Myths of ICTs and Progress in Malaysia

by

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Abstract

The dissertation is dedicated to studying myths related to the intersection of technology and progress. Its primary focus is on Malaysian myths concerning the progressive powers of information and communication technologies (ICTs). Drawing upon academic research from the fields of international communication, development theory, and political economy of communication, the project explores how and why the Malaysian government has promised its citizens that new forms of ICTs will “leapfrog” the country into the new “information age” and a more prosperous social, political, and economic future. Emphasis is placed on the government’s use of hegemonic / consensus-building techniques, as well as more coercive measures to promote and ensure the longevity of these myths. Within this discussion, attention is directed to the development of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), an international high-tech hub that former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad promised would beget progress writ large for all Malaysian society.

As well, the dissertation examines how Malaysian myths of ICTs and development can be compared to Western myths concerning the progressive powers of new technology. However, rather than viewing these myths as being mutually exclusive, the project considers how the West has influenced the myths and actions of the Malaysian government. In the end, the dissertation makes an argument on behalf of recognizing 1) the power of technological myths (e.g., to capture people’s imagination, garner political support, impel social action, etc.); and 2) the value of international communication and comparative research.

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List of Abbreviations and Malaysian Terms

Aliran	Aliran Kesedaran Negara (National Consciousness Movement)
ARPA	Advanced Research Projects Agency
BA	Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front)
Bangsa	A united Malaysian nation
BN	Barisan Nasional (National Front)
Bumiputra	Ethnic Malays, as well as other indigenous ethnic groups (also known as Bumiputera)
CAP	Community Access Program (in Canada)
CCC	City Command Centre for Cyberjaya
DAGS	Demonstrator Application Programme and Grant Scheme (under the auspices of MIMOS)
DAP	Democratic Action Party
EPF	Employers Provident Fund
EPZ	Export processing zone
FDI	Foreign direct investment
GATS	General Agreement on Trade in Services
GMOs	Genetically modified organisms
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GNP	Gross National Product
ICTs	Information and communication technologies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISA	Internal Security Act
KLCC	Kuala Lumpur City Centre
KLIA	Kuala Lumpur International Airport
Malaysia Boleh	Malaysia Can (slogan)
MAMPU	Malaysian Administrative Modernisation & Management Planning Unit
MAS	Malaysia Airlines
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MCMC	Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (under the auspices of MECM)
MDC	Multimedia Development Corporation
MECM	Ministry of Energy, Communications & Multimedia
Merdeka	Malaysian Independence
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
MIMOS	Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems
MIU	Mobile Internet Unit
MMU	Multimedia University
MSC	Multimedia Super Corridor
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration

NDP	National Development Policy
NEP	New Economic Policy
NIC	Newly industrializing country
NIDL	New international division of labour
NITA	National Information Technology Agenda
NITC	National Information Technology Council
NORAD	North American Aerospace Defence Command
NVP	National Vision Policy
NWICO	New World Information and Communication Order
OPP	Outline Perspective Plan
Orang Asli	Original People (of Malaysia)
OSA	Official Secrets Act
PAS	Parti Islam Sa-Malaya (Islamic Party of Malaysia)
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publications Act
Reformasi	Reform
SDI	Strategic Defense Initiative
SUARAM	Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Voice)
Suqiu	Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeals Committee / Chinese Organisations' Election Appeal
UMNO	United Malays National Organization
UNIMAS	Universiti Sarawak Malaysia
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USM	Universiti Sains Malaysia (Science University Malaysia)
UUCA	Universities and University Colleges Act
WTO	World Trade Organization

Figure 1: Map of Malaysia
 Source: United States, Central Intelligence Agency (Nov. 1998) Figure 801957.

Boundary representation is not necessarily authoritative. Names in Vietnam are shown without diacritical marks.

Figure 2: Map of the Multimedia Super Corridor
Source: Multimedia Development Corporation, Malaysia.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

...because of the myth of progress, it is much easier to sell a man an electric razor than a straight-edged one.

(Jacques Ellul, Propaganda 41)

I. Background to the Project

The inspiration for the topic of this dissertation presented itself a number of years ago. At the time, I was working for a research branch of the Department of Canadian Heritage and was charged with the task of determining how other countries were addressing growing domestic “digital divides.” Since Canada was in the midst of designing its Connecting Canadians Strategy to become the most “wired” country in the world, policy makers were interested in culling international best practices of encouraging citizens to embrace new forms of information and communication technologies (ICTs). My task was to investigate these practices in a number of Asian countries. Included in the list was the Southeast Asian country of Malaysia.

Through my research I discovered that the government of Malaysia, led by its long-time leader Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad¹, had embarked on an ambitious project to build a technological hub specifically designed to attract

international companies and foreign investment into the country. This hub was conceived and constructed in the image of Silicon Valley and was named the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). According to Mahathir and his government, the MSC was supposed to “leapfrog” Malaysia from an agricultural and manufacturing economy into a high-tech, knowledge-based economy ready for the “information age.” The project seemed to me a massive undertaking, especially for a developing country still emerging from a long history of colonialist occupation. Yet, Prime Minister Mahathir appeared convinced that the MSC was *the* path for Malaysia to realize its social, political, and economic aspirations for the future.

After completing my comparative policy report, of which the MSC was the primary focus, I remained interested in Malaysia and kept abreast of political and economic developments in the country. Soon thereafter, I decided that my doctoral dissertation would centre on Malaysia, the MSC, and the perceived importance of ICTs to the country’s future progress and autonomy from the West. However, I realized that if I wanted to write about these issues, I needed to spend time in Malaysia. Owing to the generosity of a Rotary International Scholarship, as well as in-kind support from the Universiti Sains Malaysia (located in the Malaysian state of Penang), I engaged in ten months of field research from August 2000 to May 2001.

At the outset, my research plan consisted of two elements. First, I intended to examine the MSC and determine how, as per government rhetoric, the project was supposed to help the country progress socially, politically, and economically. I was interested in finding out how the idea of the MSC had transpired, the form the

¹ As discussed in Chapter 5 of this dissertation, Mahathir stepped down from office in October 2003 and was replaced by his former Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi.

project had taken, what was promised of it to the Malaysian citizenry, and whether or not it had thus far proven successful. Second, I planned to explore by what means the government had tried to “sell” the MSC vision to the rest of the country – what kind of hegemonic / consensus-building and coercive measures had it employed to ensure public support for the project (or, at the very least, to silence any criticism of it). As a corollary, I wanted to better understand how the government had positioned new forms of ICTs as being central to the country’s overall future health. To address these two elements of the research plan, it was clear that a significant amount of attention needed to be dedicated to Prime Minister Mahathir, the man inextricably linked to historical changes in the social, political, and economic landscape of Malaysia and the key figure behind the development of the MSC.

As an outspoken advocate and champion of the developing world, Mahathir has charged the West with engaging in neo-colonial activities and developing a form of globalization only of benefit to First World countries. During his 22-year reign as Prime Minister, Mahathir also at times denounced the morals, political system, and democratic ideals of the West, arguing the necessity of gaining social, political, and economic autonomy from their negative influences. However, in an attempt to attract valuable foreign direct investment to Malaysia, he also actively encouraged and facilitated economic relations with Western countries (as well as with Western-based transnational corporations). This tension between Mahathir’s domestic idealism and a global economic reality clearly manifested itself in the development of the MSC. In order for the MSC to be successful, Malaysia needed to develop and maintain strong economic relationships with Western countries (particularly the

United States, its primary trading partner). At the same time, the project was expected to launch Malaysia into the new information age and global economy according to the rules, cultural values, and economic principles determined by Mahathir and his administration rather than by Western interests and market politics.

As this tension became increasingly evident during the research process, I began to consider more seriously what role the West might have played in Malaysia's decision to build the MSC. I also began to notice similarities between rhetoric used by the Malaysian government to promote the progressive powers of ICTs and the MSC, and the promotional activities of the Canadian government regarding new forms of technology (including its Connecting Canadian strategy). Though my intention was not to engage in a comparison between these two countries, I also recognized parallels between programs dedicated to promoting the widespread use of ICTs in each locale. Malaysia's Internet Desa initiative, for example, appeared similar to Canada's Community Access Program, while the Malaysian Smart School project was comparable to Canada's SchoolNet program.

Soon, I began to compare more than just programs and policies. At first, as per my original research plan, I was trying to determine how the MSC was supposed to beget progress writ large for Malaysia. In so doing, I started to question how I as an individual and a citizen of a Western country conceived of "progress." Living in a media-saturated society, I knew that I was continuously bombarded by promises of how new technology was supposed to change my life for the better. As Vincent Mosco writes, we in Western society are faced with a plethora of "visionaries promising an electronic utopia, the mass media looking for a good story, politicians

wanting to be identified with the next new thing, and businesses, public relations firms, and advertisers eager to market the latest promise to transform life as we know it” (Digital 117-18). As such, the newest, most efficient, and even the most expensive technology is promoted as a benchmark for one’s own personal progress and, at an aggregate level, as a means of “proving” the progress of one’s society as a whole.

Since this idea of the progressive powers of new forms of ICTs appeared so influential in my own country, as well as half way around the world in Malaysia, it seemed to me too powerful to be referred to as only an “idea.” For, if it was able to compel countless people into investing millions of dollars into dot-com companies, believing that a new era in human history had arrived, then it was (and still is) more than just a story or idea about technology and progress. Rather, it should instead be viewed as a *myth* about technology and progress. Accordingly, I do not consider myths to be definable according to such categories as right or wrong, true or false. Rather, in the spirit of sociologist Alasdair MacIntyre, I view myths as either living and therefore relevant to a given society, or dead and no longer in circulation. In order to remain alive, a myth must be able to tap into people’s emotions, making them believe in it and support it through talk and social action (e.g., investing money into e-commerce stocks). With this understanding of “myth” in mind, I considered myths concerning the progressive powers of new forms of ICTs to be alive and well in both the West and Malaysia.

To summarize, this dissertation sets out to study Malaysian myths concerning technology and progress, focusing on the role the MSC is expected to play in

begetting social, political, and economic development for all of Malaysian society. These myths will be compared to Western myths of progress in the hopes of providing insight into how and why each operate in their respective locales.

II. Dissertation Overview

Chapter 2, titled “Myth and its Makers,” begins with a brief historical overview of the idea of “myth,” tracing the etymological evolution of the word. It continues with an exploration into how “myths” have been studied within a variety of academic disciplines and examines how the word has been used throughout history to lay claim to “truth.” The chapter argues that we do not label our own myths as constituting “myths,” but instead rhetorically construct our myths as “truths.” In so doing, we are able to exclude perspectives that differ from our own by labelling *them* as myths.

The chapter also distinguishes between three different kinds of myths: universal, macro, and micro-myths. This distinction provides the basis for subsequent discussions concerning macro-myths of technology and progress², as well as relevant micro-myths (e.g., the Malaysian micro-myth of the MSC). Since myths must be made relevant to a given society in order to remain alive, the chapter also explores a variety of techniques used by political and economic elites in the West to ensure the longevity of myths that are in their best interest.

² Throughout the dissertation, the macro-myth of progress will, for the most part, be referred to as simply the “myth of progress.”

Chapter 3, “The Myth of Progress,” opens with a discussion of how philosophers of the Enlightenment considered improvements in science and technology as guaranteeing widespread social, political, and economic progress. Although this chapter is not intended to provide a detailed history of the myth of progress since the Enlightenment, it does offer a brief historical overview of how and why this myth has remained intact (arguably with less enthusiasm) in present day.

Recognizing that all myths experience some manner of dissent, this third chapter also comments on perspectives that run counter to mainstream myths of technology and progress. By drawing on a theory of hegemony, I will explore how political and economic elites try to draw these dissenting views back into the mainstream or, alternatively, marginalize them in order to keep certain tellings of the myths alive.

Chapter 4, “Going to the Races in Support of the Myth of Progress,” explores how myth-makers use the theme of a race to promote and ensure the longevity of specific myths. The chapter focuses on four micro-myths that Western elites have turned into races including, the land race (specifically American frontierism), the final frontier of the space race, the competition to become “connected” in the cyber race, and the pursuit of genetic engineering patents in the bio race. By tapping into the fear of being “left behind,” each of these races encourages people to focus their attention on developing and acquiring the technology necessary to win, rather than on whether not being a part of the competition is desirable, winning plausible, or if the technology is necessary. All told, each race helps support the larger myth that

technological progress begets progress writ large by encouraging people to compare their technological achievements against others and to use them as indicators of social development. This discussion also provides valuable insight into how the Malaysian government has used a similar theme of a race to garner support for its micro-myth of the MSC.

Chapter 5, “Contextualizing Malaysia’s Myth of Modernity, Progress, and Development: A Historical Overview,” provides some historical background for understanding Malaysia’s current myth of modernity, progress, and development, highlighting major events that have shaped the country’s social, political, and economic landscape. It also includes an overview of the MSC and its socio-political Flagship Applications (e.g., Telehealth and E-Government), as well as a discussion of research methodology that details specifics of the fieldwork conducted in Malaysia.

Chapter 6, “Malaysia’s Myth of Modernity, Progress, and Development,” is dedicated to examining the content of this macro-myth, as well as various hegemonic / consensus-building methods used by the Malaysian government to encourage public support for it. These techniques include a wide range of symbolic language (e.g., government speeches, promotional documents), as well as physical symbols (e.g., architecture in urban settings).

In Chapter 7, “Keeping Malaysia’s Myth of Modernity, Progress, and Development Alive: Consensus-Building and Coercive Measures of Control,” I will continue this exploration into the government’s use of consensus-building techniques, focusing on specific approaches used by Mahathir to ensure support for

his Vision 2020 strategy, the MSC, and policies and plans designed to promote widespread usage of ICTs. I will then turn to examine more coercive measures that the government has employed to ensure compliance with its macro and micro-myths. In addition to examining some of the country's more repressive laws (particularly the Internal Security Act), I will discuss methods used to control domestic media and educational institutions.

