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GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL RISKS
VERSUS ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT:
MALAYSIAN DISCOURSE AT THE UNCED

Submitted for the 1998 AMIC Convention by:

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Global Environmental Risks versus Economic Development: 
Malaysian Discourse at the UNCED

The emergence of a global risk society has produced a debate between cultures which is best exemplified by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. One of the most out-spoken Southern nation-states at the UNCED was Malaysia. Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed and the Malaysian environmental non-governmental organisation Third World Network put forth a uniquely Southern position on the global environmental risks of modern development. In this paper, I use a Habermasian/Foucauldian theory of discourse analysis to examine the language and arguments used by Mahathir and Third World Network and to explain the impact of their discourse in the international debate on the global risk society.
Global Environmental Risks versus Economic Development:

Malaysian Discourse at the UNCED

According to Ulrich Beck (1996), we are currently living in a global "risk society" in which "The conversion of the unseen side-effects of industrial production into global ecological flashpoints is not strictly a problem of the world surrounding us—not a so-called 'environmental problem'—but rather a deep institutional crisis of the first (national) phase of industrial modernity ('reflexive modernization')" (p. 12). The emergence of this global risk society has produced a debate between cultures, which is best exemplified by the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. At the UNCED, actors from both the industrialised North and the industrialising South came together to discuss the global environmental risks that are a result of modern development.

Originally hailed as a historic opportunity for international cooperation on global environmental risks, the UNCED quickly became the setting for a contentious debate between the nation-states and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of the North and the South. Throughout the conference's preparatory meetings and most of the conference itself, delegates from the North and the South were embroiled in a dispute reminiscent of the 1970s New International Economic Order debate. On the one hand, the Southern nation-states

and NGOs argued for economic development unhampered by Northern environmental restrictions and enhanced with Northern financial and technological assistance:

Most developing countries approached UNCED with a mix of fear and hope. The fear was that environmental issues would intrude in the form of new constraints on their development, and new conditions on aid received from rich countries: the intrusion of Northern concerns on the Southern priorities of development and poverty alleviation. The hope was that these Northern concerns about the potential environmental implications of Southern development at last gave the South some real leverage in global politics: if the North wanted them to change their future behaviour and development paths, they would have to meet Southern demands. (Grubb, Koch, Munson, Sullivan & Thomson, 1993, p. 26)

On the other hand, the nation-states and NGOs of the North wanted an environmental presence in the South, while maintaining their own economic status quo:

While the North’s professed concern is the long-term global crises, the rich nations have succeeded in painting global problems as largely the responsibility of the South. For instance, the North has emphasised the role of tropical deforestation in accelerating the greenhouse effect when, in reality, logging in the South contributes little to global warming. The US, in
particular, calls for an end to tropical deforestation but refuses to limit its emissions of greenhouse gases. (Pearce, 1991, p. 12)

These differing positions resulted in considerable discursive conflict between the North and the South as they debated the global environmental risks of modern development.

One of the most outspoken Southern nation-states at the UNCED was Malaysia. In fact, the Malaysian Prime Minister Dato' Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamed threatened to boycott the UNCED. His justification was the threat of “third world bashing” (Vatikiotis & Awanohara, 1992, p. 10). In the end, Mahathir did attend the conference, but chose to take a confrontational approach by speaking out against what he perceived to be the hypocrisy of the Northern nation-states and NGOs. Mahathir’s hard-hitting stance was bolstered by the position put forth by the Malaysian environmental NGO Third World Network. Third World Network’s insistence that there should be North-South equity in the discussion of the global environment risks of modern development represented the convictions of most Southern countries. For these reasons Malaysia was described by some delegates as the “bad boy” of the conference. According to Malaysia’s ambassador to the United Nations, Tan Sri Razali Esmail, this role was acceptable because “Someone has to carry the can. We don’t want to be pushed aside and bullied like we have been for the past 45 years” (Schwarz, 1992, p. 61).

Because Malaysia’s communication of its position on the global environmental risks of modern development at the UNCED was so unequalled, it warrants further study. Specifically, the language and
arguments used by Mahathir and Third World Network to put forth their own positions on the global environmental risks of modern development are important because

Every policy issue is contested in a symbolic arena. Advocates of one or another persuasion attempt to give their own meaning to the issue and to events that may affect the outcome. Their weapons are metaphors, catchphrases, and other condensing symbols that frame the issue in a particular fashion. (Gamson & Modigliani, 1987, p. 143)

In this paper, I use a Habermasian/Foucauldian theory of discourse analysis to examine the language and arguments used by Mahathir in his official statement at the plenary of the UNCED and Third World Network in reports on global issues that it submitted to the UNCED. I conclude by examining the impact of the Malaysian position on the international debate on the global risk society.

