ANALYZING THE CONCEPT OF PERSONHOOD AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS IN MALAYSIA

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The world’s ongoing climate crisis is not only a threat to the viability of the future, but also a challenge to the conception of personhood. The associated issues climate change elucidates, such as the new economic and political patterns of the world order, necessitates a conversation on the interpretation of responsibility and security in the nation-state. In this paper, I will recontextualize these ideas of personhood, by arguing how the climate crisis has forced a fundamental reconsideration of the role of responsibility alongside redefining the meaning of security. Throughout this paper, I will tackle these implications of the climate crisis through analyzing the history and present-day systems of Malaysia. I will begin by examining the role of colonialism in conjunction with Malaysia’s current economic system, and their largest export, palm oil. Malaysia’s production of palm oil is a significant detriment to the climate response. However, I will illustrate how it is Malaysia’s history with British colonialism that is the perpetrator behind this process, and how colonial legacies are the main hindrance to advancing climate solutions. Additionally, I will examine the introduction and rapid spread of neoliberalism amongst the country, analyzing how it has shifted to the new form of Malaysia’s security. I will discuss how this redefined concept of security prohibits the appropriate understanding of climate change, and obstructs the creation of tangible solutions towards the overall crisis.
Exchanging the concept of Malaysia’s role and responsibility in the climate crisis, it is necessary to address the British colonial legacies, which instilled the platform for the country’s contributions to climate instability. Today’s Malaysia is the leading exporter of palm oil, which contributes to 2.8% of the country’s overall GDP. The process of making and exporting palm oil involves extensive deforestation and planting on peat soil, which advances the world’s destructive global carbon sink (Detwiler 67). Malaysia has faced backlash over the palm oil industry as other countries, significantly the Western world, continuously implore them to diminish palm oil plantations and take social responsibility for their impact on the climate crisis (Paterson and Lima 456). However, it is extremely unfair to place the entirety of the blame on Malaysia, considering that the country’s dependence on this industry is a direct consequence of British colonial rule. During the period of Malaysia’s conquest by the British, colonial masters envisioned the country as a platform to elevate British economic growth. Their primary purpose entailed furthering economic ambitions as they “encouraged mass migration ... fixated on developing plantations. Plantation workers, or coolies, were brought mainly from India to work on the rubber and oil plantations, and generate revenue” (Bissonnette 33). Evidently, there was no concern for citizen welfare, or interest in cultivating inclusive institutions, which would be able to facilitate Malaysia’s growth, postindependence. Colonialism generated an uneven nature of economic and state construction, as Malaysia experienced how, “The lack ... of development of infrastructure in facilitating the transfer of capital ... as well as the development of transport, communications and power divided economic activity - and encouraged an imbalanced economy” (Salleh 113). Therefore, in consideration of the responsibility Malaysia holds in the climate crisis, it is vital to recognize that the palm oil industry arises as an entrenched economy created by colonial legacies.
During the 1960s, plantations and the palm oil industry emerged as the primary backbone of Malaysia’s socio-economic development, where this industry alone contributed to 7.2% of the country’s GDP (Courtenay 330). The legacy of colonialism had fundamentally constructed the foundation for Malaysia’s economic trajectory, which cannot be terminated. Malaysia was forced to turn to what they had left, as with “a well-established palm oil plantation industry .... this institutional setup enhanced centralisation of plantation capital during the 1960s and beyond, as dependence on the system seemed evident” (Fold 11). Bonneuil and Fressoz posit the role wealthy nation-states play, in their desire to extract raw materials without creating inclusive institutions (Bonneuil and Fressoz 246). The British who possessed ultimate and executive authority, failed to build institutions able to diffuse opportunities for power and mobilization. They had no interest in foreseeing Malaysia’s political and socio-economic problems or cultivating a pluralistic civil society. Plantations were introduced under British rule, which were viewed solely as an avenue for British economic opportunism. Essentially, when the British departed, Malaysia was only able to capitalize off of the pre-existing systems in place, in order to maintain socio-economic stability. Interestingly enough, wealthier Western and European nations are only able to capitalize on economic growth because they drain renewable resources from the rest of the world.
Ashley Dawson further pinpoints this in examining how economic growth in the European and Western world is impossible without the unequal exchange of material (Dawson 194). As a result, the notion of personhood must be re-examined, regarding exactly whose responsibility it is to look after the global climate. Dawson reflects, “environmental degradation ... is the symbol of the social and urban effects of the elite ... which emerges as the real ‘strategic’ danger ... to the Global South” (Dawson 212). Dawson’s thinking leads to a critique on how imperial nations are the instigators of this exploitative system, showcasing their heavier participation in climate change. Clearly, in overseeing Malaysia’s contributions to climate change through the palm oil industry, the role of colonialism must be held accountable. Instead, a new way of rethinking is desperately needed, in revisiting the ways elites have exacerbated the climate crisis and identifying how victims should be repaid. In this context, Malaysia is part of the rampage on the Global South, who remains as the victims of European and Western exploitation.