In the eighth chapter of the dissertation, titled "Conclusion: Comparing Myths of Technology and Progress," I will compare and contrast Western and Malaysian myths concerning technology and progress. In so doing, I will draw upon the work of Wendy Doniger and Sonia Livingstone concerning the value of international comparative research. I will argue that by examining the myths of other people we are able to "test theories about our own culture" and thus unveil and "defamiliarize what we take for granted" (Doniger 34). As well, I will discuss the dissertation's contribution to the field of communication and offer suggestions for potential future research.

III. A Topic of Communication

By focusing on the myth of progress, this dissertation is, at its core, about communication. Since myths help us make sense of our world and our place in it, they are central to both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. At the same time, myth is also about communications – myths are kept alive in our society

through, among other means, the technological tools of mass communication, mainstream media, and cultural industries.

Principally, the dissertation addresses the three fields of concentration that comprise the doctoral program in Communication at Carleton University. They include 1) the history of communication; 2) the political economy of communication; and 3) the socio-cultural analysis of communication.

First, the dissertation discusses the importance of history for understanding contemporary communication(s) phenomena. A historical overview of Malaysia's social, political, and economic landscape, for example, provides the necessary context for understanding how and why the government has constructed its myth of modernity, progress, and development, as well as the role that the MSC is expected to play in supporting it. At the same time, this myth depends on a selective telling of history, incorporating specific and subjective elements from the past which best illustrate how Malaysian society has progressed. As a result, the dissertation champions a broader, less event-focused view of history that recognizes how power relationships operate in the construction and maintenance of myths.

Second, the dissertation draws on a political economy of communication perspective to gain insight into how Western and Malaysian elites leverage their control over media and cultural industries to promote certain versions of myths that are in their best interest.

Third, although this project is undertaken from within the field of communication, it is also fundamentally anthropological in nature as it tries to understand how and why people construct, promote, accept, reject, and negotiate

certain myths (e.g., it examines how the Malaysian government has utilized specific cultural cues to garner political support for its leadership, programs, and policies).

In addition to these three areas of communication, the dissertation also calls upon theory from the growing field of international communication. As social psychologist and media scholar Sonia Livingstone writes, “[i]ncreasingly, the salience of globalization is encouraging many communication researchers to address the transnational dimensions of cultural institutions, products, audiences and policies” (478). As such, this project explores how myths that address the intersection of ICTs and progress have crossed international borders. In particular, it explores how the political and economic dominance of the West has influenced these kinds of myths in developing countries like Malaysia. As well, Chapter 6 briefly addresses the central role played by ICTs in the construction of a new international division of labour that is of benefit to the developed world, transnational corporations, and the local elite in developing countries.

In addition, this dissertation draws upon writing from within the field of urban geography, which provided particularly valuable insight into understanding how the Malaysian government, in its attempt to demonstrate the country’s modernity, has tried to turn Kuala Lumpur into a “world-class,” “modern” city.

All told, this dissertation is theoretical (particularly Chapters 2 and 3 concerning myths in general and the myth of progress in particular), as well as practical (e.g., the races in Chapter 4, and the discussions in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 dedicated to examining myths in Malaysia). Although the theories and issues discussed in this dissertation are broad in scope, when linked together they promise

to tell an interesting, informative, and thought-provoking story about technology and progress.

CHAPTER 2

MYTH AND ITS MAKERS

In contrast to a more colloquial understanding, for the purposes of this dissertation, when I refer to the word “myth,” I do not mean stories that are fictitious or fabrications. I am not speaking of folktales, legends or fables (although they may perform some of the same functions as myths), nor am I referring to tales told by “other” people. Therefore, I consider a myth to be more than simply a false statement. Indeed, as political scientist Christopher G. Flood contends, “the functions ascribed to myths are incompatible with a straightforward judgement of truth or falsehood” (46). As such, rather than assigning a label of true or false, right or wrong to myths, I will, as noted in the Introduction, follow the lead of philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre and instead refer to them as being either living or dead. MacIntyre has argued that if a myth is relevant to a given community or society, if it is culturally shared and both reflects and affects that group’s beliefs and values, then it can be defined as a living myth. As a result, the “actual truth or falsity of the story is irrelevant; what is important is that the story and the ideas it embodies are accepted and believed to be true” (Sykes 17). However, myths often promote ideas, attitudes, and actions that are not in the best interest of the majority of society. And yet, these myths remain an important part of the society’s cultural landscape. Consequently, they must be of value even if they cannot be judged true or false, right

or wrong. It would, therefore, be more appropriate and useful to explore what a myth does and what it is intended to do.

To provide some historical and theoretical context for a discussion regarding what myths are intended to do, I will begin with an exploration into the etymology of “myth,” and consider how the word has been used strategically as a vehicle for personal and political advantage, changing according to time, place, and circumstance. I will then turn to discuss the importance of historical research for understanding how and why contemporary myths operate in the West, as well as in Malaysia. From there, I will examine differences between universal, macro, and micro-myths, followed by an exploration into various consensus-building techniques used to promote and keep these myths alive in society. The purpose of this chapter, then, is primarily threefold. First, it serves to demonstrate the importance of myths in contemporary society. Second, it argues the centrality of history for understanding how and why these myths operate. Third, it lays the theoretical groundwork for discussing myths and micro-myths about technology and progress in both the West and Malaysia.

I. Myths About Myths: A Brief Historiography of Mythology

A. Mythos vs. Logos: A History of Discursive Authority

Though my focus in this dissertation is on the distinction between myths that are living and those that are dead, the word “myth” has two other commonly held

definitions. As noted above, a “myth” can refer to a story that is obviously not true, while, at the same time, can also signify beliefs that are generally held to be true. How, then, can these two contradictory definitions apply to the same word? This uncertainty in myth’s meaning can be traced all the way back to ancient times and the struggle between Homer’s *mythos* and Plato’s *logos*. In Theorizing Myth: Narrative, Ideology and Scholarship, religions historian Bruce Lincoln describes how the Greek poet Homer associated the term *mythos* with truth and “an assertive discourse of power and authority” (17). In contrast, *logos* was identified with seductive lies; the “speech of women, the weak, the young, and the shrewd, a speech that tends to be soft, delightful, charming, and alluring, but one that can also deceive and mislead” (Lincoln 10).

Four hundred years after Homer’s death, the Athenian philosopher Plato managed to reverse these associations by associating *mythos* with propaganda and deceit, while promoting *logos* as reasonable, authoritative, and in the best interest of the state (Lincoln). As we now know, it was Plato’s, rather than Homer’s, distinction that would endure over time, as *logos* is the root for the English word “logical,” and is concerned with disinterested, unemotional, reasonable, and objective knowledge. However, what is most interesting about this historical example is that it demonstrates a strategic attempt on behalf of Plato to relocate the locus of societal power away from the *mythos* of Homer’s poets. For, Homer had bestowed great power upon the poets of his day, believing them to have access to knowledge from the gods (within a society that was primarily oral in tradition). In contrast, Plato wanted his Philosopher Rulers, the aristocracy he considered most

adept and well-trained to rule society, to have a higher authority. As such, the *logos* of Plato and his aristocracy was promoted in the place of the *mythos* of Homer and his poets. As such, we can see how the terms *mythos* and *logos* were used for very specific political purposes by each of these historical figures.

However, this struggle for discursive authority did not end with Plato. In fact, for centuries after the shift from paganism to Christianity, the myths of Antiquity were generally considered to be folktales, legends, and amusing stories, i.e., myths (e.g., Chaucer's The Knights Tale). Similarly, monotheist Christian culture promoted the one true story of God, while stories of other deities were characterized as untrue and irrational myths. When the Renaissance period revived classical mythology, the myths of antiquity were resurrected as tools to challenge the religious "truths" that had dominated the Western Middle Ages. And, the arrival of the Enlightenment period, with its emphasis on reason, rationality, and the humanist intellect, signalled the beginning of the new "truth" of science.

Clearly, then, throughout history, distinctions have been made between *mythos* and *logos* for a wide range of political objectives, which demonstrates that the concept of myth is flexible and open to interpretation. By the late nineteenth century, academics from a variety of different disciplines became interested in understanding how "myths" were to be defined and understood, both in terms of their own society, as well as the myths of "other" people.

B. Mythos vs. Logos: Academic Interest in Mythology

Early academics interested in the myths of other societies became founding members of a new discipline called anthropology. Some of the most notable anthropologists interested in the myths of the “other” included Franz Boas (an empirical ethnographer who challenged aspects of Sir James Frazer’s and Edward Tylor’s theories of cultural / social evolution), Bronislaw Malinowski (a functionalist dedicated to thorough and extensive fieldwork), Margaret Mead (a pioneering woman who produced the groundbreaking, if later controversial for its supposed inaccuracy, Coming of Age in Samoa, 1928), A.R. Radcliffe-Brown (a scientific functionalist who sought general, underlying laws of how societies operate), E.E. Evans-Pritchard (a structural anthropologist, arguably best known for his ethnographic work in Africa), and Sir James Frazer (author of the influential, controversial, and social evolutionist book The Golden Bough, 1890). In addition to scholars from the disciplines of religion, philosophy, history, and psychology, these early anthropologists dedicated themselves to studying the myths of the exotic peoples from other parts of the world. However, their ethnographies, which brought the myths of foreign and exotic people back “home” for examination, were primarily descriptive rather than interpretative, as the scholars believed themselves to be in possession of the academic and intellectual authority to only document the “facts” that were important.³

³ Later, as the discipline of anthropology found itself in a state of crisis and in need of (re)invention, scholars such as Clifford Geertz, James Clifford, George E. Marcus, Talal Asad, and Max Gluckman pushed for a critical examination of how text making (including their own work) can be used to artificially construct cultural accounts (Clifford 2).

Despite differences in their philosophical and methodological approach to the “study of man,” these early anthropologists promoted the idea that the “other” relied upon myths⁴ rather than *logos* to explain the world around them and their place in it. In contrast, the West was in possession of scientific truths, or *logos*, to explain social, political, technical, natural, and economic matters. This perspective was supported by a theory of social Darwinism (discussed below) that placed certain cultures (i.e., societies in the West) further along an evolutionary chain than others.

While, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the field of anthropology was busy studying myths of the “other,” the discipline of psychology began to take an interest in investigating the “relationship between myth and the Unconscious” (Leonard and McClure 12). Psychologist Carl Jung, for example, argued that every individual has an unconscious which could be divided into the personal and the archetypal; the former carries our individual memories and thoughts, while the latter holds our collective, shared memories. According to Jung, since all humans share these common archetypes / unconscious symbols, regardless of ethnicity, culture, or history, they manifest themselves in common, universal myths (73). Drawing on the work of Jung and other psychologists, a growing number of other academics began to take interest in issues related to mythology. Mythologist Joseph Campbell, for example, theorized that myths are cultural manifestations of a universal need to explain the world and one’s place in it (Power). He argued that all myths incorporate Jungian archetypes; typical themes, ideas, symbols, and characters inherent in the human psyche (e.g., there are a limited

⁴ Which they often conflated with religious myths.

number of archetypal heroes, serving only a handful of possible functions, which are shared by every culture in the world) (Hero; Power).

In turn, Campbell's work on mythological archetypes directly influenced research conducted by Claude Lévi-Strauss, founder of structural anthropology, concerning the cross-comparability and taxonomic nature of myths. According to Lévi-Strauss, in order to process the chaos of an increasingly complex world, humans organize vast amounts of information into dualisms (Structural). Myths, then, are simply the manifestation of how the human brain operates in this binary, dualistic fashion (e.g., right versus wrong, heroes versus villains). However, rather than detailing the myths of specific cultures, Lévi-Strauss has been more interested in understanding the common, universal structures of myths. Also drawing on the work of Jung, he argued that since myths throughout the world resemble one another, it was possible to develop a model that would describe how all of them worked (Leonard and McClure 14). To do so, he began by studying the structural units or component parts of myth, which he referred to as "mythemes." He argued that every culture in the world has a limited number of these mythemes or "prefabricated pieces" from which to choose in order to construct their myths (Doniger 146). Therefore, he claimed that it was possible to mathematically compare similarities between these smaller units.

Although Lévi-Strauss's work on myths and mythemes has garnered significant criticism for being too quantitative, as well as ahistorical and lacking in cultural context, I have included it in this discussion to provide some context for understanding arguments made by other scholars regarding the cross-cultural

comparability of myths. Religions historian and comparative mythologist Wendy Doniger, for example, argues that although myths can be compared across cultures, we need not fall victim to Lévi-Strauss's universalism, essentialism, or use of positivist methodology. Rather, we can explore similarities and differences between the myths of two different cultures, while also recognizing that they are more arbitrary and culturally bound than Lévi-Strauss has allowed for. In subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will use Doniger's work in my examination of how a Western myth of progress can be qualitatively compared to Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development in terms of 1) content; and 2) methods used to construct, promote, and keep myths alive in each locale.

C. Do We Need Myths?

In the first section of this chapter, I suggested that we do in fact have myths in all societies, including a contemporary Western one. However, the question can be raised: Do we *need* myths in our society, do they serve a function? Or, as comparative literature scholar David A. Leeming asks, "have we become so mastered by our so-called scientific-rationalistic aspect that we can no longer take seriously anything beyond its scope?" (16)

Lévi-Strauss contends that we do in fact need myths in order to cope with the complexity of our society and to give order to its many irreconcilable aspects (Myth). For him, myths give us the tools to simplify issues and the language to talk about, although not necessarily resolve, seemingly contradictory aspects of our

society that we find difficult to comprehend. Myths about capitalism, for example, allow us to talk about how the free market benefits everyone in society while, at the same time, helping us reconcile the widening gap between rich and poor. Religions historian Mircea Eliade contends that myths give us the psychological armour necessary to cope with an unknowable future that often causes us great anxiety; they reassure us by connecting us to a past that we know and understand (Myth). Carl Jung also argues that myths are essential to our existence, for they explain who and what we are at a collective level.

