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Colonial Policy and Practice: A Comparative Study of Burma and Netherlands India. By J.S. Furnivall. New York: New York University Press, 1956 (1948).

Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure. By Edmund R. Leach. Boston: Beacon Press, 1965 (1954).

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Furnivall and Plural Society

John Sydendam Furnivall could be classified as a “critic of empire” who favoured reforming British colonial rule so that it would “be ruled with more concern for the welfare of its native inhabitants ... rather than ... those of [British] capitalists” (Porter 2006, p. xxiv). A “reluctant imperialist”, he did not see colonialism as inherently bad, but rather that it “should be a passing phase governed in the meantime to improve the welfare of the natives until the time shall arrive when, part by part, it may be developed into a normal and national life of its own” (ibid., p. xxxi). By the time he wrote *Colonial Policy and Practice* then, Furnivall was already arguing for the colonial government to start preparing the conditions for eventual self-rule in Burma.

Being a former Indian Civil Service (ICS) administrator in Burma of more than twenty years, a lifelong Fabian socialist and, after resigning from the ICS, a “pro-Burmese” activist engaged in promoting reforms in the interest of the Burmese all did have some

bearing on his writings (Pham 2004; 2005). Furnivall was not a 'racist', he did not subscribe to racial superiority ideas,¹ but yet, like his fellow ICS officers, could not extricate himself from the paternalism that imbued the ICS. Perhaps because he was a "critic of empire", scholars of Southeast Asian societies have yet to closely scrutinize his writings for their "orientalist" elements; for example, Furnivall's usage of the "colonial category of 'race' was not just a way of examining society [for] it maintained the structure of colonialism itself" (Pham 2004, p. 268).

Colonial Policy and Practice brings together four recurrent themes found in Furnivall's writings; (i) colonialism and its deleterious effects on the dependencies, (ii) the disparity between colonial policy and practice, (iii) his concern about the welfare of the natives, and (iv) how to re-integrate the unstable social order — plural society — created by colonial rule. Even though he was already an outspoken critic of colonialism and well known for his pro-Burmese views, the Government of Burma commissioned him to do this study at the end of 1942.

The former ICS administrator turned "activist-scholar" uses a comparative study of British direct rule in Burma and Dutch indirect rule in Netherlands India to show the disparity between colonial policy and practice. British direct rule relied on the "rule of law" and "economic freedom", while Dutch indirect rule imposed "restraints on economic forces by strengthening personal authority and by conserving the influence of custom" (Furnivall 1956, p. ix). Both British and Dutch colonial policies claim to include the idea of social justice but "often worked in practice to the advantage of the colonial power rather than of the dependency" (ibid., p. 7).² Furnivall was more favourable to the Dutch indirect rule even though he concluded that both British and Dutch colonial rule resulted in destroying the native societies. Colonialism indeed transformed the tropical dependencies into a distinctively new form of social order which he called "plural society".³

For Furnivall, plural society

is in the strictest sense a medley, for they [ethnic groups] mix but do not combine. Each group holds by its own religion, its own culture

and language, its own ideas and ways. As individuals they meet, but only in the market-place, ... [and] ... with different sections of the community living side by side, but separately, within the same political unit. Even in the economic sphere there is division of labor along racial lines, Natives, Chinese, Indians and Europeans all have different functions, and within each major group subsections have particular occupations. (1956, pp. 304–05)

Plural society is composed of racial groups that are divided into separate sections, where each racial group is “an aggregate of individuals rather than an organic whole” (*ibid.*). Such a society is inherently unstable because there is no common social will to integrate the different ethnic sections. Economically, the atomized individuals will not create social demand that can produce a shared set of wants and values to guide or check social action among the ethnically-sectioned society. Without a common social will, order in plural society in the dependencies thus cannot be attained through voluntary union. Instead, order in the tropical colonies was imposed by the colonial regime and by the force of economic circumstances. Ironically hence, the colonial power, which created the plural society in the first place, was also needed to ensure that the plural society did not dissolve into anarchy.

How did colonial rule destroy the pre-colonial native societies and transform them into plural societies? In brief, the plural society was created when colonial rule set free capitalist economic forces, without the accompanying restraining social will, to remold the social order in the dependencies. When unfettered capitalism is unleashed without social will to act as checks and balances to exploit the tropical dependencies, then “... there is materialism, rationalism, individualism, and a concentration on economic ends far more complete and absolute than in homogenous western lands; a total absorption in the exchange and market; a capitalist structure, with business concern as subject, far more typical of capitalism than one can imagine in the so-called ‘capitalist’ countries ...” (*ibid.*, p. 312). In the colonies there is an inversion, or rather perversion; instead of “production for life” one gets “life for production” such that “in the plural society the highest common factor is the economic factor” (*ibid.*, p. 310).

