

SOCIAL RELATIONS OF DEPENDENCE — A REPLY TO KRATOSKA AND KAHN

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I am grateful for the opportunity to reply to Kratoska and Kahn's reviews of the monograph, yet my initial reaction was to decline. In the three years since I completed the work I have moved from the study of past foreign colonization to involvement in present colonial experience. Working for an Aboriginal organization in the remote regions of Northwest Australia, there are constraints of time and resources (I have only the monograph itself to refer to) that, added to my change of interest, made me view the necessity of a reply to these reviews with little enthusiasm.

There are three reasons for changing my mind. Firstly, there is a sense of responsibility not to abandon a work that previously demanded attention, even a work that I now consider precocious in its pursuit of academic certainty. Secondly, I was afraid that those who would not read it would accept Kratoska's implication of shoddy research, empirical inaccuracy, and ignorance of relevant material. In fact it deals meticulously with the difficult problem of interpreting historical sources. Unfortunately, to ensure that the work is not dismissed in future as a shonky fabrication, and to encourage those in doubt to read and decide for themselves, requires a tedious point by point reply to each of Kratoska's observations. Thirdly, Kahn's reservations have been in my own mind at least since beginning the work (though I admit this is hardly evident) and strike to the heart of contemporary social theory. Indeed, the questions he has raised have led me to abandon both the study of "the Orient" and the label "Marxist". It is frustrating that he did not carry his observations further in his review, and I take the opportunity of commenting in a limited way on the problems he raises in the second part of this reply.

Kratoska's three charges, a lack of command of empirical data, a faulty use of sources, and unsupported assertions, will be answered here in detail first, before addressing Kahn's more fundamental concern that the work in its conception cannot be justified.

Kratoska's first accusation is that I have lied in stating that contemporary historians contributed little to this monograph. It is true that the work of Burns in his introduction and annotations to

Birch's journal covering 1874-5, and Andaya and Lewis' work on the 18th Century were used, mainly in Chapter One, as an historical overview. Reference to the footnotes will show the reader precisely when these scholars were resorted to. In a work of only 84 pages relying heavily on documentary sources, and yet making reference to 104 published works, it is a strange criticism that others have deliberately not been credited. Yet the reader must take my word, if a work has not been cited it has not been used. *None* of the works mentioned in Kratoska's footnote 1 were referred to in the course of searching the monograph (nor indeed, with the exception of Sadleir, ever read).

Throughout his review Kratoska makes use of highly selective quotations, placed in a foreign context, to convey a false impression. In the first instance he does this to suggest there is something suspicious in the position, not always honestly stated by historians, that sources have certain defects that should be borne in mind when the reader assesses the accuracy of information attributed to them.

As an example, it would be remiss in this work not to mention Maxwell's treatise on the law regarding land tenure. The discussion on pages 27-29 presents this information almost at face value as a reasonable position of the researcher's balanced assessment of its worth. The reader is left in a position to decide, however, that because of Maxwell's lack of affinity with all but the ruling class, he has probably presented too juridical a view of a system that was in all probability more susceptible to the influence of personal relationship. While the reader, presented with the social context of the source material, is entitled to hold this opinion, a historian lacking evidence cannot. The worth of a history is not limited to the historian's page, but ultimately rests on its critical assessment by the readership.

Other sources have been used more judiciously than Kratoska's selective quotation implies. Those that I am particularly prejudiced against, such as Swettenham and Winstedt, have been resorted to only when necessary. It is wrong to compare this cautious reference to Swettenham, mainly in official reports, with Gullick who stated in footnote that he had relied on Swettenham more than all other sources put together! Isabell Bird's observation is also treated with more caution than is credited. It is cited in a passage with several supporting observations from diverse sources and is described as "fairly reliable" while she herself says she was told it was "absolutely true".

Kratoska thoroughly overstates the accusation of relying on citations to give spurious authority to statements in the text. His

information reveals that the statement concerning the use of slaves in agriculture is far from unsupported (footnote 3). Maxwell twice makes mention of a family and slaves engaged in production. In the light of the rest of Maxwell's work the term 'slave' has been interpreted to mean both *abdi* and *orang berhutang* and was glossed as "slaves and debt slaves" (see p. 45). That their produce was reserved to their owner is dealt with in the chapter on slavery (e.g. pp. 54-55, 58-59), indeed it is doubtful that they could be termed slaves if it were not. The point that Kratoska blunders past in his concern to uncover "spurious authority" is that such passing references indicate significant information, in this case the use of both kin and slaves indicates the existence of fundamentally different productive relations in what was ostensibly a single production process.