For the purposes of this dissertation, myths may be viewed as stories that help us make sense of our world and our place in it. However, as noted above, there is no one “truth,” one “right” telling of a myth. Rather, specific groups in society, e.g., the political and economic elite, actively promote certain versions of myths that are in their best interest. Therefore, even though myths must resonate with society in order to remain alive (as discussed below), they do not appear out of nowhere, but are purposefully shaped and kept alive in society.

II. History & Myth

By tracing the etymological, political, and academic roots of myth, I have tried to provide a sense of how and why the idea of myth has changed over time and offer some insight into how myths are studied and used in contemporary society. Throughout this dissertation, I will highlight the importance of this kind of historical research for understanding current socio-cultural, political, and economic

phenomena. In particular, I will call upon historical examples concerning technology and progress to inform discussions regarding contemporary myths about technology. To better understand the importance of this historical research, I will now turn to the work of French historian Fernand Braudel and his philosophy of the *longue durée*.

Braudel, along with other members of the Annales School, attacks a “traditional” type of historical research that recognizes only the short time span and focuses primarily or solely on the event and the individual. In contrast, he favours a long, slow-moving history that considers the middle ground, the “non-events,” and the everyday – history with a small “h.” This latter approach recognizes the complexity of history and is more inclusive in nature than an evolutionist perspective that views “history as cut up into successive water-tight stages” (Mattelart xvi). The interplay between these two understandings of history is particularly relevant to the field of communication, which tends to focus on the introduction of new technologies as milestones between historical stages (and, even as such, often extends only as far back as the mass media “revolution”). Of concern, if attention is focused only on the event, then its historical context is relegated to a position of lesser priority. Moreover, the power relationships involved in a technology’s creation, introduction, and distribution are omitted from the analyses. As Braudel cautions us, “do not believe that only the actors which make the most noise are the most authentic – there are other, quieter ones too” (38). In other words, the past lives selectively in the present; history is written by the winners.

Our tendency to concentrate on the newest and latest technology in isolation from its historical context is particularly relevant for understanding how myths concerning the intersection of technology and progress operate. For example, it is impossible to critically examine the Malaysian myth of modernity, progress, and development without first understanding the country's colonial legacy and the history behind its contemporary social, political, and economic landscape. In other words, it requires an appreciation of why the country wants to be “modern” and “developed,” and why it believes that new forms of ICTs will help it get there.

III. Universal, Macro, and Micro-Myths

Drawing upon Lévi-Strauss's concept of myths and mythemes, in this next section I will differentiate between three different kinds of myth: universal, macro, and micro-myths. In turn, I will explore a variety of consensus-building / hegemonic methods used to promote and keep these myths alive.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will describe universal myths as those which are shared by every group, culture, and society in the world. They address phenomena such as time and space, origins and purpose of the human race, and the place of our world in the rest of the universe. They reveal our universal need to explain and understand common experiences. Although there are, arguably, commonly posited answers to issues of sense phenomenology, since we tend to react to sense data in a similar manner, explanations for these other universal phenomena change according to specific cultural contexts. To illustrate, the need to explain and

understand the origins of the human race is universal, yet, the myths employed to do so may be very different depending on the cultural context. At this uppermost level, myths are not falsifiable because one cannot empirically “prove” that a specific interpretation of the universal myth is “right” while another is not.

However, my focus here is not on these kinds of myths. Rather, it is on myths that might be considered one level down from universal myths, as their purpose is not to understand common, universal experiences, but to explain large-scale, complex social, political, and economic phenomena through the use of an accessible, simplified story. These myths, therefore, tend to be rather reductionist in nature – e.g., the free market / invisible hand will provide. Following the lead of Wendy Doniger, I will consider these kinds of myths to be “macro-myths” to be differentiated from smaller, micro-myths described below.

Despite a common post-modern argument that large-scale, overarching meta-narratives or myths no longer exist (as perhaps best illustrated by Jean François Lyotard’s work, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge), I would argue that they in fact remain firmly entrenched in contemporary Western society. In subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will describe and explore the continued relevance to Western society of the macro-myth of progress, which promotes the idea that technological progress begets progress writ large. Moreover, as I argue in Chapters 5 through 7, this myth is not exclusive to the Western world. Rather, Malaysia’s macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development bears a distinct resemblance to a Western macro-myth of progress.

Supporting these various macro-myths are innumerable smaller myths.

Drawing again on the work of Wendy Doniger, I will refer to these smaller myths as micro-myths. As Doniger explains, a micro-myth is “like a trampoline that allows each culture to fly far away to its own specific cultural meanings, leaping to make wildly different variants instead of remaining stuck to a limiting, constraining structure (a description often used for archetypes)” (88). Therefore, neither Doniger, nor I, adhere to Lévi-Strauss’s structuralist belief that there exists a limited set of universal micro-myths or “mythemes” from which society can draw from in order to construct its myths. As Doniger explains, “[s]tructuralism is a great way to see what questions are being asked over and over... Structuralism isolates the themes in a myth; it says, this *is*... But the myth does not settle for elementary structures; it modifies them and qualifies them in many different ways, and often even rejects them” (149). In subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will argue that although there may be similarities between Western and Malaysian macro and micro-myths concerning technology and progress, there are also some culturally bound differences in terms of how these myths are constructed, promoted, and kept alive.

Moreover, similar to geckoes willing to sacrifice a tail to keep predators occupied while making a quick getaway, micro-myths can, if necessary, be offered up for debate and possible destruction in order to keep a larger myth intact. Since, as discussed below, hegemonic power is never complete and there is always room for dissent, myth-makers are willing to sacrifice components of a myth to control *what* people think and talk about. This is not to suggest, however, that such a sacrifice is necessarily a conscious decision / action. Certainly, some myth-makers deliberately

construct and circulate myths and micro-myths that are in their best interest, as is the case with the Malaysian government's promotion of the micro-myth of the MSC.

However, it is important to also recognize that myth-makers themselves are operating within their own set of norms; within a society predicated upon a multitude of other rational and naturalized myths. Therefore, they may promote myths that are only in the best interest of certain sectors of society, without being fully aware of their actions.

IV. Myths as Dialogic Stories: Consensus-Building Techniques Used to Promote and Keep Myths Alive

Although on the surface it may appear that narratives and myths are one and the same, there is an important distinction to be made between these two concepts. The word "narrative" refers more to the conveyance of a linear story, whereas "discourse" implies that the story is dialogic, that there is more of a two-way flow of communication (even if the power relations involved in the interaction may be unequal). To return to Alasdair MacIntyre's distinction, a myth is living if it is relevant to, and part of, a society's discourse. Until there is discussion and / or social action concerning the narrative, whether the end result is acceptance, rejection, or negotiation, it remains merely a narrative. Consequently, myth-makers try to encode myths in such a way so as to ensure that myth-receivers decode their messages in the "right" way (however, they must be encoded without being too obvious or, as Barthes's would argue, "motivated").

What this suggests, then, is that the ability to keep a myth alive is, in large part, reflective of hegemonic power relationships. As Italian political theorist and activist Antonio Gramsci explained, hegemony is a process in which consensual power must be won, and re-won, on a continual basis. As such, there is always room for counter-hegemonic activities and the (re)negotiation of myth's meaning as people interpret the narrative they receive and place it within a hermeneutic circle composed of tacit cultural assumptions. As Barthes writes, "there always remains, around the final meaning, a halo of virtualities where other possible meanings are floating: the meaning can almost always be *interpreted*" (132).

And yet, Gramsci's seventy-year-old question remains valid – how is it that dominant groups in society are able to hold the allegiance of so many people? How is it that people are willing to believe in myths that may be in direct contradiction to their private and collective interests if myths are, in fact, dialogic, and myth-receivers possess powers of negotiation? To address these questions, I will now turn to examine some of the consensus-building / hegemonic methods used by dominant groups to ensure that certain versions of myths and micro-myths are disseminated, promoted, and kept alive.

A. Appealing to Reason and Tapping into Emotions

In order for a myth to be successful, it must appear rational, natural, and a taken-for-granted truth. As Roland Barthes explains, "*in the eyes of the myth-consumer*, the intention, the adhomination of the concept can remain manifest

without however appearing to have an interest in the matter: what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason” (129).⁵ Therefore, even though myths are in fact political stories, they are made to appear apolitical through processes of naturalization. In other words, if constructed and disseminated successfully, a myth will 1) have us believe that its premise is timeless; and 2) that it is “unmotivated” and authorless.

At the same time, myths are particularly effective if they are able to tap into people’s emotions. For example, the micro-myth of the MSC is based on the project’s ability to “leapfrog” Malaysia into the “information age,” bringing social, political, and economic improvements for all of society. To garner support for this micro-myth, the Malaysian government has tapped into people’s desires concerning winning and their fears of being “left behind.” As described in greater detail in Chapter 7, Malaysians are told that they will “lose out” if the country fails to build an ICT hub capable of competing with other imitations of Silicon Valley housed in neighbouring countries (e.g., Singapore, India, China). As the MSC micro-myth example demonstrates, if a dominant power wants to gain support for an idea, it must tap into and engage people’s emotions and desires. Therefore, as Jacques Ellul contends, they draw upon myths to “incite strong emotions in people” (qtd. in Karim, “Cyber-Utopia” 121). This is because myths are “part emotionalism, part affective response, part a sacred feeling... The myth does not leave man passive; it drives him to action” (qtd. in Karim, “Cyber-Utopia” 121-23).

⁵ Barthes’s “myth-consumer” is similar, although not equivalent to, “myth-receiver.” The latter provides more room for negotiation in terms of how much of the myth a receiver “consumes.”

To summarize, myths (in both the West and Malaysia) have a better chance at becoming successful if they can appear rational, logical, and apolitical. At the same time, these same myths must also, rather ironically, be able to tap into human emotions. We must believe in them and view them as “truths,” even if our logic would lead us to believe otherwise. For example, it is difficult to determine whether or not the MSC will be able to deliver on the Malaysian government’s promise that it will produce social, political, and economic development. However, Malaysians are told that if the government does not build the project, the country risks slipping back into the status of a developing country, rather than a newly industrializing one. It would, therefore, appear that in order for myths to be successful, the emotional and the rational (usually defined as *mythos* and *logos*, respectively) must share a symbiotic relationship rather than a mutually exclusive one.

B. Controlling Myth Through Exclusion

As discussed in the opening section of this chapter, Plato employed the terms *mythos* and *logos* for specific political purposes – “[t]he myths that Plato didn’t like (that were created by other people, nurses, and poets) were lies, and the myths that he liked (that he created himself) were truths” (Doniger 2-3). In like manner, the word “myth” is selectively used in contemporary society as we do not label our own myths as being “myths,” but instead regard them as “truths.” At the same time, we often frame the myths of other groups as “myths” if they do not correlate with our

own.⁶ In this respect, myths provide us with a set of rules by which to live our lives and to establish boundaries “with respect to other communities. Those who do not share the myth are by definition excluded” (Schöpflin 20). In other words, individuals who know, understand, and re-circulate a myth are aware that there are individuals and groups who do not share the same myth and are therefore subject to possible exclusion.

We have witnessed this process of exclusion in North America through recent campaigns aimed at criminalizing dissent from mainstream myths. Individuals willing to engage in counter-hegemonic social activities that challenge the political and economic status quo are often characterized as irrational, labelled as conspiracy theorists,⁷ and even charged as criminals. The destructive actions of the early nineteenth century Luddites, carried out in response to some of the negative effects of capitalism, are often called upon to demonstrate the irrationality of this kind of dissent. Unfortunately, when the story of the Luddites is retold in present day, their beliefs and actions are often subject to gross over-simplification and imbued with a sense of heresy that borders on violence. Similarly, the actions of

⁶ David A. Leeming offers an especially potent example: “All cultures and religions have sacred stories that the common sense of people in other cultures and religions recognizes as myths... It is difficult to believe that the Buddha was conceived in a dream by a white elephant. So we call that story a myth... But, of course, stories such as the parting of the Red Sea for the fleeing Hebrews, Muhammad’s Night Journey, and the dead Jesus rising from the tomb are just as clearly irrational narratives to which a Hindu or a Buddhist might understandably apply the word ‘myth’... But since stories of the ancient Hebrews and Jesus are central to ‘our’ monotheistic religions we tend to resist labelling them as myths” (8-9).

⁷ Some noteworthy work on this subject includes: David Brion Davis, ed., *The Fear of Conspiracy: Images of Un-American Subversion from the Revolution to the Present* (Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1971); Jodi Dean, *Aliens in America: Conspiracy Cultures from Outerspace to Cyberspace* (Ithica, NY: Cornell UP, 1998); and Mark Fenster, *Conspiracy Theories* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999).

neo-Luddites are often treated as threats to social, political, and economic stability and security.⁸

Campaigns waged by dominant powers to marginalize dissent from mainstream myths and restrain activities of, for example, neo-Luddites, can range in nature from the subtle to the more spectacular. On the more subtle end of the spectrum, there is a movement underway to collapse left / right political oppositions in favour of some sort of new politics that transcends a social democrat / neo-liberal split. As promoted in the work of Anthony Giddens,⁹ the new “Third Way,” a self-proclaimed voice of the “radical center,” best represents this attempt at adversarial collapse (Third). Although the Third Way advocates a form of politics located “beyond left and right,” some have argued that, in reality, it has “simply given up the traditional struggle of the left for equality” (Mouffe 6). As a result, it has allowed hegemonic forces to go unchallenged. Moreover, by defining where the center point of consensus is located, it has been able to construct perspectives outside of the centre as being outside the norm. These perspectives then become *mythos*, which are thus easier to manipulate, imbuing a degree of flexibility that would allow hegemonic powers to marginalize them when they cease to remain effective to their interests.