Besides his comprehensive analysis of the impact of colonialism on the native Burmese and Netherlands Indian societies, Furnivall also suggested various ways to deal with the central problem of how to reintegrate the plural society created. For him, since colonial rule largely served the interests of the capitalists of the home country rather than the welfare of the natives, it follows that the colonies should be gradually granted political autonomy in the form of native self-rule as they alone would promote their own welfare. Also, only native self rule would facilitate progress towards independence and democracy in the colonies. In terms of modernizing the economy and society, he took the position that the natives “must come to terms with western civilization in order to achieve harmony with their environment” (*ibid.*, p. 409).

How can the autonomous native government proceed to reintegrate the plural society? Colonial rule liberated the economic forces but at the expense of disintegrating the native society and replacing it with a plural society where order was only possible with foreign rule. Furnivall argues that economic progress and social welfare and order in the plural society “can be attained only through political reintegration on a national basis”. In fact he asserts that “political reintegration is not conditional on but a condition of social and economic reintegration” (*ibid.*, p. 506). For in the plural society there would be no ‘people’ for Government to represent as the racially sectioned population would not constitute a ‘people’. To transform the various racial sections of plural society into a ‘people’, the Government should use social education to instill in the diverse populations the principle of nationalism so as to first build up “a common social will, and then on enlightening this common social will” (*ibid.*, p. 506).

Reintegration of the plural society thus would require more than just constructing new state machinery — “first it is necessary to transform society”. A post-colonial state would need to create a common social will in order to generate cohesion among the different ethnic sections. Only social cohesion in the society can form the basis for a Government that will represent the people as an organic

whole. In order to facilitate the creation of a common social will, and to prepare the people for the modern world, the Government will have to turn to social education. Furnivall believes that nationalism, usually regarded as “a destructive fever” under colonial rule, can be transformed into “a creative force” to create a common social will and transform the racially sectioned population into modern, national citizens.

Furnivall’s comparative political economy study of colonial policy and practice was highly influential among scholars of colonialism and decolonization, of Southeast Asian studies and of ethnically divided societies in the 1950s and reached its peak in the 1970s. Vickers (2004) rightly notes that although J.S. Furnivall is now less frequently cited than say Clifford Geertz or Benedict Anderson, his work nevertheless contributed to “many of the key developments in Southeast Asian Studies” (p. 2). In particular, his analysis of the impact of the capitalist economy on the colonies Burma and Netherlands India during colonialism continues to exert an enormous influence on studies of these two countries’ colonial histories.

Furnivall’s contribution is not, however, limited to the study of Southeast Asia. His idea of ‘plural society’, which he used as a way to describe and analyse the tropical dependencies, has attained a prominent place in the development of theoretical models for studying ethnically stratified societies. Anthropologists and sociologists including Rex (1959), Smith (1960), Morris (1967), van der Berghe (1967), and Leon and Leon (1977) have critically developed his descriptive-oriented plural society concept into generalized theories of plural society. Furnivall’s largely empirically derived and driven concept of plural society is rather underdeveloped; one cannot fault him for this since he was more concerned with solving a problem — plural society — than with developing a general theory of society. Smith (1960) and Morris (1967) both rightly single out the limited explanatory value of his plural society concept as Furnivall has developed it. All the same, his rather less than clear and rigorous formulation of the concept has given rise to different interpretations,

and misinterpretations, of his concept. And the popularity of the plural society concept has generated a good deal of confusion that subsequently has diminished the explanatory value of the concept.⁴

The concept of plural society has been, and continues to be, uncritically adopted by many scholars studying Southeast Asian societies. A few scholars have, however, pointed out that Furnivall exaggerated the 'pluralistic' features of Southeast Asian colonial societies; especially his claim of the social and cultural separation of the different ethnic groups who only met in the marketplace. In urban Java there were social and cultural contacts among the different racial groups where a 'creolization process' resulted in "the colony, so that in many cases the offspring of the immigrant groups (Europeans and Chinese) even adopted the native language" (Coppel 1997, p. 573). Thus urban Java at the turn of the twentieth century could be classified as a 'mestizo society' rather than 'plural society'.