Selective quotation is again used as a device to suggest that an account of slavery in Perak was wrongly accepted as accurate. In fact the information referred to does not concern slavery at all. Knaggs' statement was that Malay villagers were oppressed so severely that they frequently had no recourse but relocation. However, it is not accepted uncritically on the grounds that "he had little reason to exaggerate". On the contrary, it was first stated that this could not always have been the case (p. 39-40 see also p. 25) and in the footnote Kratoska selectively refers to (fn. 153) reasons are advanced as to why Knaggs should have made this observation.

Similarly, the accusation of uncritical acceptance of a statement Speedy cannot be sustained. The English construction "there is no reason to doubt.... except" may be a little demanding of the inattentive reader, but it surely indicates doubt. Possible reasons for Speedy's estimate that 75% of the Malay population were slave debtors are meticulously given in the footnote so selectively used by Kratoska (p. fn. 10). This may well have been the case in Speedy's province of Perak though not in the rest of the State. On the basis of the estimated cost of redemption it was suggested that the slave population may have been "at least 10,000" in 1978. Kratoska has meandering "around 10,000", although on the same basis it could have been as much as 26,500 (p. 46. fn. 9. see also pp. 48, 51.) or almost half the 1979 population. It is clear from the text that the estimate of the cost of redemption was made in 1878, the population estimate on p. 34 referred to by Kratoska in 1879, yet Speedy's information dates from 1874-5. This was before the British invasion as a result of which, according to Maxwell, many slaves gained their liberty (p.46).

The confusion over slave numbers attributed to the monograph is entirely Kratoska's own, having selectively ignored clearly presented information about dates and places available on a single page. It is

similarly wrong of him to characterise a "text full of disclaimers" as the basis of a single, overtly speculative, paragraph.

It is clear from all reports that the number of slaves and slaves in Perak in the 19th Century was very great. One principal aim of the monograph is to advance reasons for this. It is significant that Kratoska has almost exclusively seized upon footnotes to criticise the competence of the writer, and it is on the basis of a footnote that he attempts to dismiss the suggestion that the Dutch demand for tin was decisive in setting in motion a process of exploiting an increasing number of slaves and slave debtors in Perak. In a work where footnotes reach almost paranoiac proportions even by the standards of historians (some 600 in all) it is surprising that he could find only one statistical error. By reworking the calculation of tin mining productivity (p. 12 fn 77) he attempts to demonstrate that the amount of tin supplied to the Dutch from the late 17th Century was not sufficient to produce an intensification and transformation of systems of exploitation of labour. Nevertheless, his own calculation can be no more defensible than the original.

There is no evidence in the text that kilograms and pounds have been transposed to arrive at the figure of 17% of the population engaged in tin mining. There is obviously an error, but it is equally possible it is a misprint for 7%. Yet the calculation was open to declared dubious in the first place for three reasons, and is no more credible after Kratoska's scrutiny. Population estimates are acknowledged to be little more than guesses (see p. 6 fn. 4), an average production per person per mine of 43.5kgs in 30 days is taken from recordings of six mines (in 1879) in which the average output per person varied from 26.25kg to 62.50kg (p. 32 fn. 99), a variation which does not permit an accurate average to be computed from such a small sample. Thirdly, the existence of other trading partners, frequently mentioned in the text, renders the estimate a vague indication at best. Fortunately, it was never intended that the success of this thesis would depend on a calculation in a footnote so dubious, and without errors in transcription, that indeed it should never have been attempted.

The reworking of such a calculation with the apparent result that it overturns the monograph's conclusions is deceiving not only because it uses inaccurate estimates, but also because it deals with a much reduced version of a more general thesis. This is that external trade had the political effect of establishing and supporting a Malay ruling class by intensifying traditional forms of exploitation. This occurred both by extending dependant relationships to a larger proportion

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the population and by increasing the demands on dependants. External trade was therefore instrumental in the evolution of Malay state systems.

In several places in the monograph it is suggested that the social system encountered by the British conquerors in the late 19th Century was largely influenced by the demand for tin over the entire period of European contact, some 350 years, but may have been especially affected by increased demand in then 19th Century when tin became an industrial commodity (see pp. 12-13, 65-6, 69, 71, 75).