NEOLIBERALISM AND SECURITY:

To start this section, I would like to begin by defining the ideas of security. Particularly under the lens of climate change, environmental security can be thought of as an intersection between national, political, and environmental needs (Allenby 5). This includes advocating for a clean environment, and confronting environmental conflict through multifaceted and critical dimensions of thinking. However, shifting from Malaysia’s history of colonialism, the understanding of the role it played in economic development necessitates a need to redefine Malaysia’s understanding of security, regarding the relationship between it’s current economy and climate change. As Malaysia struggled to establish a flourishing political and socio-economic sphere of influence, the government soon recognized that “without a strong domestic capitalist class, South Asian states lacked the developmental capacity to govern the market, and maintain a significant state presence” (Khoo, 4). In correlation, Mann and Wainwright acknowledge how neoliberalism emerges as an attractive solution to facilitate financial recovery (Mann and Wainwright 270). Malaysia was receptive to the idea of improving and integrating their economy with globalized markets, and the rise of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1970s introduced elements of privatization, deregulation and industrialization into the country (Khoo 8). Against the backdrop of globalization, Malaysia’s economic policies became interconnected with neoliberalism. Simultaneously, Malaysia rose as the 29th largest country throughout the 1980s and 1990s, to produce an increasingly large amount of carbon dioxide emissions (Courtenay 334). The spread of neoliberalism invoked various positive effects for the country, Malaysia soon recognized that, “neoliberal practices reconciled certain state and class interests ... transformed public assets ... securing the country and stimulating growth towards a ‘developed nation’ status” (Khoo 8) Due to the widespread socio-economic and political developments neoliberalism introduced, Malaysia’s comprehension of security transformed. The country equated security with the concept of neoliberalism because it provides state welfare, isolating any past considerations of security and the environment.
In evaluating Malaysia’s economic policies, it is interesting to analyze Simon Dalby’s arguments that “security in these terms is now about reshaping the future of the global economy” (Dalby, 428). Security becomes synonymous with the consumption-based lifestyle in the neoliberal nation-state, because the state benefits from the modes of production and associated economic growth neoliberalism is able to provide.

As evidenced in the relationship between neoliberalism and Malaysia’s economy, a focus on neoliberal growth and production has become the dominant ideology of the country’s concept of security as it enables lifestyles of prosperity. This reveals a symbiotic relationship between security and capitalism where nation-states seek to pursue policies, which offer the most market efficacy. Unfortunately within this vantage point, the concept of security and citizenship is ostensibly the pursuit of self-interest, which ensures no country jeopardizes their ability to maximize their economic benefits. As a result, neoliberalism can develop an exploitative nature where citizens fail to prioritize climate change, in their desire to secure this lifestyle. Pertaining to Malaysia, in a recent study completed by the Royal Geographical Society, the general public of Malaysia was asked to interpret the severity of the climate crisis. Forty-two percent of respondents emphasized the crisis as a threat, but only to the country’s economic, national and sovereign interests (Manzo and Padfield 467). The public’s reaction to the climate crisis necessitates a need to redefine Malaysia’s concept of security. Malaysia’s neoliberal framework demonstrates how the problem of climate change is understood only as a direct warning to both profit, and individual interests.
Dalby further considers how the concept of security is inextricably linked to the mechanisms of capitalism, which is evident through Malaysia’s response to climate change. Dalby posits, “Citizens are increasingly turned into consumers, and the functions of state agencies rearticulated in terms of clients and customers, not democratic political subjects” (Dalby, 436). Malaysia’s understanding of climate change as a threat to economic performance illustrates the by-products of neoliberalism through a consumption-based lifestyle, which has openly allowed the global economy to become built into the security regime. Human economic activity has generated a swift change to the dimensions of national security, and has enabled a fragmented relationship with environmental security to emerge. There is immense danger associated with the new idea of security revolving around the socio-economic relations of power and control. Environmental issues are treated as security concerns and encourage the scarcity of resources. There arises a difficulty to properly comprehend how, “extreme weather conditions have the potential to cause mass migration; create food and water insecurity; and cause several other environmental and social impacts which will give rise to violent climate conflicts” (Mehta, Huff and Allouche 226). Additionally, this can offset the responsibility citizens feel towards the climate crisis, and the need for action, as it becomes increasingly difficult and unattractive to initiate pragmatic policy systems that carry the capability of disrupting the current modes of economic governance, the structure, which Malaysia assumes, delivers security. Lacking the foundation needed to recognize the detrimental effects of climate change, there is a shift in personhood, which becomes progressively unable to neither imagine nor accept this reality. Applying this to the platform of economic policy and security in Malaysia, Malaysia has taken an overall weak stance on climate reform. Given their absence of in-depth knowledge, “As a result, many adaptation measures are reactive in nature. Existing policies may be strengthened instead to accommodate adaptation” (Lian and Bhullar 82). The danger of equating security with neoliberalism is that it leads to the depoliticization of the climate crisis. Clearly, the neoliberal view of security privileges solutions that do not disrupt any political, or socio-economic factors in Malaysian society. Ultimately, this viewpoint of security does not address the root causes of climate change and the inequalities it gives rise to.
Ultimately, climate change is the most pressing crisis we face in today’s world. It carries the potential to revolutionize the future, unless there is rapid action taken to restrict its prevalence. At the same time, environmental concerns provide a wider platform to deconstruct the notion of personhood, nation, and place. Throughout the course of this essay, I’ve analyzed the turbulent relationship between climate crisis and personhood through examining colonial history, associated interpretations of responsibility, and dominant ideologies of neoliberalism, and related to Malaysia’s climate response discourse. Through my analysis of colonial legacies, I’ve asserted how climate change cannot be properly conceptualized without examining colonialism and it’s position in orchestrating the Global South’s dependence on raw materials. Furthermore, I’ve explored the ideologies of neoliberalism throughout Malaysia and it’s consolidation into the new understanding of security, which restricts the ability to pursue long-term and tangible action in terms of addressing environmental instability.
Works Cited