A Habermasian/Foucauldian Theory of Discourse Analysis

Discourse is the means through which the public understanding of a particular issue is constructed by various actors. As discourse theorists Klaus Eder and Michel Foucault have pointed out, the most effective method for understanding discourse is to analyse both the texts and the strategies of actors. Eder's (1996a, 1996b) three-step public discourse analysis method is useful for studying the makeup of discursive texts. I believe, however, his method of analysing the
strategies of actors needs to be supplemented with Foucault's (1971/1972) work on the rules that control discourse.

Eder utilises a type of discourse analysis informed by Jürgen Habermas' (1992/1996) recently revised communicative theory of the public sphere. Consequently, for him "Discourse analysis is simultaneously the analysis of the semantics of texts and the analysis of discursive strategies of actors" (Eder, 1996a, p. 216). What is important is the notion that both the texts and the way they are presented in the public sphere must be analysed. Eder (1993) explains:

We need data on the cultural orientations of mobilized groups which can show their continuity with specific interests, normative belief systems and value orientations...Since culture has a textual nature, we should take texts more seriously. Literary texts are a first approximation, but nothing more. Analyzing interviews as texts and not as a list of words that indicate answers is a further step. We don't need simply the opinion of actors—we need data on the semantic space within which actors locate themselves. (p. 172)

It is only through the complex analyses of texts and the discursive strategies of actors that we can begin to understand the importance of discourses and their role in political, moral and social change.

One way to begin to analyse these discourses is to examine the frames\(^2\) that are at work in them. For Eder (1996b), frames are...

\[^2\text{Goffman (1974/1986) originally formulated the theory of frames and frame analysis.}\]
...stable patterns of experiencing and perceiving events in the world which structure social reality...we use and apply frames in order to sort the world, thus reducing the continuous stream of events to a limited number of significant events. Frames give to these selected events an objective meaning, thus disregarding subjective differences and idiosyncrasies ascribed to individual persons. (p. 166)

Frames should be understood metaphorically not as “picture frames”, but as structures. To investigate the frames in a particular discourse, Eder (1996b): 1) identifies the cognitive devices for constructing frames, 2) analyzes this construction of frames as a process of symbolic packaging, and 3) identifies the masterframe which emerges from the competing framing strategies in public discourses (p. 167).

The cognitive devices used for constructing frames are based on Habermas' (1981/1984; 1981/1987) cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical and evaluative-expressive reference dimensions. These constitute the cultural conceptions of the “real”, the “right” and the “meaningful” (Eder, 1996a, p. 206). These cultural conceptions become the cognitive framing devices of empirical objectivity, moral responsibility and of aesthetic judgment (Eder, 1996b, p. 167). The cognitive framing device of empirical objectivity involves economic, scientific and technological facts. The cognitive framing device of moral responsibility comprises laws and moral codes. The cognitive

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3 Gamson, Croteau, Hoynes and Sasson's (1992) discussion is helpful in understanding the notion of a frame: they also see it, not as a picture frame, but as the frame (or structure) of a building (p. 385).
framing device of aesthetic judgement entails ethical or value choices made for identity-formation. These three cognitive framing devices are always present in an actor's frame, but one of them is usually dominant.

Once the cognitive framing devices are identified, the symbolic packaging of these frames must be examined. Eder (1996b) explains this process:

Through symbolic packaging framing devices are 'attached' to the social world, to social situations and to social actors. To identify frames, it is therefore necessary to include the social context of framing devices, that is, empirical social situations with real actors. I refer to the phenomenon as 'symbolic packaging'. The frames in action-contexts cannot be understood outside the specific symbolic package that gives them consistency, coherence and validity. Thus, the second step of discourse analysis involves a move from the level of analysis of cognitive structures to the level of narrative structures. (p. 168)

Actors use the social process of "framing strategies" to transform the cognitive framing devices into frames (Eder, 1996a, p. 204).