The statement isolated by Kratoska that it was Dutch demand for tin that proved *decisive* in the reduction of the Malay population to the equivalent of chattel slaves may be abandoned without damage to this thesis, yet I feel it is unnecessary to do so. The conclusion that Dutch demand was decisive rests not on questionable calculations of the amount of tin and available population in a single year. It rests on the observation that the Dutch introduced Perak into an international network of exchange in which the demand for tin outstripped supply (see Andaya, cited p.9). It is beyond doubt that production of tin, both for the Dutch and others increased in Perak during this century. A non-subsistence product, exchanged for other non-subsistence products, requiring a high labour content in production must have intensified the exploitation of a relatively stable population to increase production of both food and tin. This is not merely a logical suggestion. The evidence produced in the Chapter on slavery (in particular pp. 57-66) supports this argument (see also pp. 12, 39 fn 146).

Several other points Kratoska makes in this passage must be taken up. It is true some tin went to Indian merchants and some to the English, in addition other Southeast Asians were traditional trading partners (p. 9). Pressure on Perak society was as a result of Dutch entry into the market in addition to these merchants. Both Wilkinson and Cowan agree, however, that tin was mined exclusively by Malays. While Chinese miners were established elsewhere in the Peninsular from 1777, they appeared in Perak only in 1830 (p. 13fn. 90, 91). Nor is the introduction of Bennet Bronson's model of a productive hinterland and trade-oriented coast relevant to Perak in the 19th Century. There were no truly coastal trading ports and tin was often transported overland from the interior to the coast by the producer (p. 22). Rights over mining produce were complex and could be exercised over Upper Perak mines even by owners resident in Lower Perak (p. 39).

Finally, Kratoska turns his attention to the question of slavery

itself, and again throughly misrepresents the substance of the monograph. Returning to the subject of a deterioration in the status of dependants during the 18th Century he charges "a serious misunderstanding of Malay usage" and implies I have taken at face value Raja Culan's reference to himself as a debased *hamba*. This is to miss the point entirely. While there is no doubt Raja Culan considered himself to be a great deal more exalted, his use of derogatory images in association with the word *hamba* does indeed tell us about the status of *hamba* in Malaya society at that time. To take up Kratoska's point in footnote 12, the use of the phrase "your most humble and obedient servant" may tell us little about the writer who signs himself this way, but it does reveal that servants are ideally humble and obedient in the social milieu of such a writer, although this may not have always been the case. It is in the failure to identify such clues that several plodding dissertations on Malay history reveal their lack of insight.

Kratoska also misses a significant point, as well as ignoring large sections of the work, when charging that the monograph does not define slavery or debt-bondage, and so "is forced to fall back on the definitions of others, accepting that whatever his sources refer to as slavery is the same phenomenon". This statement is so far from the truth that it is difficult to see how it could have been made in good faith. Problems of terminology and definition are addressed as a first priority of the chapter on slavery (pp. 45-7). Whatever possible Malay term has been used, or indicated in parentheses, throughout this chapter. In particular the discussion of slave law attempts to preserve every distinction (pp. 57-60), and the discussion on pp. 63-64 is entirely concerned with the correspondence between terms of dependants and actual status at various times and places. The necessity pointed out in the introduction was to avoid an *a priori* definition of slave relations that could prove inhibiting. All too often the technique of defining terms, apparently in a vacuum, then applying the definition to a subject, structures the analysis in advance, rendering it sterile.

The claim that I choose not to define slavery at all is ludicrous. The monograph concludes with an appendix titled, in type large enough for the most jaundiced eye, 'On the Meaning of "slavery" and its Use as a Term of Comparative Analysis'. These six pages review most of the relevant literature on slavery as an institution and relate it to the case of 19th Century Perak. These pages offer some of the most intense analysis of the entire monograph and I must question why Kratoska chose to ignore them.

I hope that at this point it has been established that Kratoska's claims cannot be justified by any fair-minded reading of the text.