Pre-colonial Southeast Asia was characterized by a 'plurality' that was brought about by the process of migration and through cultural borrowings and adaptations (Shamsul 2003). In a number of places social and cultural interchanges between the immigrant communities, both from outside and within the region, and dominant regional ethnic groups gave rise to various 'creolized' groups. Pre-colonial Southeast Asian societies thus can be viewed as "a series of groups of rather fluid membership, which, within the larger political unit are differentiated by various degrees and combinations of linguistic, religious, origin and political factors, each of which, independently, can be a potential normative reference group" (Ngata 1975, p. 3). It would be strange to think that the 'creolization process' simply evaporated under colonial rule; Coppel's (1997) study of the "mestizo society" in urban Java and Tan's (1988) study on the *peranakan* Chinese in Malacca are just two examples which show that the 'creolization process' persisted under colonial rule.

At the onset of colonialism, it would not be erroneous to say that the natives subscribed to an "ethnicity" concept that was very different from that of the European colonialists. However Furnivall, like his fellow ICS officers, was not "sensitive to what the [natives] consider

to be meaningful categories and reference groups” and thus would uncritically impose a Western racial taxonomy that was different on the colony. By using the colonial category of ‘race’ in his analysis, Furnivall would have contributed to rationalizing the “relation between orientalist ideas and the colonial project to organize and rule [colonial] society” (Breckenridge and van der Veer 1993, p. 4). Since racial classification and exclusion was a central *raison d’être* of the colonial state, racial categories were used to conceive and organize the native populations in the colonies. In the case of colonial Malaya, Hirschman (1986; 1987) shows how the British colonial state classified and used racial categories to divide the society and economy along ethnic lines. Thus the resulting ethnically-sectioned colonial society was not just the creation of unfettered capitalism or the voluntary behaviour of ethnic groups, as the colonial state also did play a central role — “ethnic compartmentalization was an obvious technique of administration” (Stockwell 1998, p. 340).

That Furnivall did not explicitly analyse the colonial state’s role in the creation of plural society is rather surprising since he assigned to the post-colonial state a central role in generating a common social will to reintegrate plural society. In the colonial context, “segments of a plural society are not autonomous but are bound together within the framework of a wider, state-organized society” (Leon and Leon 1977, p. 564). Even in the article “The Fashioning of Leviathan” he did not discuss the racially discriminatory state practices, especially the exclusion of non-Europeans from the upper echelons of the ICS. The prevailing colonial form of European-native relationship was one of “superior-subaltern” — the Europeans command and the natives obey. Thus while Furnivall was fond of the Burmese people, perhaps he also preferred them “in their place”. This attitude was common among ICS administrators and it was an attitude that was not incompatible even with “critics of empire”.

Can we use Furnivall’s concept of plural society to describe post-colonial Southeast Asian societies? After independence, state interventions in the political, social, cultural and economic fields have facilitated social and cultural interchanges among the ethnic

groups and removed the ethnic division of labour. Freedman (1965) shows the varying degrees of the Chinese community's adoption of indigenous groups' social and cultural elements in post-colonial Southeast Asian societies. More generally, nation-building projects in Southeast Asia would have generated varying degrees of acculturation by, and in some cases assimilation of, the immigrant groups. It follows that the ethnic situations in post-colonial Southeast Asia are very different from the context where Furnivall derived his concept of plural society.

Yet, many scholars have continued to use the plural society concept to describe Southeast Asian societies where they interpreted Furnivall to mean that ethnically divided society is invariably unstable because it lacks a common social will to cohere the ethnic members of society. This Durkheimian concept of society assumes that a shared set of values and customs must operate to bind the members of society together. If the shared values and customs break down, anarchy and lawlessness will result. If plural society is viewed invariably as unstable and prone to inter-ethnic conflict, then it can have conservative implication towards order and social control. Indeed, in post-colonial Southeast Asia, plural society, interpreted as inherently prone to inter-ethnic violence, has been manipulated by political elites to justify using authoritarian measures to preserve order and stability. Ironically then, today it is the post-colonial states that are using the idea that plural society is inherently unstable to justify authoritarian rule.