Framing devices are situated in the public spheres via the strategies of the actors producing them. Eder claims that the empirical social contexts of framing devices must be taken into account by examining the symbolic packaging (in the form of narratives or ideologies) organising them. He argues that framing strategies transform the framing devices and their symbolic packages into
frames. He does not, however, provide a method for studying the framing strategies of the actors. As Foucault (1970-1971/1977; 1971/1972) has pointed out, the empirical context of a discourse is always already imbued with power. Consequently, power can influence the availability of a particular framing strategy to a particular actor. Rules of exclusion (such as an outright prohibition, the rejection of the "unreasonable" and the rejection of the "false"), rules of internal control (such as the role of the discourse, the role of the author as a unifying principle and the organisation of disciplines) and rules of speaking subjects (such as the qualifications required of the speaker, the existence of an exclusive "fellowship of discourse", the existence of allegiance to doctrine and the social appropriation of discourse) all direct the framing strategies of actors (Foucault, 1971/1972, pp. 216-227).

The Official Statement of Malaysian Prime Minister

Mahathir bin Mohamed

The official statement of Mahathir stresses the cognitive framing devices of what is "right" and "meaningful" in order to construct a masterframe of the right to develop within the symbolic package of colonialism.

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4 Eder (1996b) himself admits that the existing discourse analysis literature regarding the relationship between frames and framing strategies is insufficient (p. 169n18).
### Framing Devices/Micro-Frames

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<th>Right</th>
<th>Symbolic Package</th>
<th>Masterframe</th>
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<td>Greatest good for greatest number</td>
<td>Colonialism</td>
<td>The right to develop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal rights</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty is the best policy</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial exploitation</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Meaningful</td>
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<tr>
<td>Advocate of the poor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wasteful lifestyles of the rich</td>
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<tr>
<td>Real</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith in science and technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic instrumentalism</td>
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Mahathir (1992/1993), highlights the idea of international co-operation on environmental issues, or the micro-frame of **the greatest good for the greatest number**, throughout his text. Significantly, however, he tempers this by arguing that there should be **equal rights** in sharing the burden. He asks, "It is right that the poor be forced to clean up the mess created by the rich? Should there not be some sharing of the task, the responsibility and the cost for cleaning up" (Mahathir, 1992/1993, p. 1)? In calling for answers to these questions, Mahathir (1992/1993) also says, "...there must be a modicum of sincerity and honesty on the part of everyone" (p. 1). Here, Mahathir is relying upon the micro-frame of **honesty is the best policy**. Mahathir (1992/1993) also charges the developed countries of the North with **colonial exploitation**:

The poor are not asking for charity. When the rich chopped down their own forests, built their poison-belching factories and scoured the world for cheap resources, the poor said nothing. Indeed they paid for the development of the rich. Now the rich
claim a right to regulate the development of the poor countries. And yet any suggestion that the rich compensate the poor adequately is regarded as outrageous. As colonies we were exploited. Now as independent nations we are to be equally exploited. (p. 3)

The cognitive framing device of what is "meaningful" is also significant in Mahathir's text. He sets up the dichotomies of rich/poor, developed/developing and North/South in order to portray himself (and Malaysia) as the advocate of the poor, developing nation-states in the South (Mahathir, 1992/1993). Mahathir (1992/1993) presents what he believes is the common view of these poor, developing nation-states by saying that the poor are seen to be worth less than their forest resources (p. 3). These forest resources, on the other hand, are "...of no value until the rich, through their superior intelligence, release the potential within" (Mahathir, 1992/1993, p. 3). Interestingly, Mahathir never counters this "Northern" perception with a contrary description. Finally, Mahathir (1992/1993) emphasises that it is the wasteful lifestyles of the rich, developed nation-states in the North that are at the root of the problem:

It is what the rich do that counts, not what the poor do, however much they do it. That is why it is imperative that the rich change their lifestyles. A change in the lifestyles of the poor only, apart from being unfair, is quite unproductive environment-wise. But the rich talk of the sovereignty of the consumers and their right to their lifestyles. (p. 2)
For Mahathir, the cognitive framing device of what is "real" is stressed almost as much as the other two framing devices. Mahathir has faith in science and technology and presents a lot of scientific facts to support his moral and aesthetic positions. For example, with regard to his identification of the aesthetic position of the wasteful lifestyles of the rich, he cites well-known statistics:

We know that the 25 per cent of the world population who are rich consume 85 per cent of its wealth and produce 90 per cent of its waste. Mathematically speaking, if the rich reduce their wasteful consumption by 25 per cent, world-wide pollution will be reduced by 22.5 per cent. But if the poor 75 per cent reduce consumption totally and disappear from this Earth altogether, the reduction in pollution will only be by 10 per cent. (Mahathir, 1992/1993, p. 2)

In his discussion of cross-border pollution, Mahathir (1992/1993) explains that Malaysia's capacity for dealing with its own waste is sufficient:

At present, Malaysia is well able to cope with its own pollution. In a country about the size of Britain, we have a population only one third as big. We are a developing country with a per capita income one tenth that of the developed countries. Our capacity for wasteful consumption is therefore very limited - roughly one thirtieth that of the developed countries. On the other hand, our capacity to deal with our own waste is far in excess of our needs. Our land is almost 60 per cent covered
with self-regenerating tropical rain forest, with an additional 15 per cent covered by tree plantations. Any carbon dioxide we produce we can absorb. (p. 1)

In addition to a faith in science and technology, Mahathir also uses the micro-frame of economic instrumentalism. In his speech, he discusses the “green fund” proposed by the developing countries that would finance a global reafforestation project (Mahathir, 1992/1993, p. 3).

Mahathir’s normative, aesthetic and cognitive framing devices come together to form a symbolic package and masterframe that are very persuasive. Mahathir puts forth an image of Malaysia as a victim of colonialism. This symbolic package is potent because it relies upon the long, and often unpleasant, history of colonialism. As a former colony that was economically exploited and politically and socially subjugated, Mahathir and Malaysia believe the time has come for economic development and equality in the community of nations.

Mahathir frames the Malaysian environmental position as the right to develop. With this masterframe, Malaysia can argue that the economic development of the poor nations of the South must come before the risk of global environmental problems. Mahathir’s framing strategy is influenced by the “rules of speaking subjects”. Unlike Northern leaders (such as the United States President George Bush), he knows that he does not have the qualifications of a superpower. Instead, he is a member of a “fellowship of discourse” based on the closed community of former colonies. These former colonies (generally known as the
Group of 77) actually met in Kuala Lumpur prior to the UNCED in order to forge a consistent position for Mahathir to present.

The Third World Network Reports on Global Issues

Unlike Mahathir, the Southern NGO Third World Network stresses the cognitive framing device of what is “real” more than what is “right” or “meaningful” in their reports on global issues in order to construct a masterframe of global economic reform within the symbolic package of equality.

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<th>Masterframe</th>
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<tr>
<td>Real</td>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>Global economic reform</td>
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<tr>
<td>Economic instrumentalism</td>
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<tr>
<td>Indigenous technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>Right</td>
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<td>Equal rights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rights of current generations</td>
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<td>Rights of future generations</td>
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<td>Democratic reform</td>
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*Note: Only the most prominent micro-frames have been noted here. Because of the length of the reports, a number of minor micro-frames were present. They did not contribute significantly to the construction of the overall masterframe, however.

Unlike Mahathir, Third World network utilises a micro-frame of economic instrumentalism and focuses almost exclusively on economic arguments and figures in the two reports on global issues that it
submitted to the UNCED. At the heart of the Third World Network (1992/1993) position is the link between environmental problems and the lack of economic development:

The UNCED is supposed to be dealing with both environment and development. The South has good grounds to argue that in order to implement its commitments on environment; it requires sufficient economic resources to enable a transition to environmentally sound development policies. (p. 2)

According to Third World Network (1992/1993), the current deficit in economic resources is caused by global financial institutions and global financial mechanisms:

This [economic] space is now absent because international institutions and mechanisms are presently draining away financial resources from South to North. This South-North outflow is more than US$100 billion yearly; it would be over $200 billion if declining terms of trade is included [sic]. (p. 2)

Additionally, Third World Network argues that the Northern unsustainable economic model is the root of the global environmental crisis and maintains that it “...is even more important and difficult to alter the parent economic model in the North, where 20% of world population consume 80% of world resources [sic]” (Khor, 1992/1993, p. 2). Moreover, this economic model is destroying indigenous technology:

Many of the environmentally and socially appropriate technologies exist in the South, in the areas of agriculture, water
retention and harvesting, industry, energy, shelter, medicine and health care, food preparation and nutrition, etc. These technologies and practices continue to be destroyed by "modernisation" and commercialisation. (Khor, 1992/1993, p. 3)