Also, as political economy of communication scholars¹⁰ have effectively demonstrated, control of the media has become increasingly concentrated into the

⁸ As an example, mainstream media often depict protesters, e.g., in Quebec City (FTAA), Seattle (WTO), and Genoa (G8), as unpredictable, fringe members of society capable of participating in violent activities.

⁹ In his books, The Third Way: The Renewal of Social Democracy (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999); and The Global Third Way Debate (Oxford: Polity Press, 2001).

¹⁰ Edward Comor, Karim H. Karim, Ben Bagdikian, Robert Babe, Andrew Feenberg, Nick Dyer-Witheford, Kevin Robins, Frank Webster, Cees Hamelink, Robert McChesney, Vincent Mosco for example.

hands of fewer individuals who have the power to decide which myths will circulate in the mainstream press, and which ones will not. Of primary concern, since the media play an important agenda-setting role, they can tell us what to think about; what we should consider as important and relevant information.¹¹ This type of control gives political and economic elites the ability to decide “who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, who has authority and may be believed” (Marvin 142). And since the mainstream media in most of the West tend to be viewed as relatively objective, the myths that they promote often appear unmotivated and authorless.

Examples of exclusion methods at the more spectacular end of the spectrum might include McCarthyism and the work of the Un-American Activities Commission in the 1940s and 50s, or the neo-liberal movement led by Reagan, Thatcher, and Mulroney to counteract the political activism of the 1960s and early 70s. More recently, concerns have also been raised about how the criminalization of dissent from mainstream myths has moved beyond rhetoric and has seeped its way into policies, programs, and laws. As an example, in the aftermath of September 11th, the Bush Administration introduced the USA Patriot Act (Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism), while the Canadian government established its Anti-Terrorism

¹¹ Therefore, what is *not* printed, aired or recorded can be as, if not more, important than that which does. As cases in point, the 1994-1995 Rwandan genocide, the 1997-1999 crisis in East Timor, and the recent human rights atrocities in war-torn Sierra Leone, barely hit the radar screens of North American mainstream media. Stories within our own countries also go unreported or under-reported on a regular basis. NewsWatch Canada (formerly Project Censored Canada) and Project Censored in the United States expose the stories and issues that they believe failed to enter society's consciousness because the mainstream media chose not to report them.

Act (Bill C-36).¹² The objective of these new pieces of legislature is to root out terrorists and stave off cyber-warfare. However, civil libertarians have raised concerns that they also give authorities greater power to monitor and track the activities of citizens who may dissent from mainstream myths, thereby compromising the rights and freedoms of North American citizens.

V. Looking Ahead to the Myth of Progress

As demonstrated in the opening section of this chapter, there has been a long line of scholars interested in processes of myth-making. They include Enlightenment philosophers, historians, early mythologists, anthropologists, and communication scholars. Many of these intellectuals considered myths to be the tales of “other” people of either the past, or of far-off lands. Yet, they all argued that myths are necessary in order for us to live and operate in society, to give order and sense to our world, and to define who and what we are.

Therefore, rather than trying to define what “myth is,” this chapter has focused on “what myth does.” In doing so, I have not considered myths to be true or false, right or wrong. Instead, I have argued that they should be viewed as either living, and thus relevant to society, or dead and no longer in circulation (i.e., stories of another time or place that have no relevance to present society). To better understand this distinction, I have explored a variety of techniques used by the elite / myth-makers to promote and keep alive certain myths in society. I examined

¹² The Act is intended to work in conjunction with Bills C-35, “An Act to Amend the Foreign Missions and International Organizations Act,” and C-42, “Public Safety Act.”

methods used to make myths appear rational and natural while, at the same time, tapping into our emotions and desires to encourage us to believe in their promises. As well, I explored a selection of methods used to marginalize dissent from myths sanctioned by the status quo, emphasizing the role played by the mainstream media in its agenda-setting capacity. In Chapters 6 and 7 of this dissertation, I will compare these various consensus-building methods with those used in the Malaysian context.

Drawing on the discussion in this chapter regarding myths, micro-myths, and methods used to keep them alive, in the following chapter I will focus specifically on the myth of progress that argues that technological progress will beget progress writ large.

CHAPTER 3

THE MYTH OF PROGRESS

But nowhere – and now we get to the heart of the matter – can we find a master narrative so deeply entrenched in popular imagination and popular language as in the mythic idea of progress, particularly technological progress.
(John M. Staudenmaier 262-63)

This third chapter of the dissertation begins with a brief historical overview of how a Western conception of progress has shifted in meaning from the Enlightenment period to present day. Drawing on the historical and theoretical discussion regarding myths and micro-myths presented in Chapter 2, this chapter examines how an Enlightenment belief in the power of science and technology to beget progress writ large (i.e., social, political, and economic development) has survived, albeit with less enthusiasm, to the present day.

As such, the purpose of this chapter is primarily threefold. First, a historical overview of this macro-myth of progress is intended to provide some context for understanding contemporary conceptions of technology and development. An examination of the definition of technology and of technological determinism, as well as a review of micro-myths surrounding the telegraph, the railroad, and electrification, provide some historical context for the myth.

Second, this chapter explores the concept of progressive technologies, both in terms of social growth and theories of modernization, as well as contemporary promises regarding social and political development. As such, it will highlight a

selection of methods used by myth-makers / elite to promote and ensure the longevity of the myth of progress within society. This will include Roland Barthes' concept of inoculation, which explains how problems experienced in a technology's application can be converted into "positive setbacks," which provide valuable feedback of benefit to the technology's ongoing development (i.e., Barthes argues that by inoculating the public with the admittance of a little bit of "evil," the "evil" comes to appear harmless). As well, the chapter briefly explores rhetoric which promotes a "technological sublime," in which the public is encouraged to transfer their reverence of the religious and natural world to human-made constructions. In so doing, attention is focused on the progressive powers of technology, rather than on its potential applications (some of which may not be in the best interest of the majority of society).

Third, I will use this chapter as a basis for comparison with Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development, as discussed in Chapters 5, 6, and 7. I will compare and contrast the content of each myth, as well as examine methods used to promote and keep each myth alive in its respective locale.

However, to be clear, this purpose of this chapter is not to offer a comprehensive examination of the idea of progress in contemporary Western society. Nor is it designed to provide an in-depth study into how the relationship between technology and progress has changed from the Enlightenment to the present day. Rather, my goal here is to provide the reader with a general overview of the myth of progress, which I will then use to compare against a seemingly similar myth operating within Malaysia.

I. A History of the Myth of Progress

From the outset, it is important to make a distinction between two broad meanings of progress. The first is a relatively straightforward, everyday meaning. It is “when we say that a person or group has made progress within a specific practice, one with a clearly bounded scope and a more-or-less obvious purpose, we simply mean that they have moved closer to their goal” (L. Marx, “Domination” 205). The second definition of progress is based on a general belief in Western culture’s historical record of continual improvement. Historian J.B. Bury wrote in his seminal work, The Idea of Progress, that this second understanding of progress provides “an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing... in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely” (5). It is this definition of progress to which I will refer to throughout the duration of this dissertation as the “myth of progress.”

During the Enlightenment period, this myth of progress became firmly entrenched in the European “collective mentality” (L. Marx, “Domination” 205). Although most philosophers of the time believed in the existence of God, they challenged l’ancien regime of the church, monarchy, and aristocracy. In its place, they sought rational, secular, liberal societies based on an empirical, experimental scientific methodology and a materialist view of humanity. The Enlightenment philosophers believed that through the application of reason and scientific ingenuity to social and political affairs, society as a whole would improve. As a result, a

Western conception of history had been given a sense of direction and optimism; humanity was able to progress and move forward while here on earth, rather than only in a heavenly afterworld. The shift towards reason and science provided the philosophers with proof that the Western world had progressed away from its old “myths” as it became increasingly enlightened. In contrast, the rest of the world was characterized as unenlightened, still clinging to irrational stories to explain their existence and surroundings.

French philosophers Marie Jean Antoine de Condorcet (1743-1794) and Claude Henri de Saint-Simon (1760-1825) were particularly influential in securing this doctrine of progress. Living and working in politically explosive times, Condorcet and Saint-Simon both argued that improvements in science and technology would foster political and social liberation from traditional authorities and help society as a whole to progress. Condorcet, arguably the most eloquent and visible advocate of the idea of progress, argued that science and technology constituted “the *means* of achieving political and social *ends*: a liberation from monarchic, aristocratic, and ecclesiastical tyranny, and the creation of more just, less hierarchical, peaceful, republican institutions” (Baker; L. Marx, “Domination” 210). He claimed that human history could be divided into sequential eras through which societies progressed if they successfully applied these scientific and technological means (Baker). Not surprisingly, Condorcet considered European cultures to be at the apex of this evolutionary scale. As he exclaimed: “Will all nations one day attain that state of civilization which the most enlightened, the freest and the least burdened

by prejudices, such as the French and Anglo-Americans, have attained already?” (174).

During the Enlightenment, evidence of progress in the West and its social, political, and economic superiority vis-à-vis other societies came in the form of new wealth, improvements in material conditions (for many although certainly not all of society), greater control over nature, higher life expectancy, and the diffusion of less authoritarian political institutions. It also came in the form of new technology, efficient methods of production, as well as mass-produced items afforded by the rise of capitalism and the industrial revolution. Enlightenment philosophers promoted these new technologies and production methods “not as ends in themselves but as instruments for transforming society” socially, politically, and economically (L. Marx, “Does Improved” 34).

As a result, a new class of businessmen had emerged with the introduction of capitalism that was able to transform the sins of avarice and usury into virtues, as the seeking of glory through the attainment of commodities had become a noble endeavour (Hirschman). As Lewis Mumford describes, “[a]varice ceased to be a sin: the minute attention to the care of worldly goods, the hoarding of pennies, the unwillingness to spend one’s surplus on others – all these habits were useful for capital saving. Greed, gluttony, avarice, envy and luxury were constant incentives to industry” (162). This shift also gained support from Weber’s Protestant work ethic thesis, as well as the Invisible Hand theory, both of which suggested that individuals pursuing their own interests would unknowingly help the public good. As discussed below, this shift also provided the basis for the commodity fetishism that remains

central to everyday capitalism in contemporary society, as reverence is often directed towards the latest, fastest, most efficient and complex technological commodities.

In this chapter, I will briefly discuss three new technologies – the telegraph, the train, and electrification – that emerged at the tail end of the Enlightenment during the expansion of capitalism and the industrial revolution. Each of these technologies offered proof of Western progress and demonstrated the benefits to be gained through capitalism and the application of scientific and technological ingenuity. From there, I will compare the utopian rhetoric surrounding the introduction of each of these technologies into society with the promises that have been made regarding the power of contemporary forms of technology (specifically ICTs) to beget social, political, and economic progress in present day. To lay the theoretical groundwork for these discussions, I will begin by commenting on some definitions of technology, as well as technological determinism.

II. Defining Technology & Technological Determinism

In defining technology, one can begin at a very broad level and view it as simply a way of doing things. More restrictively, technology can also refer to the physical artefacts of the machine, the invention, and the material. Striking a balance between the two, historian Thomas J. Misa considers technology in terms of “sociotechnical networks,” which include “a whole host of actors, machines, institutions, and social relations” (“Retrieving” 141). Misa’s approach therefore incorporates the artefact, as well as the people who create, construct, use, and benefit

from technology. To clarify, if automobile assembly is viewed as simply the deployment of automatic mechanical devices, then the “defining center of the conceptual constellation is technical; it is the hard fact to which the other social, cultural, and natural ‘factors’ are ‘related’”(Williams 219). However, we must also recognize the integral role played by the people who design the cars, run the machinery, co-ordinate labour and movement of materials, and in the end, actually purchase the final product. This understanding of technology is of greater relevance to the theme of my research as it refers to the mutual interaction of technology and society.

However, the normative conception of technology in a determinist sense tends to remain at the level of the artefact, material, and machine (i.e., the machine influences society rather than being constructed by it). Consequently, most myths concerning technology have, at their base, a harder, more restrictive approach to technology. This restriction, then, opens the door for the kinds of technological determinism described below. As an example (which is discussed in greater detail in subsequent chapters), the Internet is often characterized as having *caused* a transformation in society without taking into account how the technology is socially, politically, and economically constructed and used by society.

As a corollary, science, like technology, also does not have one definition. It can, however, be understood as a theoretical apparatus for understanding the world, as well as a method of empirical, inductive, experimental knowledge. Nevertheless, the scientific method does not ensure “truthful” or “objective” knowledge. Rather, it is only a method of producing knowledge, as it embodies “theoretical assumptions

about what should be counted, how one should understand material reality, and how quantification contributes to systematic knowledge about the world” (Poovey x). As well, science should not be viewed as necessarily preceding technology, even though technology is often considered to be its application. Science and technology should instead be considered as interdependent entities, as technology can assist in new scientific discoveries and vice versa.

A. Technological Determinism

At its core, technological determinism attempts to explain social and historical phenomena in terms of a single or determining factor. The Enlightenment’s narrative of progress, for example, is based on “the efficacy of technology as a driving force of history: a technical innovation suddenly appears and causes important things to happen” (Marx and Smith x). And, despite “the best efforts of historians and others to show that the relationships between technology and society are reciprocal rather than unidirectional,” this kind of determinism has continued into present day (Bimber 80).

There is, however, a critical distinction to be made between soft and hard technological determinism (in fact, an entire spectrum of perspectives lies between these two positions, a discussion of which is beyond the scope of this project). Soft determinism suggests that technology “drives social change but at the same time responds discriminatingly to social pressures,” whereas hard determinism views “technological development as an autonomous force, completely independent of

social constraints” (M.R. Smith 2). Therefore, Enlightenment philosophers of the same ilk as Condorcet and Saint-Simon would be placed into the hard determinist category, as they believed that new technology *would* produce social, political, and economic progress. In comparison, Karl Marx, if considered a determinist at all, would be classified as a “soft” determinist, inasmuch as he recognized the power relations at play in the creation of technological networks.¹³ In subsequent chapters, I will argue that Malaysian myths concerning technology, particularly ICTs, tend to veer towards the hard determinism end of the spectrum, as the government has promised that society *will* experience social, political, and economic progress through the application of new forms of ICTs.