Answering his final point, there is nothing raised in his criticism that demonstrates any inconsistency in the monograph with what is already known about Malayan history. The accusation that some empirical evidence has been misused and some relevant material ignored rests on partial and distorted selections from the text do him little credit. Yet this final statement of Kratoska's is important because it reveals the naive empiricist approach to history and society that has much relevance to Joel Kahn's criticism. It implies that there is indeed an empirically verifiable object labelled 'Malayan History' which is only open to competing interpretations because all the facts are not known. It is unfortunate that the division of labour in social enquiry allows many historians, sociologists and anthropologists to continue blithely with such notions, ignoring the highly germane debate in the theory of their disciplines that indicates their enterprise is misfounded.

It is this debate that informs Kahn's criticism of my work. Since Kahn is in this instance concerned mainly with identifying problems, rather than resolving them, it is possible for us to be very much in agreement. In what follows similar problems are addressed in the way they have presented themselves since the monograph was written. It is fortunate that the relatively informal format of a reply to a review allows a discursive and exploratory approach which I have taken full advantage of. It may be evident that I have not had the benefit of Kahn and Llobera's work. When I have these views may be modified extended and enriched.¹

Kahn raises two linked problems that works such as the present monograph fail to address adequately. The first is the question of positivism in history and social theory, in particular the positivism at the heart of Marxist structuralism. The second is the critique of orientalism, in particular the enhanced effectiveness of the critique once positivism is rejected.

Reducing Kahn's observations to these two statements makes it possible to approach them one by one. There is no doubt the Althusserian tradition including the work of Meillassoux, Terray, et al., is as arrogantly positivist in its claim to scientific truth as Kahn suggests. It is conceded also that, while much of the monograph is descriptive and draws on these works only for a general perspective, in crucial respects it accepts their untenable assumptions along with their useful insights. There is an unresolved dilemma in this and in any further work. It is established that empirical analysis devoid of theoretical content is impossible, yet the richest and most productive source of social theorising in recent years, Marxist discourse in general, suffers from insurmountable problems. In its structuralist form it is,

firstly, wrong in its assumption of positive scientific knowledge, secondly, dangerous in its disguised functionalism, and thirdly, removes from consideration as an element of its discourse an entire realm of social experience. This is the investigation of a culture metaphysic, which is for particular interest in the understanding of non-capitalist societies.

These criticisms are not new, and it may be that positivism is the least serious of them. After all, it is possible to create and analyse social facts according to Althusserian tenets while accepting them as mere constructs, constructing a representation of social reality rather than uncovering scientific truth. To do so robs the procedure of its force, of course, rendering it more susceptible to the criticism of orientalism, and does nothing to obviate the other problems mentioned. The unfortunate, even dangerous political consequences of Althusserian constructions of social reality revealed in Thompson's "Poverty of Theory" essay are not a matter of mere academic posturing. To take an example from the work I am engaged in, the dilemma is apparent in accepting the usefulness of concepts of colonial domination and the articulation of White Australian and Aboriginal social forms and yet rejecting the consequent description of Aborigines as defeated, possessing a relatively impoverished structure of production and social reproduction and lacking an autonomous culture. These views, that lead to Althusserian comfortably to political solutions of social incorporation, are rejected by the colonized themselves and by those who work for their interests.

These harmful effects result not only from the poverty of concepts of structure, but also from the inability of this perspective to encompass the non-economic or purely cultural. In Malaya, for example, analysing tin as a commodity, or embodied labour, entering into cycles of production and reproduction has the effect of relegating a potentially rich field of study to a footnote (p. 30. fn. 93). To the Malays tin has affinities and antipathies, it had volition and the ability to increase or decrease. The production process was governed to some extent by ritual considerations. This indicates that the Malays thought about the natural world in a very different way to their trade partners and colonizers. This metaphysic affected social and economic processes significantly. Why else was its Birch's first task to capture the regalia of Perak sovereignty, and what was the reason for the ritual divination held before killing him? A theory that confuses such a central phenomenon as a culture's metaphysic of the natural world with the lesser phenomena of its political ideology, and reduces both to mere derivative of social and economic processes is extremely impoverished. Rejecting postivist claims that it is indeed, in a sense,

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ific sense, by these processes that societies function renders the neglect of the non-material and non-economic indefensible.

