Dr. Mahathir has proven this in the many fierce speeches and public statements that he has made, either to a particular western audience or the west as a whole. This speech at Oxford is a classic example — it is an eloquent expression of a whole belief system.

The Oxford speech

Generally, this address at Oxford is a part of Dr. Mahathir's continuous attempt to tell the west that it needs to change in terms of its attitudes towards the developing world. He said that his speech "springs from the need for a leader from the

Third World to say a few words about the First World, some of whose leaders and many of whose commentators and analysts continue to be patronizing and unduly critical of us in the developing world."

Quoting potent chapters and verses from some of the notorious writings of western scholars against the 'orientals,' Dr. Mahathir ventured that westerners "who hurl abuse at the Third World ought to make sure that they speak from premises that are fair, assumptions that are correct, knowledge that is grounded in fact, understanding that is not steeped in ignorance and arrogance."

He proceeded to catalogue and document, with much cynicism and sarcasm, the freedom of the press, the concept of democracy, the economic inequalities, the social poverty, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the overspending on prestigious projects and weapons in developed countries, especially the United States. This is not a defensive attempt on his part, as he so expressed when he said "I am no apologist for the Third World." Neither is it a jurisdiction of current Malaysian policies and practices. Rather, the bulk of the content of the speech is an explicit argumentation of a prevalent belief among many people of Third World nations which were formerly colonized and dominated by western governments.

This prevalent belief is that westerners in general, and western leaders in particular, are really insincere and uninterested in aiding the development of Third World nations. In other words, the western world is the ultimate model of hypocrisy in the history of all humanity. Implicitly, Dr. Mahathir was attempting to get westerners to accept the notion that they ought to change their way of treating third worlders, lest they want to remain as a paradigm case of hypocrites in the minds of third worlders. Further, the west must awaken to the "second great wave of decolonization, mental and psychological decolonization" in the Third World, and do so by looking at its own "ills" and stop telling the "new Third World" that its "reasoning (is) of the most 'slipshod description' ... and wanting in lucidity."

The analysis

This section will analyze the speech as Dr. Mahathir's way of reasoning about the west. For this purpose, some of the potent

ideas espoused by the Belgian philosopher, Chaim Perelman,seems relevant. The term "reasoning about the west" is used rather loosely to mean that the arguments accorded by Dr. Mahathir in the Oxford speech is his way of coming to terms with, or his way of thinking about current western attitude and behavior toward the developing nations.

Perelman's study of argumentation is the study of discursive techniques that "induce or increase the mind's adherence to the theses presented for its assent" (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969:4). Argumentation, says Perelman, is a person-centered activity; it is personal because it starts with premises that the audience accepts. Thus, the conclusion of an argument is either weak or strong, convincing or otherwise.

An interesting notion in Perelman's treatise of argumentation is starting points. According to Perelman, the aim of argumentation is to move an audience from agreement about premises to agreement about some conclusion. The conclusion of argumentation may be uncertain, contingent and perhaps unacceptable to the audience. The premise, however, is something that the audience has already agreed upon. These premises, the accepted part of the argumentation, are what Perelman called starting points. Starting points, therefore are the "facts" or "truths" that the audience holds, i.e., the "realities" for the audience, and these may be abstract or concrete.

Another fascinating issue in Perelman is the concept of choice and presence. Since there are various starting points, the arguer must choose what he wants to use as the premises. Once the choice is made, the arguer is creating a presence or a focus in the minds of the audience. Presence, therefore, is the "displaying of certain elements on which the speaker wishes to center attention in order that they may occupy the foreground of the hearer's consciousness (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969:142).

In Dr. Mahathir's Oxford speech, the starting points that he used as his premises were the writings and claims of some established western authors and colonial "masters." For example, he cited Satre and Lord Cromer. He chose lengthy instances from the works of some orientalist scholars to create a presence in the minds of the distinguished Oxford audience as to these claims. He associated the claims as "some of the present (western) conventional wisdom about the Third World." From there, Dr. Mahathir developed his arguments by using the technique of liaison.

The technique of liaison seeks to establish a link between the starting points of argument and the speaker's claims. In his speech, Dr. Mahathir established the link between western conventional wisdom about the east to his claim that westerners hold a superior notion of themselves in light of nonwesterners. This argument is supported by the use of examples which show how "the columns in (western) newspapers and in the pages of (western) books, (westerners) lecture, expound, declaim on all that is wrong with the Third World."

Such arguments in Dr. Mahathir's speech is consistent with Perelman's notion of arguments that establish the structure of reality by examples (Perelman, 1982). Examples are used to generate a generalization (see the above quote from the speech) in argumentation. It presumes the existence of regularities among case, and by presentation of several cases, a rhetor aims at convincing an audience of those regularities (Foss, Foss & Trapp on Perelman, 1985:119).

Nested within the above argument in Dr. Mahathir's Oxford speech is the claim that the west must rid off its way of looking at "this entire planet from the western, orientalist perspective," and judging the Third World "day in and day out only according to the self-righteous values of the West and its media." This claim is based on the starting point or premise that the western path of development is the best model for a nation's progress and economic growth. But when democracy breeds chaos, and freedom breeds moral decadence in both developed and developing nations, these are highlighted of the Third World, while in the developed world, they are largely unreported. We can detect the use of a quasi-logical argument in this point.

Quasi-logical arguments serve to gain adherence of an audience through the act of eliminating incompatibilities. One can eliminate incompatibilities by rationalizing. In the above claim of the speech, Dr. Mahathir pointed out that it is incompatible for the west to criticize the Third World which practices western democracy and freedom, and follows the western development model. To escape from this incompatibility, the west should stop evaluating the Third World from a western perspective, and start looking at its own weaknesses. In other words, the west should stop acting like hypocrites.

By applying the ideas of Perelman to the arguments found in the Oxford speech by Dr. Mahathir, we may understand one Third World leader's reasoning about the west. All that is asked of the west by Dr. Mahathir is some respect and understanding of what the Third World is attempting to do in its search for its own identity and destiny. In this argument, a quasi-logical approach is again used by Dr. Mahathir. It is not becoming, he argued, of the comfortable to afflict the afflicted, to scorn the efforts of many men in many lands who are trying their level best, in the best way they know how, to pull their people up by their bootstraps. An argument of reciprocity is detected here, in the sense that it is not fit for a developed nation to behave in an uncivilized manner toward a developing nation.

Conclusion

Although Perelman does not explicitly intend for his treatise of argumentation to be a tool of analysis, one can certainly use it fruitfully to understand a reasoning behavior. In this article, the Malaysian Prime Minister's speech at Oxford in 1985 was analyzed as one way a Third World leader reasons about the west. In his reasoning, some claims were established. It is hoped that understanding one's argument, especially at the level of international relations and politics, will provide for a better way of establishing that illusionary idea called world peace and understanding. The finding of starting points in intercultural argument is certainly critical.

References

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