Having discussed, albeit briefly, how I wish to define technology, as well as technological determinism, I will now turn to examine how technology relates to a myth of progress that has survived beyond the Enlightenment.

III. Progressive Technologies: The Telegraph, Train, and Electrification

In this next section, I will briefly describe three technologies from the past, the telegraph, train, and electrification, which were promised to induce peace and democracy, reduce labour time and energy, create community and, in the spirit of

¹³ Sociologist Donald Mackenzie argues that Marx was not, in fact, a technological determinist at all. He contends that Marx believed that “social relations moulded technology, rather than vice versa” (473). On the other side of the debate, economic historian Robert L. Heilbroner maintains that Marx was indeed a technological determinist. In his well-known article, “Do Machines Make History?”, Heilbroner argued that Marx viewed the sequence of technological developments as a “necessitous path over which technologically developing societies must travel... the steam-mill follows the hand-mill not by chance but because it is the next ‘stage’ in a technical conquest of nature that follows one and only one grand avenue of advance” (336).

Karl Marx, annihilate or compress space with time (Grundrisse). These examples provide a historical context for understanding how technology can be expected to beget progress writ large while, at the same time, providing physical evidence of society's overall improvement. For each of these technologies, mainstream rhetoric treated their arrival into society as a revolutionary event; they were expected to significantly alter the social, political, and economic landscape for the betterment of all society. This utopianism offers a useful frame of reference for understanding the current optimistic rhetoric that surrounds new forms of ICTs in contemporary Western and Malaysian society.

A. The Telegraph

With the introduction of the telegraph in the eighteenth century, messages could be transmitted instantaneously over vast distances for the first time in history. Consequently, those involved in, or related to the telegraph's development, advanced a utopian rhetoric that promoted the wide range of benefits accruing from this new technology. These benefits included its impact on journalism (international news could make its way into small-town newspapers overnight), military strategy (co-ordination of military personnel and equipment could be centralized and expedient), and commerce (the telegraph facilitated up-to-date information regarding stock prices, commodity supply and demand, as well as impersonal commercial transactions). As a result, people were encouraged to believe that "[e]verything about it was monumental, larger than life" (Rowland 64).

Moreover, based on its ability to compress space with time, the telegraph was charged with the task of leading society towards a “Universal Brotherhood of Universal Man,” by advancing worldwide peace and fostering democracy (Carey 208). As early nineteenth century author and telegraph enthusiast H.L. Wayland once wrote, the telegraph “binds together by a vital cord all the nations of the earth. It is impossible that old prejudices and hostilities should longer exist, while such an instrument has been created for an exchange of thought between all the nations of the earth” (qtd. in Rowland 60).¹⁴

B. The Railroad

The train, probably more than any other technology developed between the Enlightenment and the introduction of the automobile, symbolized and provided evidence of the overall progress of society. Within only a few decades of the first steam locomotive being operational in early nineteenth century England,¹⁵ much of Europe¹⁶ and North America had fallen into the throes of “railroad mania.”

However, as discussed in Chapter 4, myths surrounding the train and railroad had particularly captured the imagination of the American people (Danly; L. Marx “Railroad”). Commonly referred to as the Iron Horse, this new technology played a

¹⁴ In a similar vein, Tom Standage (Technology Editor for *The Economist*) quotes an unnamed advocate of the telegraph’s democratic and pacifist powers: “The different nations and races of men will stand, as it were, in the presence of one another. Thus the electric spark is the true Promethean fire which is to kindle human hearts. Men then will learn that they are brethren, and that it is not less their interest than their duty to cultivate goodwill and peace throughout the earth” (104).

¹⁵ Although the first steam locomotive capable of operating on a railroad was built in 1804, use of the railroad for business purposes did not occur until almost two decades later (Comstock 8-9). Interestingly, James Watt did not think that steam carriages would work. It was his assistant, William Murdoch, who proved him wrong by developing the first steam tricycle in 1784 (Comstock 5).

¹⁶ However, it would take another few decades before France, one of Europe’s foremost powers, would focus its energy on building a railway system (Mattelart).

critical role in opening up the Western frontier of the continent and in helping America fulfil its Manifest Destiny.¹⁷ In like manner to the telegraph,¹⁸ the utopian rhetoric surrounding the train promised that this new technology would advance peace and democracy, free people from constraints imposed by nature, and compress space and time thus helping to increase the circulation of capital.¹⁹ In addition, the train, and the railroads on which it ran, showcased man's scientific ability and technological ingenuity – the Iron Horse symbolized “the pulse of progress” (Ogburn 11).²⁰

C. Electrification in International Expositions

International expositions (often referred to as World Fairs) have also played a central role in promoting the “progressive” powers of new technologies. For each exposition, the newest technologies of the most “advanced” nations are put on display to be consumed by massive crowds of visitors (Rydell). During the nineteenth century, electrification was placed front and centre in these expositions as awe-struck visitors marvelled at the ability of thousands of little light bulbs to light

¹⁷ To illustrate the importance of railroads in American history, some 180,000 full-scale steam locomotives were built in the United States between the years 1831 and 1949 (Comstock 19).

¹⁸ The telegraph and the railroad share a particularly close history as “one of the early uses of the electric telegraph was in fact to signal trains” (Mattelart 51).

¹⁹ As Karl Marx, who considered railways the crowning glory of countries possessing advanced modern industry, explained in the *Grundrisse*, “[t]he more production comes to rest on exchange value, hence on exchange, the more important do the physical conditions of exchange – the means of communication and transport – become for the costs of circulation. Capital by its nature drives beyond every spatial barrier. Thus the creation of the physical conditions of exchange – of the means of communication and transport – the annihilation of space by time – becomes an extraordinary necessity for it” (524).

²⁰ The author's father, Frank Smeltzer, a certified train enthusiast, provided insight into the importance of the train in North American history.

up the night-time sky.²¹ The exhibits offered further evidence of the West's progress, as well as its superiority vis-à-vis other societies that did not possess similar technology. As David E. Nye comments,

[e]lectricity became more than the theme for a major exhibit building; it provided a visible correlative for the ideology of progress.

Electrification was placed quite consciously at the apex of an evolutionary framework... Only the most advanced societies had electrified machines and lighting. Darkness was a metaphor for the primitive; light was the exemplification of Christianity, science, and progress. (*Electrifying* 35-36)

As a corollary, at the same time that electrification took centre stage on the world fair scene, it also began to gain importance in urban areas throughout North America and Europe. In particular, the Great White Ways of lighted night-time urban streets were viewed as physical manifestations of society's progress and became fodder for popular literature and artwork of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Marvin; Nye *Electrifying*).

Similar to the telegraph and train that came before, the rhetoric accompanying the introduction of electrification into society encouraged great reverence for the power of this new technology. Although electricity was, of course, harnessed in ways that significantly altered the way people lived, worked, and played, they were also promised that the Great White Ways would end urban crime

²¹ Visitor's reactions to these exhibits could, in large part, be attributed to their generally poor understanding of how electricity worked.

and create community: “[p]romoters of electricity envisioned a twentieth century with Cities of Light ushering an epoch of peace” (Mosco, Digital 87).

As the discussion above demonstrates, the telegraph, train, and electrification were not only expected to produce social, political, and economic improvements in society, but also served to provide a quantitative measure of this progress, particularly in comparison to the technological capabilities of other societies. Supported by theories of social evolutionism, this technological superiority of the West was often translated into superiority writ large. As such, in the following section, I will explore the intersection between “social evolutionism,” technology, and progress. To do so, I will begin with a brief historical overview of Western theories concerning evolution and “modernization,” followed by a discussion of how these theories have endured into present day.

IV. Progressive Technologies, Social Evolution, and Theories of Modernization

Drawing on the terminology used by Charles Darwin in his nineteenth century theories on species evolution, English philosopher Herbert Spencer developed a theory of *social* evolution that applied natural selection in a social context. In like manner to his predecessor Saint-Simon, Spencer viewed society as a living organism which, due to industrialization, capitalism, and technological advancements, had become increasingly complex over time. Spencer argued that the more complex a society, the further it was along the scale of social, political, and economic

evolution. This meant that the highly complex societies of the Western world were more “evolved” than other societies (James Kennedy).

As such, Spencer’s work was often used to justify acts of colonialism, as “other” cultures and societies could be constructed as being less evolved (as evidenced by their lack of Western technological capabilities).²² His work also influenced many of the early mythologists, anthropologists, and sociologists discussed in Chapter 2. For example, in their study of the social structures and myths of “primitives” from other parts of the world, many scholars (e.g., Sir James Frazer, Edward Tylor, and later Émile Durkheim) drew upon theories of social evolution to demonstrate that their respective cultures were at the apex of social, political, and economic development.²³

In addition, Spencer’s theories regarding evolution had a significant impact on the nascent field of advertising. In order to move a theoretically never-ending supply of commodities into the hands of consumers, businessmen began to promote cure-all technological fixes, selling “the public on the idea that the latest advances in technology brought not only immediate personal gains but also social progress” (M.R. Smith 19). Acquiring the latest and the newest technology soon became synonymous with being “modern” and progressive, a philosophy of commodity fetishism that has remained central to everyday capitalism in contemporary society. In terms of computer communication, for example, much of the hype surrounding

²² For instance, Spencer’s theory played a key role in the American doctrine of Manifest Destiny, which argued that “a succession of empires” had arisen along a “hereditary line of progress” culminating in the Republican Empire of North America” (H.N. Smith 37).

²³ Social evolution research also impacted the work of a number of early communication scholars, including John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, Robert Park, and Charles Cooley. Also, in their administrative social psychology research on behalf of the war effort, Paul Lazarsfeld and Harold Lasswell focused on the role that the mass media could play in constructing public opinion.

new forms of technology has been manufactured by the very companies that stand to benefit from the sale of computer technology, software, and access to cyberspace.

As Vincent Mosco notes,

[i]n addition to a global cadre of bricoleurs spinning the grand narratives of cyberspace, we can observe a global movement to bring the Word to the people [including] massive advertising budgets that sell both specific products and the general message that a new age has dawned and we must, in the word of Apple Computer, ‘think different’. (Digital 41-42)

As such, on a micro / individual level, it appears that we have shifted away from viewing commodities / technologies as useful goods, and now consider them as “positional” ones; i.e., possession of the most recent technology serves to showcase one’s personal place in the hierarchy of success.

The impact of Spencer’s theories can also be seen in other theories concerning technology and progress writ large on a macro / societal level. For example, the modernization theory that emerged in the decades following the Second World War argued that in order to become developed, societies throughout the world must progress through a battery of stages to expand their modern sectors and abolish their traditional ones. Since the developed Western world had, according to this theory, already successfully proceeded through these stages, it was in a position to assist the rest of the world in going through the same process. Developing countries were therefore urged to acquire the machinery, amass the capital, and embrace the

One of the primary goals of this wartime media, however, was to promote a North American way of life based on an evolutionist argument of its superiority.

secular, capitalist democracy that embodied Western ideals of progress. The mass media were expected to play a particularly important role in this process of development by transferring these “modern” ideas and innovations to people in the developing world. As modernization theorists, including Wilbur Schramm, Daniel Lerner, Ithiel de sola Pool, Lucien Pye, and Everett Rogers argued, the media could “spread the message of modernity and transfer the economic and political models of the West to the newly independent countries of the South” (Thussu 56).

The media, along with other forms of ICTs, were also used by modernization theorists as a means of quantitatively measuring the progress of developing countries. The penetration rates of telephones, radios, and television sets, for example, were used to determine a country’s level of modernity and development (However, the type of technology usually counted [both in the past and in present day] is that which tends to be considered valuable to a Western sensibility. Often it is the most efficient, complex, and even the most expensive technology, rather than the technology most appropriate for the situation). Save for critical enclaves of scholars and activists, little was said, however, about *how* these media and ICTs were used, who benefited from their usage, who owned and controlled them. Rather, their mere existence was usually sufficient enough to indicate progression along the path of development, feeding a social evolutionist conception of progress described above.

This first stage of the modernization theory lasted up until the late 1970s, at which point it, and much of the Western world, were met with a concerted ideological backlash from the developing world (particularly in the form of the Non-

Aligned Movement, NAM). They called for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) to balance out the one-way flow of media and ICTs from the West to the “rest.” They also characterized the modernization theory as being ethnocentric and accused its proponents of encouraging the underdevelopment of developing countries. At the same time, theories of dependency and cultural / media imperialism had started to gain in popularity throughout the developing world, as well as within critical enclaves of developed countries.²⁴ These theories, later critiqued by various manifestations of a pluralism perspective, argued that the developing world had become dependent on the West in terms of technology, information, media, economic development, etc.

In later stages, the concepts and constructs of “modernization” and those of “development” have extended from one another. As a result, many of the technological and communication issues raised by NAM via NWICO remain unresolved in present day.²⁵ In fact, dependency theorists would argue that in an era of hyper-capitalism, stronger international financial institutions, and a new international division of labour, the West possesses even greater power now than it ever has before (in subsequent chapters of this dissertation, I will return to this issue when addressing Malaysia’s relationship with Western governments, international organizations, and transnational corporations).

Therefore, the modernization theory has not disappeared, nor has it been replaced by newer theories of cultural / media imperialism or pluralism. Rather, the

²⁴ Which included, among many others, such scholars as Herbert Schiller, Armand Mattelart, Cees Hamelink, and Kaarle Nordenstreng.