Furnivall's paternalist image of pre-colonial society in Southeast Asia has been unearthed, evaluated and criticized by a number of scholars including W.F. Wertheim on Netherlands India and Pham (2004) on Burma. Earlier in his career, Furnivall was among a minority of ICS administrators who "reflected a kind of paternalism that desired to preserve both the Imperial Idea and Burmese culture" (Pham 2004, p. 247). The anthropologist Renato Rosaldo aptly "described this kind of sentiment as 'imperialist nostalgia', 'where people mourn the passing of what they themselves have transformed'" (cited in Pham 2004, p. 248). Furnivall thus was critical of

colonialism because it destroyed his exoticized and romanticized Burmese tradition and culture and “spoilt the pleasantest country and the most delightful people in the world” (ibid., p. 249). However, Furnivall, like many pro-native administrative scholars, did not see how his encouraging Burmese nationalists to preserve their tradition and culture would have adverse impacts on the nation-building project after independence; it would fragment, instead of integrate, the ethnically divided society after independence.

There is a dearth of scholarship focusing on the prescriptive aspect of Furnivall's *Colonial Policy and Practice* where he tried to provide suggestions and solutions to the central problem of reintegrating the plural society. Southeast Asian Governments are indeed confronted with the difficult problem of how to maintain peace and stability and enhance welfare and equality in their ethnically diverse societies. What can we learn from Furnivall's insights in relation to the question of state and nation-building in Southeast Asia? Even more than fifty years after independence, the process of reintegration of ethnically diverse Southeast Asian countries remain not just far from complete; in some countries the forces of disintegration are still raging. Was Furnivall's belief that nationalism could be “creatively” used to reintegrate plural society misplaced?

Furnivall's idea that nationalism could be a resource to generate a common social will has not really worked out that way; instead, in several Southeast Asian countries it has further aggravated ethnic relations. The problem is that Furnivall did not realize that the very strong link between ethnicity and nationalism in Southeast Asia can have adverse effects on ethnic relations. Political elites from the dominant ethnic groups have naturally pursued policies to transform their language and culture into the national language and culture. Nation-building projects invariably expect the minority ethnic groups to sacrifice their language and culture in varying degrees for the sake of national integration. But ethnic minorities insisted that as citizens they have rights to their culture and language and as such resisted the dominant ethnic groups', more or not less, assimilationist policies. Indeed, today Furnivall's idea of using nationalism to

facilitate the reintegration of ethnically heterogeneous Southeast Asian societies must come to terms with the concept and reality of multiculturalism.

Leach and *Political Systems of Highland Burma*

Political Systems of Highland Burma quickly established itself as a classic and generated much lively discussions when it was published in 1954. On the one hand, theoretically, Leach introduced a framework that departed from the prevailing British social anthropology school dominated by the “stable equilibrium” approach of Radcliffe-Brown and his followers. On the other hand, his approach to the study of the Kachins provided “a picture not merely of Burma as a whole, but of the entire region of northern mainland Southeast Asia as a system of inter-group/inter-ethnic relations ... held together by a network of nodal thrones” (Chit Hlaing 2008, p. 244).

For Leach, his engineering background influenced him to see a problem in terms of “just how the system works” or “why it held together”⁵ (Leach 1984, p. 9). Thus in the book *Political Systems of Highland Burma*, Leach formulated his research problem this way: “How far it can be maintained that a single type of social structure prevails throughout the Kachin area. Is it legitimate to think of Kachin society as being organized throughout according to one particular set of principles or does this rather vague category Kachin include a number of different forms of social organization?” (Leach 1965, p. 3).

To tackle this research problem, Leach adopted a “dynamic equilibrium” model that helped social anthropology to break away from the stifling dominance of Radcliffe-Brown’s “stable equilibrium” model of tribal society. The Radcliffe-Brownian model treats tribal groups as isolated, closed societies which exist throughout time in stable equilibrium. It is not clear how one takes into account change in societies which are in a state of “stable equilibrium”. Thus contra the “stable equilibrium”, Leach wanted to find out whether it is “possible to describe at all societies which are not

assumed to be in stable equilibrium” (ibid., p. 4). He claims it is possible because

[w]hile conceptual models of society are necessarily models of equilibrium systems, real societies can never be in equilibrium. The discrepancy is due to the fact that when social structures are expressed in cultural form, the representation is imprecise compared with that given by the exact categories which sociologists would like to employ. I hold that these inconsistencies in the logic of ritual expression are always necessary for the proper functioning of any social system (p. 4).

Leach also argues that society would not be in a stable equilibrium state because individuals or groups acting according to their interests would endeavour to exploit the situation as they perceived it and in so doing the individuals or groups would alter the structure of society itself.