The cognitive framing device of what is "right" also plays a significant role in Third World Network's discourse. Like Mahathir, it stresses throughout both of its texts that there need to be equal rights in the current world order (Khor, 1992/1993; Third World Network, 1992/1993). In fact, Third World Network claims that the rights of current generations are equal to the rights of future generations:

Equity is the central principle to operationalize and attain sustainability. Sustainable development does not only mean conserving enough resources to meet the needs of future generations. Thus sustainability requires inter and intra generational equity, and equity between and within nations. (Khor, 1992/1993, p. 2)

The inequalities existing in the economic world order (with its corresponding institutions and mechanisms) require action. Third World Network believes the solution lies in democratic reform.

"Institutions such as the World Bank, IMF, GATT and investment instruments (especially the TNCs) have to be democratized, made more accountable, and enable greater participatory rights in the decision-making processes for the Southern countries" (Third World Network, 1992/1993, p. 3).
Also like Mahathir, Third World Network stresses the cognitive framing device of what is "meaningful". It clearly identifies itself as an advocate of the poor publicising the plight of the developing nation-states in the South. Throughout both of its texts, it distinguishes these countries as members of the G-77, the South and the Third World (Khor, 1992/1993; Third World Network, 1992/1993). It also stresses that it is the wasteful lifestyles of the rich, developed countries of the North, not those of the poor, developing countries of the South, which must be changed:

In particular it is proposed that... Methods and mechanisms to identify and address the inappropriate consumption patterns of the North should be emphasized. UNCED's Secretary-General has stated that Northern lifestyles are unsustainable and pose the major threat to the environment. The South should insist that action proposals to alter the inappropriate aspects of Northern lifestyles be drawn up. (Third World Network, 1992/1993, p. 9)

Third World Network's cognitive, normative and aesthetic framing devices create an unusual symbolic package and masterframe. This is because it is unlike most environmental social movements, which tend to stress the aesthetic framing device. Third World Network symbolically packages its framing devices within the narrative of equality. This package relies on a long tradition of democracy in which everyone has the equal right to decide the collective good. Consequently, Third World Network frames its position as one of global economic reform. With this masterframe, it
can argue that economic development of the South must come before the risk of global environmental problems. Third World Network's framing strategy is influenced by "the rules of exclusion". Because it was excluded from giving an address at the UNCED proper, its position was presented in written reports. In order for these reports to be read and to be effective, they had to seem "reasonable". Hence, the focus on economic reform.

Conclusion

Although the complex positions on the global environmental risks of modern development put forward by the Malaysian actors Mahathir and Third World Network are very different, they reinforce each other effectively. Mahathir's masterframe (*right to develop*) and Third World Network's masterframe (*global economic reform*) constructs a unified Southern position of *economic development*. By arguing for *economic development*, the Malaysian actors were able to present the South's argument that the future global environmental risks of modern development do not outweigh the present rights of poorer nation-states to develop into modern industrial societies.

It appears that the Southern argument for the rights of poorer nation-states to develop into modern industrial societies did have currency at the UNCED. For the first time, the future risk of global environmental problems did not automatically outweigh the right of
nation-states to develop in the present. Professor Tommy T. B. Koh (1992), who chaired the UNCED, argues that

The intellectual breakthrough in Rio is that we have a global consensus in favour of both development and environment.

To put it simply, the consensus is that in order to alleviate poverty and to give people a better life, we must continue to achieve economic progress. We must, however, do so in harmony with nature. (p. 32)

Evidence of this "intellectual breakthrough" can be found in one of the most important documents to emerge from the UNCED, "The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development" (UNCED, 1992/1993). Principle 1 proclaims that "Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature" (UNCED, 1992/1993, p. 1). As Mensah (1994) explains,

This Principle is very important because it sets the tone for the rest of the document in that it assumes the environmental agenda of the conference by establishing from the beginning that it is primarily human beings that must occupy the international community's concern in discussions on sustainable development, and only after that, the environment. (p. 41)

In conclusion, I would argue that although the Malaysian position was considered confrontational by Northern actors, it actually made a significant contribution to the debate at the UNCED. By putting forth the masterframes of the right to develop and global economic reform
within the symbolic packages of *colonialism* and *equality*, they were able to construct a unified position on *economic development* that altered the course of the international debate on the global risk society.
References


Asia's 'Silicon Valleys': Are They Competing or Complementing Each Other?

Matthias Goertz