²⁵ It is also due, in large part, to the fact that the United States vehemently opposes the principles of NWICO. In the mid-1980s, the United States, along with Britain and Singapore,

media and new forms of ICTs are still expected to play important roles in helping to “modernize” the developing world. However, the discourse has shifted from one of “modernization” to that of “ICTs for development,” as progress (both at home and abroad) appears to hinge on advanced telecommunication and computer infrastructures. As sociologist Dominique Wolton writes in reference to the “modernizing powers” of new forms of ICTs,

[A]lmost nobody dares criticize them nor question whether they deserve such a place in public space, on the one hand, or if they signify a progress so unquestionable that they continually summon up the imperious need to “modernize”, on the other. For many, the number of computers connected to the Internet seems to be the clearest index of a country’s development, and even its degree of intelligence . . . In any case, this identification of progress with new techniques is there, massive, omnipresent in the discourse of politicians, the media and the elite. (qtd. in León, Burch, and Tamayo)

As I will discuss in subsequent chapters, this kind of technologically-driven “modernization” discourse is at the heart of development strategies within many developing countries. For example, the Malaysian government has actively encouraged its citizens to adopt new forms of ICTs, promising that they will beget progress writ large and help the country break its cycle of economic and technological dependency on the West. As well, the government has used both

withdrew from UNESCO in protest to the organization’s support of the NAM proposal (via the MacBride Report).

consensus-building and coercive measures to ensure that the Malaysian media play a “modernizing,” nationalist role, instead of acting as a watchdog of industry and government. Therefore, it would seem that Malaysia has bought into, what I would refer to as, a technologically-driven, neo-modernization theory of development.

However, I am not suggesting that ICTs cannot play a valuable role in projects of development. On the contrary, as discussed below, the ability to access and use ICTs is a fundamental human right, one that can open up a wide range of new social, political, and economic opportunities. However, there are a number of issues involved in understanding the role of technology in projects of development that must also be addressed (some of which are discussed below, as well as in Chapters 6 and 7). In terms of the Malaysian situation, for example, although ICTs have provided citizens with a variety of new opportunities, citizens must still live, work, and play in an environment that is 1) fundamentally undemocratic; and 2) is characterized by neo-liberal economic policies. This environment therefore limits the potential democratic uses of the technology.

V. Progressive Technologies Today: Promises of Social and Political Development

According to mainstream Malaysian rhetoric, new forms of ICTs will dramatically improve democratic practices, encourage civic engagement, and foster political participation. Although there is no one definition of democracy, for the purposes of this discussion I will consider it in broad terms, as an ongoing process in which citizens, rather than consumers, are able to participate in a meaningful way in

their daily lives. Since the personal is political, debate and discussion concerning the issues that affect peoples' lives occurs in the workplace, on the street, and in the café. Thus, democracy lives not only in the voting booth and the narrow confines of the political arena but also thrives in a multitude of public locales (which, hopefully, offer the fullest equality of access). It is the maximization of such citizen participation that creates a viable and robust democracy (Mosco, Pay-Per 67-69).

In recent times, democratic hope has been specifically pinned to the Internet in both Malaysia and in the West. By the late 1990s, the potential of this new technology had become similarly hyped by politicians (e.g., former American Vice President, Al Gore), optimistic academics,²⁶ as well as mainstream media. These optimists promised that “the marriage of computers and communications networks had ushered in a new era of permanent peace and prosperity” and that “the Internet was the most *revolutionary* development since the electric dynamo, the printing press, or the wheel” (Cassidy 1, emphasis added). The technology has been lauded for its ability to connect people who are separated geographically, as well as for the opportunity it offers users to produce and receive content in a point-to-point or point-to-multipoint formula. Through activities such as electronic town halls and electronic forums, as well as e-government initiatives and voting on-line, the Internet seems to offer a chance for citizens to engage in the kind of debates and discussions

²⁶ These optimists of the “digital sublime” include, but certainly are not limited to, Michael Benedikt, John Perry Barlow, Steven Clift, Esther Dyson, George Gilder, Kevin Kelly, George Keyworth, Ray Kurzweil, Nicholas Negroponte, Kenichi Ohmae, Mark Poster, Don Tapscott, and Alvin Toffler. Also, the Progress & Freedom Foundation, of which many of the individuals listed above are members, offers an optimistic, neo-liberal take on the power of new forms of ICTs. According to the website, the Foundation is “is a market-oriented think tank that studies the digital revolution and its implications for public policy. Its mission is to educate policymakers, opinion leaders and the public about issues associated with technological change, based on a philosophy of limited government, free markets and individual sovereignty” (Progress & Freedom).

considered essential to a healthy democracy. Technophiles have therefore argued that, “computer-mediated communication... hails a rebirth of democratic life. It is envisaged that new public spheres will open up and that technologies will permit social actors to find or forge common political interests” (Bryan, Tsagarousianou, and Tambini 5). Many of these optimists claim that new ICTs such as the Internet are not only revolutionary in terms of their technological capabilities, but also in terms of the changes they beget in society and the economy.²⁷ As an example, sociologist Manuel Castells writes that,

[T]he history of life, as I read it, is a series of stable states, punctuated at rare intervals by major events that occur with great rapidity and help to establish the next stable era...[A]t the end of the twentieth century, we are living through one of these rare intervals in history. An interval characterised by transformation of our ‘material culture’ by the works of a new technological paradigm organised around information technologies. (29)

In a similar vein, technological writer and optimist Don Tapscott contends that,

Today, we are witnessing the early turbulent days of a revolution as significant as any other in human history. A new medium of human communications is emerging, one that may prove to surpass all previous revolutions – the printing press, the telephone, the television,

²⁷ To be clear, the term “technological revolution” can be used to refer to a revolution in technological capabilities (e.g., digitization). This meaning, however, is quite different from technology *causing* a social, political, or economic revolution.

the computer – in its impact on our economic and social life. (qtd. in Mosco, Digital 18)

It appears, then, that Castells' and Tapscott's perspective runs contrary to Braudel's philosophy of the *longue durée*, and instead embraces a technologically determinist ahistoricism. For them, there is no need "nor genuine value in placing the Information Age in historical context because everything that came before is prehistory, of little value save to account for the extent of the contemporary rupture" (Mosco, Digital 35). However, as the micro-myths of the telegraph, train, and electrification would suggest, our faith in the power of new technologies to positively change our social, political, and economic environment is not at all new or unique. In fact, our modernist history is full of similar examples of utopian rhetoric surrounding the introduction of new technologies into society.²⁸ And yet we forget that the same enthusiasm expressed about the revolutionary potential of new forms of technology today is very similar in nature to that which greeted technologies of our past.

Moreover, as technology historian Wade Rowland contends, the same utopian yearnings are projected onto information, communication, and transportation technologies "in most cases without much thought being given to the appropriateness of the expectations, indeed, in most cases the most fervent expression of hope comes from those who least understand the technology" (375-76). As a result, technologies are, for the most part, unable to live up to the hype and

²⁸ Other examples of new forms of information, communication, and transportation technologies include the radio, telephone, television, cable television, automobiles, and airplanes. As Wade Rowland comments, "[w]hen the first manned, heavier-than-air flights took place over Kitty Hawk in 1903, the popular media greeted the birth of aviation as the dawn of an era 'in which planes would conquer distance, abolish national boundaries, and make all men brothers. They spoke of the

exaggerated expectations that have accompanied their introduction into society. For example, as discussed further in Chapter 7, even though the Internet has been used to connect geographically separated peoples, to challenge the political and economic status quo, and to transmit and receive vast amounts of information, it is not as free, democratic, or anarchist as many might have once hoped. Rather, as political economy of communication scholars, among others, have effectively demonstrated, this new technology has become increasingly co-opted by the political and economic status quo, thus mirroring the divisions, patterns, and monopolies already established in society.^{29 30} In fact, many technologies have often been employed for purposes that directly contradict tenets of democracy, peace, justice, and freedom. They have played pivotal roles in acts of war, colonization, the subjugation of nature and peoples, and the overall cultural and geopolitical imperialism of capitalism.

Yet, if we know this to be true, why is it then that we still tend to lean towards technological determinism, believing in the “revolutionary” potential of new technologies? Why do we believe technologies to be, as James W. Carey asks, “a force *outside* history and politics,” capable of begetting social, political, and economical “progress” in an environment where the political and economic elite want to maintain the status quo? (191)

According to historian Michael L. Smith, our faith in technology stems, in part, from the fact that we have become like Bonnie and Clyde who found themselves “rushing headlong against the wind, confident that their car would

airplane as guaranteeing equality, democracy, and perpetual peace – as a kind of universal or omnipotent technological fix” (375-76).

²⁹ e.g., as demonstrated particularly well by Dan Schiller and Lawrence Lessig.

³⁰ As examples, private companies own much of the “code” of cyberspace, the US-based private Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) controls much of the

always be the fastest and that they would never be caught” (38). In like manner to this elusive pair, who must have known that their world would eventually fall apart, Smith contends that we too recognize that the technological world we have created for ourselves will eventually reach a breaking point as well. However, we continue to hold on to the belief that technology can indeed make our world a better place to live because, “[w]ithout a clear sense of alternative routes... sheer momentum can steer the chase” (M.L. Smith 38). In the following section of this chapter, I will discuss two particularly effective methods used by the elite to help maintain this momentum of the myth of progress. They include 1) Roland Barthes’ notion of inoculation; and 2) the advancement of a technological sublime.

A. Inoculation

When something goes awry in a technology’s application causing an unanticipated negative outcome,³¹ or when technology is used for purposes other than what was promised of it, the effects are either concealed or explained away through seemingly rational justifications. Although trial and error is, of course, to be expected in the development of a new technology, Roland Barthes contends that we are encouraged to overlook the seriousness of some of the problems in a technology’s application in order to keep myths about its progressive powers alive.

Internet’s domain infrastructure, access to the network is limited within and between countries due to political and economic constraints, and information databases have become increasingly privatized.

³¹ The Hoover Dam, for example, has been viewed as a triumph of man over nature even though it caused serious environmental damage along the Colorado River. The Queen Elizabeth Way (QEW highway) was hailed as the pinnacle in roadway construction during the 1950s, but was built over the most fertile land in Ontario. And although the St. Lawrence Seaway is considered an engineering marvel, it was constructed without taking into consideration the effect of introducing alien entities to the fresh water lake system (through the dumping of ballast tanks).

He therefore argues that the elite in society immunize “the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil” (150). In other words, by publicly acknowledging that there will, of course, be some setbacks in a technology’s application, problems can be converted into “learning tools” to help make the technology more efficient, resilient, etc. (i.e., we are now the wiser for having learned from our mistakes).³² As an example, if something were to go amiss in the progressive trajectory of new ICTs, e.g., the dot-com bubble burst, it can be framed as a learning experience rather than a failure, or as a reflection of normal economic patterns rather than the validity of the technology itself.

In the Malaysian situation, the MSC may have, thus far, failed to live up to the tremendous hype of government and industry leaders. However, problems in the project’s development are (for the most part) kept out of public discourse through the government’s strict control of domestic mainstream media. Alternatively, any blips along the project’s trajectory can be explained away – e.g., the Asian financial crisis, SARS, the war on terrorism, slow-downs in the American economy and the international high-tech sector; all events that will eventually run their course. As such, the government can keep the micro-myth of the MSC, as well as its larger myth of modernity, progress, and development, intact.

³² This theory of inoculation is in keeping with Herbert Spencer’s notions of Social Darwinism, in which he argued that “life, humanity and society learned from their mistakes and the

B. A Technological Sublime

According to David E. Nye, the test for determining whether or not something is sublime is to see if it “strikes people dumb with amazement. The few experiences that meet this test have transcendent importance both in the lives of individuals and the construction of culture” (American 16). Nye argues that when technologies rather than nature are able to garner such a response, the reaction may appear almost religious or spiritual in nature. For example, when light bulbs lit up the night sky during an exhibit at the 1900 Paris World Fair, they did so on a scale that seemed to defy explanation other than the work of God / the supernatural. As such, the veneration “once reserved for the Deity and later bestowed upon the visible landscape” was instead redirected towards man-made constructions (in this case, the technological harnessing of natural electricity) (L. Marx, Machine 197).

In his book, American Technological Sublime, Nye chronicles large-scale applications of technology from American history (e.g., the train, electrification, the Hoover Dam, and even the atom bomb). He argues that these technologies served to forge social cohesion through a shared sense of awe in man’s technological achievements. As he put it, “when experienced by large groups the sublime can weld a society together” (American xiii). In present day, many new technologies (e.g., the Internet, space shuttles, genetic engineering) are greeted with a similar reaction of wonderment, awe, and sometimes even dread. Moreover, the rhetoric surrounding the introduction of each of these technologies into society have actively promoted these kinds of reactions. Citizens are encouraged to believe in the

inheritance of ‘functionally produced modifications’ was for the best” (Young 22).

transcendental power of the technology and to trust that it will beget social, political, and economic progress for all of society.

C. Rationalizing Technologies

However, even during the early stages of the shift towards a technological sublime, not everyone believed that technology should be the recipient of this kind of veneration, or that technological progress would necessarily beget progress writ large. Certainly the Romantics, particularly Jean-Jacques Rousseau, questioned the ability of new technologies to deliver on what the capitalists and Enlightenment philosophers alike promised of them.³³ Other artists, writers, and scholars of the nineteenth century, including Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Herman Melville, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry Adams,³⁴ also questioned the progressive powers of many new technologies, and expressed concern that society had become too technocratic in nature. Nathaniel Hawthorne, for example, wrote a story about a scientist obsessed with a birthmark on his wife's face (appropriately named as The Birthmark, 1844). Determined to correct her "imperfection," the scientist invented a potion for her to drink. His wife's compliance resulted in the disappearance of the birthmark, but also led to her death (Coors 5). Through this tale, Hawthorne chastised his society's fascination with trying to transform nature through

³³ In fact, Rousseau opened Book I of The Social Contract with the words "Man is born free, and yet we see him everywhere in chains," referring to his concern that the political and social institutions exalted during the Enlightenment only enslaved individuals and drove a wedge between humankind and nature (a sentiment echoed by Wordsworth, Goethe and others) (5).