Having briefly canvassed the three problem areas inherent in structuralist Marxism suggested at the beginning of this discussion, I would like to turn attention to the question of alternatives. It is true that "one need not go to the extremes of phenomenology or pure praxis epistemology to call into question the Althusserian assumptions about Marxism as science". If, however, as Kahn also suggests, even "the potential scientificity of social enquiry" is rejected it is difficult to see how these extremes can be avoided. These are ultimately the result of an alternative school of thought within Marxism, owing much to Thompson, which reintroduces the necessity of concepts of voluntary behaviour in studies of society. This seems to me nothing so much as Weberianism dressed up in Marx's terminology, but is nevertheless a potentially productive alliance. Weber's contribution is that concepts generated by social theory serve rather than dominate the scholar. No prescriptive theory of society is possible as society is not an object constituted in the same way as the objects of natural science. This is one result of voluntarism. Weber also argued that no pure objective description of social phenomena was possible. He identified instead different levels of sociological understanding some of which related to subjective experience. This school of thought also argues that social facts are not always concrete objects and institutions, it is non-materialist in this sense. While this approach offers welcome relief from the stultifying effects of structuralism, it also has certain drawbacks.

Foremost, lacking an underlying generative theory it must rely on the insights of great scholars to reveal the nature of social events and processes, and upon the recognition of those insights by others. There is no recourse to empirical reality which does not exist in any approachable form, nor to a logically interconnected system of concepts. While such may be constructed they cannot pretend to prime authority. This reliance on evident genius (whether of Thompson or Said, for instance) can have politically unfortunate effects. Social analysis becomes little more than a high-powered form of commentary. The insights of conservative constructions tend to receive prominence, while more progressive analyses, lacking the claim to science, become the victim rather than the creator of social processes. Secondly, this approach can suffer from a debilitating eclecticism. Where concepts are freed from their dependence on each other in a prescriptive theory their continued use can produce such hybrid monsters as contemporary 'mode of production analysis' in which approaches with contrasting logical outcomes can be indiscriminately jumbled up.

The third major drawback returns us to Kahn's concerns and the problem of orientalism. Kahn's thesis, briefly stated, is that the positivism in both my own and Gullick's work must be rejected. The alternative, apparently offered by Milner, to seek a subjective understanding is probably not possible. If it were it would be a pointless exercise for those who already experience that understanding. Yet to claim to represent them to our own culture falls within the sights that Said had levelled on all such work including my own.

Said charged that we are playing a purely European intellectual game using a colonized orient as the material for one of our own cultural processes, academia. It is not a harmless game. The manufacture of the orient and the oriental into consistent objects out of highly diverse phenomena, and the accumulation of 'facts' bearing no relation other than that they pertain to the orient or the oriental, has been and continues to be a significant force in political domination. This offers few problems to a Winstedt of a D.G.E. Hall. It is, however, devastating to a perspective dedicated to emancipation. The defence that the 'facts' are neutral is unacceptable. The orient exists not as an object but as a construction of various objects, the same is true of 19th Century Perak. The process of construction determines what is acceptable as facts, and structures their interpretation. This process cannot be neutral. The defence that the construction rests on positive scientific knowledge had been rejected even as a possibility in social analysis.

This line of thought now concludes at "the extremes of phenomenology and pure praxis epistemology". The question of truth as the investigation of social phenomena is dealt with by Said in the same way: "The real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representers" (cited pp. xv-xvi, fn. 12.). There is no escape, then, from involvement in the subject of study. The choice is only whether to recognise that involvement and consciously pursue it, or to acquiesce in the make-believe of neutrality which is nothing more than conservatism. After Said's analysis, nevertheless, scholars of either ilk must seriously question the ethics of their involvement in foreign social formations, especially when there are pressing concerns at home.

A common reaction to the relentless, almost self-destructive interrogation of social theory is fear at the threat to academic certainty and the apparent abolition of progress in the social sciences. I feel this is misguided. Rather than the stultification and loss

¹If it is necessary to mention works: Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, and his essay "The

momentum feared, the current theoretical flux is potentially liberating and productive. The imitation of scientism has been one of the principal means by which western intellectuals have abdicated their responsibility and prostituted themselves body and soul to constituted authority. This has occurred, on the one hand, because in the university milieu the distribution of funds favour scientific proposals; and on the other hand because such perspectives, while offering a necessarily restricted view of social behaviour, immunise themselves with a pretence of neutrality and independence. The current debate places the intellectual firmly in the texture of social life while extending the bounds of the possible in his or her work. This is its liberating consequence.

¹If it is necessary to identify influences, the following discussion draws on the following seminal works: Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Shalin's *Culture and Practical Reason*, Thompson's essay "The Poverty of Theory", and Said's *Orientalism*.