Following his framework, Leach shows that the Kachin political system is in an in-equilibrium state because of the existence of two inconsistent and contradictory ideal modes of life. On the one side, there is the *gumlao* which is egalitarian and ‘anarchic’ where the political organization is characterized by the absence of chiefs, by the equal rank of all lineages and by territorial units comprising several villages of the same status. On the other side, there is the Shan ideal type which is a feudal system based on the Shan concept of a hierarchic order and the autocratic rule of a chief. Leach’s central argument is that Kachin communities fluctuate between the two ideal types — democratic *gumlao* and feudalistic Shan such that in reality the majority of actual Kachin communities are neither *gumlao* nor Shan in type. In other words, the majority of Kachin communities are organized according to *gumsa* which is a kind of compromise between *gumlao* and Shan ideals.

Leach thus shows that the *gumsa* communities are not static or in a state of stable equilibrium. Depending on the economic and social circumstances, the *gumsa* Kachin communities can move in the direction of the Shan model or the *gumlao* model. In a nutshell, the *gumsa* political structures are essentially unstable because of the

existence of the two contradictory polar types of *gumlao* and Shan organization (Leach 1965, p. 9).

Leach's rejection of the "stable equilibrium" model's notion of tribes as isolated closed societies in his study of the Kachin led to a major insight. He shows that "the ethnography of highland Burma could not be properly understood if one starts from the conventional anthropological notion of the 'tribe' as a discrete bounded society with its own distinctive language and culture" (Fuller and Parry 1989, p. 12). Thus, although the Kachin hills are inhabited by a number of separate 'tribes', they are nevertheless all part of the same system, such that it would be quite misleading to treat them in isolation.

Theoretically, it has been pointed out that although Leach was critical of the "stable equilibrium" model, the framework he adopted in his study of the Kachin still operated within structuralist theory, which "rejected any historically oriented analysis of the organization of society in favour of a certain idealization of the idea of 'structure'" (Chit Hlaing 2008, p. xxiv). For Leach then, systems reproduce themselves over time without any genuine structural change. It follows that in the Kachin case, the political system cannot escape from the endless alternation between *gumlao* and Shan. Leach thus replaced "stable equilibrium" with what Hlaing (2007) called a "dynamic equilibrium", "where the term 'equilibrium' is taken to solve the problem of structural change" (p. xxv). Also, since the *Political Systems of Highland Burma* was published in 1954, Leach's ethnography has been subjected to criticisms, especially by the Kachin themselves. Most recently, Maran La Raw (2007) has pointed out several factual and interpretational errors Leach had made in his book. Unfortunately, Leach has been rather dismissive of Kachin views about their society and history (Hlaing 2007).

NOTES

1. After all, Furnivall himself married a Burmese woman Margaret Ma Nyun in 1906. His grandson speculated that Furnivall did not think it wrong to marry

- her because she was Burmese and that perhaps “the marriage was an act of sympathy with the culture” (Pham 2004, p. 242).
2. Furnivall caricatured the Dutch system as *baboe* or nursemaid and the British as a *babu* or clerk: “Our officers are magistrates: yours are policemen and welfare-officers. Our methods are repressive; yours are preventive. Our procedure is formal and legal; yours, informal and personal. Our civil service is an administrative machine; yours is an instrument of Government. Our aim is negative-to suppress disorder; yours is positive-to maintain order. Order-it is a word we both use frequently, but with a significant difference of context. We talk of “law and order”, and you of “rust en orde”; but in the absence of a social conscience it is difficult to distinguish between law and the letter of the law, and between rust and the placidity of a good baby in its perambulator. The caricature which depicts your system as a *baboe*, a nursemaid, and ours as a *babu*, a clerk, does emphasize a difference in vital principle. You try to keep a man from going wrong; we make it unpleasant for him if he does go wrong. You believe in protection and welfare; we believe in law-and liberty” (Furnivall 1956, pp. 272–73).
 3. He first coined the term in his 1939 book *Netherlands India* which should be read together with *Colonial Policy and Practice*.
 4. An important source of the confusion came about from America where pluralism is frequently used to mean “democratic pluralism”. Pluralism here is taken to mean the conditions conducive to democracy, such as separation of powers, checks and balances, competing political parties and competing interest groups organized to promote their interests, strong intermediate groups between the individual and the State, and cross-cutting affiliations.
 5. Leach first started with mathematics but eventually ended up a First Class Honours degree in engineering from Cambridge University.

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