The Status of Ethnicity and the Ethnicity of Status
Ethnic and Class Identity in Malaysia and Latin America

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Introduction

In the context of developing countries, modernisation and problems of national integration, it has long been an axiom that ethnicity and class as principles of social organisation are not only distinct species and mutually antithetical, but are also of unequal desirability in any society. This value judgment springs from an implicitly, and often explicitly, held view of social inequalities in which ethnic differences are somehow considered to be more “primitive,” more basic and even more “irrational” than those of class, that they are an anachronism in the modern world. Following this line of argument, ethnicity is further seen to be inimical to modernisation, or at least inversely proportional to it (e.g., Inkeles 1969). Class divisions, on the other hand, represent more “advanced” stages of social development, at worst dramatising and crystallising different economic and political interests, at best being the flowering of a social and ideological commitment of a supremely intellectual, rational and progressive nature. Both kinds of division, ethnic and class, can generate conflict groups, but of the two, class conflict is to be preferred, as indicative of a modernism and a political awareness of a particular (western) type (e.g., Shils 1957; Geertz 1963, Liddle 1970; Doornbros 1972). Such value-laden social schemes give rise, further, to the pervasive acceptance by social scientists of the fact that “plural” societies are inherently inferior to non-plural ones, that ethnic assimilation bodes well for political and social integration, and that ties which bind members of different ethnic origins but divide them by class are necessarily conducive to a more viable and close-knit social and political structure. Where the two – ethnic and class cleavages – happen to coincide, as they do in such countries as South Africa, the resultant “ethnic stratification” may be expected to place the potential integration of the polity in double jeopardy. Yet where such cases occur, social scientists either declare the ethnic component of the duo as the more deplorable, as an unacceptable concentration of resources along particularistic lines (an extreme form of social and structural pluralism), or alternatively see the stratification component as the dominant one, the one which would, ceteris paribus, outdominate the other, and this would be so much the better for society and its integration. Such would be the view for instance, of Dahrendorf (1959).
One question that requires clarification at this point is whether or not part of this bias in favour of class divisions may stem from a peculiarly western and ethnocentric preoccupation with class stratification and a faith in the capacity of enlightened class activism to improve the social condition, and whether among many non-western societies, there may not be some where the whole concept of class with its associated lore and lure is absent. In such cases, it must be asked what the salient divisions in fact are and how they are perceived. For even where the western observer can demonstrate an “etic” or social scientific model of class relations, the local “emic” idiom may be at such variance with the former (cf. Strickon 1967: 95), that not only does the concern with class awareness (für sich) empirically face away, but it invalidates judgments about degrees of progressiveness, for we are comparing two different conceptual sets and perspectives – emic and etic –, like the proverbial apples and pears. This lack of congruence is even greater when comparing, measuring and evaluating ethnic and social class divisions respectively. For in the absence of any generally accepted body of theory or agreed-upon definitions of the latter, identification of ethnic categories invariably derives directly from that provided and used by the local population, and is almost never generated independently by the social scientist.

In order to evaluate arguments concerning the relative merits of ethnic and class cleavages and solidarities, it is crucial to establish some clearer idea of what each one commonly subsumes, from the standpoint of the social scientist as well as on the local level, and to try to understand whether they are to be viewed as independent categories. If not, the nature of the interdependence must be ascertained.

In what follows, I seek to demonstrate that while the two principles of ethnicity and social class are independent in origin and analytically distinct in character, they are by no means independent in operation. Indeed, it may be claimed that they exist in a dynamic interrelationship, although at any one time or on any particular occasion, one principle or idiom, ethnic or class, may prevail over the other, and individuals or groups may be predisposed to select one identity over the other, depending upon the nature of the social situation. This view challenges all suggestions therefore that expressions of ethnicity and class are inversely proportional to one another, and that, with the rise of capitalist economies and their associated classes, ethnicity as the more “retrogressive” mode of organisation will necessarily wane, but proposes that each may play an active and complementary role in the same society. By way of illustration, I shall draw upon materials from my own field studies in Malaysia, and for contrast, from the well-known Latin American material on indio/mestizo relations, as described in a number of ethnographic case studies.

The Nature of Ethnicity

Since the publication the Barth’s revitalising new look at the entire ethnic scene in the light of both old and new anthropological knowledge and theory