³⁴ For a more comprehensive list, see Merritt Roe Smith, pages 26-27.

technology, and questioned what people were willing to sacrifice in order to play “God.”

Despite these protests, improvements in technology have, quite obviously, helped improve the standard of living for most people around the world. As one writer notes, “[t]he contribution of anaesthetic dentistry to human well-being is a reminder that, in some fields, there have been unalloyed improvements, real progress” (Gray 27). Moreover, as I have noted above (and will discuss again in subsequent chapters on Malaysia), new forms of ICTs can play a central role in improving the social, political, and economic lives of people in both the developed and the developing world. As such, it is important for us to recognize and remember that the role of any technology is socially constructed – “the technical always already incorporates the social in its structure” (Feenberg, *Questioning* 210). As political economy of communication scholar Robert Babe states, “[i]n no sense did (technologies) introduce themselves. They did not descend from the clouds, nor did they make ‘natural’ any particular industry structure” (4-5). This means that we have the ability to find alternative, more democratic routes for our technology and not resign ourselves to the fate of technological Bonnies and Clydes.

However, popular rhetoric tells us that all new technologies already pass through objective scientific filters (i.e., only the most efficient and sensible technologies are developed), as well as rational economic filters (if operating in a liberal and free market-place). As a result, technological development tends to be viewed in a rather Darwinian fashion. As David Noble writes,

“[j]ust as the Earth’s creatures evolve according to the anonymous and automatic logic of survival of the fittest, whereby only those forms best adjusted to the rigours of nature survive, so too do the myriad technological possibilities generated by human imagination and ingenuity pass through a competitive and thoroughgoing process of elimination, which guarantees that only those best suited to human purposes survive – as it were, naturally and automatically. (Progress 71)

However, when a technological network is made to appear natural, rational, and consensual, then the role played by political and economic elites in its construction is omitted from the discourse. Over the course of the past two chapters, I have examined a number of methods used by these elite to naturalize particular technological systems. These methods have included the marginalization (and sometimes criminalization) of dissent from myths sanctioned by the status quo, the use of the agenda-setting power of the mass media to promote specific versions of a myth, as well as to silence alternatives. In addition, I have discussed Barthes’ notion of inoculation which describes how setbacks in a technology’s development are justified in order to keeping myths regarding its progressive powers intact.

In this upcoming fourth chapter, I will explore another technique used to rationalize and naturalize specific technological systems – competition. I will explore four micro-myths from Western history and discuss how, in each case, the theme of a race has been used to direct citizens’ attention towards acquiring the technologies necessary for winning, rather than on whether or not they wish to be a

part of the competition, or if the end goal of the race is plausible or desirable. From there, I will turn to examine how macro and micro-myths operate within the Malaysian context. This will include a discussion of how the Malaysian government has used a similar race theme to keep alive its micro-myth of the MSC.

CHAPTER 4

GOING TO THE RACES IN SUPPORT OF THE MYTH OF PROGRESS

Although a variety of techniques have been used to garner support for myths and micro-myths concerning the power of technology to beget progress writ large, one of the most effective methods is to turn the acquisition of new technology into a race. As discussed in Chapter 2, myths are particularly effective if they are able to tap into human desires and emotions. A race, then, taps into emotions concerning winning and losing, thus encouraging people to concentrate on competing and ensuring that they are not “left behind,” rather than on whether or not the end goal of the race is plausible or even desirable. As such, myth-makers / elites are able to set the terms of debate, as people are encouraged to find ways of winning rather than questioning the race itself.

Therefore, in this fourth chapter I will describe four micro-myths that have taken place within Western history and explore briefly how each supports the macro-myth of progress. These races include: 1) a Land Race to control the land, people, and resources of the North American Western frontier; 2) a Space Race to control the “final frontier” of off-planet space; 3) a Cyber Race to get citizens on-line and connected in the new electronic era; and 4) a Bio Race to secure patents in genetic engineering. Although these micro-myths materialized at different points in time and involve very different issues, the objective of each race has been to gain public support by making people believe that if “we” do not gain control first, someone else

will. They should not, however, be considered as either right or wrong.³⁵ Rather, as discussed in Chapter 2, they should be viewed as either alive and thus relevant to society, or dead and no longer in circulation. As such, I hope to illustrate the effectiveness of using the theme of a race to keep a myth alive.

As mentioned, this race theme is not, of course, unique to the West. As I will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 7, the Malaysian government has also used the theme of a race to foster support for its micro-myth of the MSC. Under the leadership of former Prime Minister Mahathir, the government has encouraged Malaysians to support the ongoing development of this costly high-tech hub by comparing it to similar projects housed in neighbouring countries. Therefore, in like manner to the races described in this chapter, the MSC race allows the Malaysian government to set the terms of debate – since it is *obvious* that Malaysia needs to build the MSC to remain competitive in the new global economy, the role of citizens is to find ways of supporting and ensuring the project's success.

To summarize, the goals of this chapter are threefold: 1) to describe a selection of myths that support the macro-myth of progress; 2) to examine how the theme of a race has been used to promote public support for these micro-myths; and 3) to use these micro-myths / races as a basis for comparison against the micro-myth of the MSC.

³⁵ Admittedly, however, I have included questions of this nature in the discussion of the controversial subject of genetic engineering.

I. The Races

A. Land Race: Frontierism

In the aftermath of the American Civil War, massive campaigns to control North America's Western territories were carried out under the supposedly divine sanction of Manifest Destiny. Under the banner of God's will, Americans raced against each other to "open up the west" and mine its resources, often at the expense of labour unrest, the displacement of indigenous peoples, and ecological degradation.³⁶ The American expansion was also expected to include Canadian territory, thus pitting the two countries against each other for control over Western frontiers (H.N. Smith 17-18; M.R. Smith).

According to the famed "frontier thesis" of historian Frederick Jackson Turner, this drive to open up the West provided America with a unique identity and a history that was independent from that of Europe. Turner argued that the American frontier ideology played a central role in constructing a national identity that was based on rugged individualism, a pioneering spirit, and the willingness to "boldly go where no man has gone before." However, Turner believed that once Americans realized that the West had been "won," they would have a difficult time accepting that their frontier was closed and thus their physical space limited.

³⁶ This race also included a search for the famed Asian trade route. For, at the time, people believed that "[f]rom the ancient Phoenicians to the English the nation which has commanded the trade of Asia in each successive era has been the leader of the world in civilization, power, and wealth" (H.N. Smith 25).

Yet, more than a century later, America continues to draw “upon the frontier for its mythic identity”³⁷ and uses Western frontier symbolism in its efforts to “win” new kinds of spaces (Rushing 265). As the examples of the Space, Cyber, and Bio races discussed below demonstrate, a number of new frontiers have appeared have appeared on the horizon since the West was won. According to the promotional hype of politicians, mainstream media, and industry representatives, citizens must race to win each of these frontiers before “others” have the opportunity to do the same.

Although “the dominant social and economic model for expressing new aspirations in the United States is based on examples drawn from the history of Western settlement patterns” (Neice 65), it should be made clear that these new frontiers are not exclusive to America. Rather, as the discussion of the Malaysian situation illustrates, other countries are also competing to take advantage of the frontiers discussed in this chapter.

B. Space Race: The New Frontier

In response to the Soviet’s 1957 launch of its Sputnik satellite, the first man-made object sent into space, the United States established NASA, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. On May 25th 1961, two and a half years

³⁷ This identity has been supported by America’s fascination with Daniel Boone, Buffalo Bill, General Custer, Jesse James, and Davey Crockett. The stories of these larger than life figures were originally championed by dime novels, newspapers, and later by cinema (H.N. Smith). The symbolic draw of Western frontierism can also be found in the names of contemporary popular sports teams including the *Buffalo Bills* and *Dallas Cowboys*, as well as in such commercial products as *Chuck Wagon* dog food, *Stetson* cologne and *Marlboro* cigarettes. In addition, recent Hollywood movies such as *Wild Wild West*, *The Quick and the Dead*, *Unforgiven*, and *Tombstone* continue to

after NASA's inauguration, American President John F. Kennedy gave his famous "man on the moon" speech in which he declared, "I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the Earth." Kennedy's speech vaulted the United States into a space race against the Soviets, which provided the political motivation to financially support the successful moon landing of Apollo 11 (July 20, 1969)³⁸ (Dickson). The Sputnik launch thus had a "Pearl Harbor" effect on American public opinion, creating an illusion of a technological gap and provided the impetus for increased spending for aerospace endeavors..." (Garber and Launius).³⁹

It was during this Cold War race against the Soviets that the current headquarters for the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) was constructed in Cheyenne Mountain, a few miles south of the town of Colorado Springs. Built out of fear that a nuclear war with the Soviets was a distinct possibility, the NORAD headquarters were built to act as an early warning system for all air traffic in North America.⁴⁰ Concerned, however, that NORAD could only act as an early warning system offering little in the way of actually preventing a nuclear attack, the Reagan administration decided in 1983 to build a security blanket to cover and protect North America from nuclear annihilation. Introduced as the

glamorize life on the Western frontier. For additional examples and discussion, see Richard White, and Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Frontier in American Culture* (California: U of California P, 1994).

³⁸ Of note, Canada also played an important role in the early years of the Space Race. In 1965, the Canadian Space Agency launched the Alouette I, making Canada the third country in space (Canadian Space Agency). In addition, when the Avro Arrow went out of commission just two months after the creation of NASA, a number of top Canadian engineers moved south of the border to work for the new American agency (Gainor).

³⁹ In its attempt to win the space race, NASA received, on average, five-percent of the American federal government's total budget throughout the 1960s (however, financial priorities shifted soon after the lunar landing, due in large part to the redirection of attention towards the Vietnam War and domestic civil unrest) (Whitehouse).

⁴⁰ Jointly operated by Canada and the United States, NORAD shares a close relationship with NASA by monitoring all activity in near off-planet space.

Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI),⁴¹ the government promised that this security blanket would irreversibly alter the international political landscape by eliminating America's fear of military attacks (Fitzgerald; Mosco and Foster 231). Although Reagan was unable to implement it during his time in office, SDI has gained new life under the presidency of George W. Bush in the wake of September 11th (the events of which clearly refuted the "end of politics" theory). However, it is difficult for the Bush administration to justify spending billions of dollars on an initiative that many are concerned may help launch a new arms race when there is no clear nuclear threat from any particular source. Consequently, the government has instead emphasized the need to be pre-emptive against rogue nations and members of its "axis of evil" who have (or may have) nuclear capabilities; a race to be one step ahead of potential aggressors.

As a corollary, even though the American government has spent significant amounts of money in its exploration of the "final frontier," its interests lie as much in gaining control of space as in exploring it. For example, the number of satellites currently in orbit controlled by the United States or an American-based transnational corporation (e.g., the Global Positioning System, owned and operated by the United States Department of Defense), the rise in the business of space-tourism, and the geopolitical and economic importance of both near and distant / interplanetary space, would suggest that space exploration represents not only a race of curiosity, but also one of political and economic "ownership" of this frontier.

⁴¹ However, as Mosco notes, "[t]his does not mean that SDI lacked a history. For more than 30 years before the Reagan administration, the U.S. military tried, with little success, to develop

C. Cyber Race: The Last Frontier

As the Cold War abated, the Berlin Wall fell, and the Soviet Union disintegrated, a new frontier hit the political and economic radar screen: cyberspace. In 1958, approximately four months prior to the establishment of NASA, the American government created the Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) under the umbrella of the American Department of Defense. By the late 1960s, the agency had created ARPAnet, a reliable communications network originally intended for military and research purposes. ARPAnet, and its ultimate successor the Internet, quickly grew in popularity and became used for other purposes of a social, political, and economic nature. Today, the Internet is the primary portal into what optimists have touted as the new and limitless frontier of cyberspace.⁴²

Drawing on frontier symbolism, the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF) epitomizes this optimistic perspective, arguing that the Internet will produce an electronic agora capable of capturing the liberal individualism of the Enlightenment.

In order to take advantage of this new frontier, countries around the world are in the midst of a race to become “connected” to the Internet. The Canadian government, for example, has encouraged its citizens to get on-line or risk losing out on the social, political, and economic benefits that the Internet / cyberspace have to offer. As a result, attention has been focused on winning the “connectivity” race, rather than on questioning how the majority of citizens would benefit from being a part of it. As former Prime Minister Jean Chrétien stated in reference to the

weapons systems that would knock incoming missiles out of the sky” (Digital 101).

economic importance of having a connected country, “[w]e know that this is a global *race* where speed wins. That our competitors are innovating all the time. And that we must continue to challenge ourselves with ambitious new targets” (emphasis added).

D. Bio Race: The Final Frontier?

The last micro-myth that I wish to discuss in this chapter is the Bio Race. For centuries, humans have developed technology to treat illnesses, cross-fertilize plants, and breed and domesticate animals. Although organic modification is therefore not a recent phenomenon, the biological alteration of humans, plants, and animals has taken a far more serious turn over the past few decades with the production of new genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Recent advancements in this area of biotechnology and genetic engineering have, without a doubt, produced a multitude of positive applications (e.g., determining the genetic information necessary to treat certain diseases). Serious concerns have been raised, however, that genetic engineering, which “has the potential to alter the primordial material of human life in a way that has not been possible until now,” has become increasingly privatized (Andrews and Nelkin; Coors 2).⁴³

As an example, a biotechnology company called DeCODE Genetics, has “gained the rights to investigate, store, and commercialize the genes of the entire

⁴² Although the “Internet” and “cyberspace” are often conflated in common parlance, the latter is actually a catch-all phrase for a wide range of computer-mediated communication applications (Koepsell).

population of Iceland” (Andrews and Nelkin 5; DeCode). Despite its potential for medical breakthroughs, there are concerns that DeCODE has infringed upon the rights of citizens. Moreover, this kind of privatization of scientific and technological advancements may not be applied in a way that a majority of people would find socially or morally acceptable (e.g., genetic discrimination in the workplace, choosing an offspring’s genetic make-up, or further privatization of medical information and samples).⁴⁴

However, with the possibility of significant financial remuneration and control of this new frontier at stake, the race is on to lay claim to patents in the field of biotechnology and genetic engineering. As biotechnology optimist Gregory Stock⁴⁵ argues, genetic engineering is not only inevitable, but will ensure that our species evolves rather than becoming extinct.⁴⁶ For Stock, the “crucial question is whether we will continue to embrace the possibilities of our biological future or pull back and relinquish their development to braver souls in more adventurous nations of the world” (201). Therefore, he encourages his readers, specifically Americans, to support the patent race, or risk being left behind.

In addition to the genetic engineering of humans, the race is also on to patent new methods of genetically modifying plant and animal life, as well as to “own” the rights of the finished modified “product.” All told, the genetic modification of flora

⁴³ Human rights organizations have become increasingly vocal about this issue following the “pivotal 1980 U.S. Supreme Court case allowing the patenting of new life-forms” (Andrews and Nelkin 2).

⁴⁴ The privatization of the human body is apparent in language that treats it as a scientific object – “Body parts are *extracted* like a mineral, *harvested* like a crop, or *mined* like a resources” (Andrews and Nelkin 5).

⁴⁵ Stock is Director of the Program on Medicine, Technology and Society at University of California, Los Angeles.

⁴⁶ In a similar vein, Ray Kurzweil contends that humankind has entered into a new era in which “the human species, along with the computational technology it created, will be able to solve

and fauna, including humans, demonstrates our fascination with the technological sublime. Similar to Hawthorne's story of the birthmark (described in Chapter 3), we try to "perfect" natural entities through the application of technology. And, in our race to patent new methods of accomplishing this task, attention is often directed away from critically assessing the possible negative ramifications of trying to remove our various "birthmarks."

II. The Allure of Competition

Although their frontiers may be different, the races described in this chapter have a number of key elements in common. As noted above, for each race citizens have been encouraged to focus their attention on winning and conquering the new frontier that lay before them, rather than on critically examining the merits of the competition or their desire to be a part of it.

Also, at the heart of each race is the glorification of the technological subjugation of nature. In the land race, for example, the train / Iron Horse engendered awe and wonderment, inspiring faith in man's technological ingenuity and his ability to overcome obstacles imposed by nature in the push to open up the West. Almost a century later, when Apollo 11 hurdled its astronauts into the heavens to land on the moon, humankind appeared capable of completely defying the laws of nature. Today, many people believe that cyberspace represents an entirely new place, one that completely circumvents nature and "real" space. As well, new technology has been used to help us defy nature in our attempt to control

age-old problems of need, if not desire, and will be in a position to change the nature of mortality in a

our natural bodies and surrounding environment (i.e., the Bio Race allows us to become the living embodiment of progress). In sum, for each of the races described in this chapter, humans have employed technology to emasculate nature by either controlling it, or completely circumventing it. At the same time, citizens have been encouraged to view these new forms of technology with the awe, reverence, and sometimes even dread once reserved for the natural world, thereby causing a shift from a natural sublime to a technological one.

In this chapter, I have also tried to demonstrate that by drawing on the theme of a race, myth-makers have been able to tap into people's dreams of winning, as well as their fears of losing, being "left behind," and thus unable to take advantage of what each new frontier supposedly has to offer. However, beyond this fear of being left behind, there are a number of other important factors that have helped to make these micro-myths and their accompanying races a success.

As Vincent Mosco argues in his most recent book, The Digital Sublime, myths are essentially "stories that animate individuals and societies by providing paths to transcendence that lift people out of the banality of everyday life" (3). As an example, the lunar landing of Apollo 11 provided Americans (as well as other citizens of the world) with a mutually shared event that transcended the banal, the quotidian, and the commonplace. The televised coverage of Neil Armstrong's and Buzz Aldrin's first steps on the moon lifted people out of their ordinary lives and gave them something to watch and discuss that was larger than themselves and their immediate worlds. People believed themselves to be living during a truly unique

postbiological future" (qtd. in Mosco, Digital 76).

time in the world's history; the Space Race had transported them out of their slow-moving, day-to-day narratives and placed them on the brink of an entirely new era.

As part and parcel of this promise of transcendence from the banal, promoters of the micro-myths featured in this chapter have also drawn upon the power of religion to encourage public support for their races. This is because, as historian of religions scholar Mircea Eliade argues, even in modern, predominantly secular Western societies, no individual wishes to live only in a desacrilized or "profane" world (Sacred). Consequently, people tend to draw upon religious metaphors, concepts, and beliefs in order to infuse sacredness back into their profane, technologically driven society.⁴⁷ And, as a result, myth-makers are able to use religion as a tool of persuasion to encourage support for their myths and accompanying races.

Hence, the American government used Manifest Destiny to promote the idea that the race to open up the West was undertaken according to God's will. For the Space Race, some people believe that the initial lunar landing and ongoing space missions have brought humankind physically closer to God. David Noble goes so far as to suggest that even though NASA may not overtly promote a merger of the religious and the professional, the agency and the American government have encouraged a spiritual enchantment with space that supports such a union (Religion). As an example, when former American president Ronald Reagan quoted poet John Gillespie Magee in his eulogy for the Challenger memorial service, he promised that

⁴⁷ Although it is certainly not a new or unique claim that religion and technology have close affiliations, David Noble offers a new twist to the story. He argues that our drive to improve Western technology is actually a Christian pursuit of redemption; in order to regain our lost divinity we use technology to develop perfection here on earth (Religion). Since our efforts to control nature have, at times, also caused tremendous ecological and social devastation, Noble's arguments primarily revolve

“[w]e will never forget them, nor the last time we saw them, this morning, as they prepared for the journey and waved good-bye and ‘slipped the surly bonds of earth’ to ‘touch the face of God’.” Moreover, when Reagan proposed the Strategic Defense Initiative for the militarization of space, he told former Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev that “he saw the ‘hand of providence’ in it” (Mosco, “Brand New”).

Proponents of the Cyber Race have also used religion to generate public support for myths concerning the necessity of high-tech connectivity. By promising people an entirely new “transcendent” space that evades materialist restrictions, myth-makers have presented cyberspace as a type of heaven here on earth. According to science writer Margaret Wertheim, cyberspace has in fact given humankind the chance of regaining a neoteric spiritual place that has been lost since Dante’s medieval Christian world. According to this perspective, cyberspace is a “new” place that allows users to leave behind their “real” and materialist lives; to shed their earthly constraints and corporeal bodies in order to become whoever and whatever they desire. As Wertheim explains, “cyberspace helps to make explicit once more some of the nonphysical extensions of human beingness, suggesting again the inherent limitations of a strictly reductionist, materialist conception of reality” (252).

In terms of the Bio Race, questions have been raised regarding the right of humankind to try and “play God.” As we continue to explore methods of extending life, cloning species, genetically modifying foods, and extracting and selling our

around the ways in which science and technology have been put to harmful ends. However, in doing so doing he fails, or chooses not to sufficiently recognize technology’s many positive applications.

biodiversity, concerns have been raised about the changing nature of the relationship between creator and created. Although common modern medical procedures already allow us to modify our bodies, recent forms of genetic engineering signal a dramatic shift in our level of control and the irrevocability of our actions. As Marilyn Coors, a professor of ethics interested in human genetics contends, “[t]he hand of humankind now participates in the origination and modification of life forms more directly and efficiently than was formerly possible” (36). Consequently, even though the thought of “playing God” to such an extent may be unappealing to many people, we have retained our modernist desire to control nature and overcome our mortal constraints.

In addition to using religion and the promise of transcendence to generate public support, myth-makers have also drawn upon the power of nationalism and patriotism to advance their myths and accompanying races. In terms of the Space Race, for example, the United States and the Soviet Union pitted themselves against one another for control of off-planet space. Failure to win the race would have resulted in a serious setback to the American government (one which they could not afford in the face of growing civil unrest over the Vietnam War). Moreover, in the aftermath of the Bay of Pigs debacle and the Cuban Missile Crisis, the American government needed something tangible to prove that the United States was, for all intents and purposes, superior to the Soviet Union. As such, the government called upon the power of patriotism to propel the American public into supporting the country’s space program, making the race to the moon a central component of the Cold War.

As the discussion above demonstrates, the efficacy of the races described in this chapter can, in large part, be attributed to the promotional efforts of political and economic forces. As Mosco writes (and I noted in the Introduction to this dissertation), these forces, “play important roles in compelling belief and action. [They] include visionaries promising an electronic utopia, the mass media looking for a good story, politicians wanting to be identified with the next new thing, and businesses, public relations firms, and advertisers eager to market the latest promise to transform life as we know it” (*Digital* 117-18). We can see each of these forces at work in the example of the 1960s Space Race. As noted above, the American government promoted myths concerning space exploration as a means of garnering political favour. At the same time, the mass media provided extensive coverage of the race, particularly the lead up to the lunar landing, knowing that its “live” broadcasts of history guaranteed a massive international audience. Also, advertisers “eager to market” this monumental event promoted the race in order to sell commodities associated with the new space age era. At the same time, industry leaders in science and technology advanced the race so as to procure additional money for further research and development.

All told, myths and the races that support them are extremely powerful tools of persuasion. As I noted in the previous chapter, Jacques Ellul has referred to myths as “part emotionalism, part affective response, part a sacred feeling” (qtd. in Karim, “Cyber-Utopia” 121-23). By being able to incite “strong emotions in people,” they are used by the dominant groups in society to maintain hegemonic power (although it is important to recognize that marginalized communities also use

myths to garner support for counter-hegemonic activities) (Ellul qtd. in Karim, “Cyber-Utopia” 121-23). In other words, the status quo use myths to encourage support for their ideologies.

III. Looking Ahead to Malaysia’s Technological Race

Similar to the examples provided in this chapter, Malaysia has a number of its own unique micro-myths that support its macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development. Of particular interest to this project is Malaysia’s micro-myth of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). As described in the following two chapters, the Malaysian government has entered its citizens into a competition against neighbouring countries (including Singapore, India, and China) for ownership of the region’s most successful international high-tech hub. In so doing, the government has tried to establish the terms of debate for this micro-myth – i.e., it is *obvious* that Malaysia *needs* the MSC in order to compete in the new global economy. As a corollary, if the project is unsuccessful, Malaysia risks being “left behind” in the new information age and thus slipping back into the status of a developing country, rather than a newly industrializing one.

Moreover, one of the primary reasons why the micro-myth of the MSC has remained alive, despite setbacks in the project’s development, is that it provides Malaysians with a clear and tangible blueprint of how the country will be able to progress in this new high-tech era. According to the government, the MSC will generate socio-economic development by: 1) attracting valuable foreign direct

investment; 2) facilitating the transfer of technological skills and training from transnational corporations to domestic ones; and 3) using its Flagship Applications (discussed below) to share benefits accruing from the project with all Malaysians. The micro-myth of the MSC is, therefore, a story of how Malaysians are able to transcend their developing country status by using an Asian version of Silicon Valley to “leapfrog” into a prosperous new future. At the centre of this story are the twin cities of Cyberjaya and Putrajaya, the headquarters of the MSC and the new administrative capital of Malaysia, respectively. With their gleaming “modern” buildings, efficient infrastructure, and clean, crime-free streets, these cities (which are discussed in greater detail in Chapters 6 and 7) represent the new and improved future of Malaysia. As such, this micro-myth functions to lift “people out of the banality of everyday life” (Mosco, *Digital* 3), bonding them together in a common pursuit of overall development.

To better understand how and why the government has constructed, disseminated, and kept alive the micro-myth of the MSC, as well as the macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development which it supports, this next chapter (5) opens with an historical overview of the country’s social, political, and economic landscape, followed by a description of the MSC and its Flagship Applications. In subsequent chapters (6 and 7), I will turn to explore some of the government’s consensus-building / hegemonic methods of encouraging support for its myths (including its use of the race theme), as well as a number of measures that are more coercive in nature.

IV. Bridging the West and Malaysia: Similarities and Specificities

The idea that progress is achieved through material accumulation and technological achievements⁴⁸ is not universal, monolithic, or static. Rather, there are various interpretations of this ethos within the West, as well as within other regions of the world. However, (as will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 6) countries such as Malaysia have been influenced by dominant Western conceptions of what constitutes “progress” in both colonialist and post / neo-colonialist periods. Today, Malaysia faces political and economic pressures from the West to accept the idea that technological and material improvements will beget social, political, and economic progress. This pressure comes in the form of international financial organizations which tend to be supported and led by Western interests (e.g., the World Trade Organization, WTO, and the International Monetary Fund, IMF), as well as by its primary trading partners (especially the United States), and transnational corporations. Moreover, in an era of satellites, the Internet, and other ICTs capable of transcending nation-state borders, Malaysians are bombarded by Western sources of news, media, and entertainment which help to promote this specific myth of progress.

As well, there are other reasons why Western myths concerning progress appear to be similar in nature to those found in Malaysia. I would argue that on a fundamental level the desire for personal progress, whatever that might entail, is universal – people want to feel that they are moving towards a better, more prosperous future. As such, myths about progress serve a universal psychological

function in their ability to help people deal with an unknown future (e.g., the MSC micro-myth acts as a knowable blueprint for how Malaysians will “progress” socially, politically, and economically). As well, the allure of competition, which includes the fear of being “left behind,” is a base, fundamental human emotion. As such, myths surrounding the races discussed in Chapter 4 (in the West) and in Chapter 7 (in Malaysia) play a social function by binding people together in support of a common project / objective.

However, there are also differences that exist between myths of progress in the West and in Malaysia which mirror their distinctive histories, politics, economics, and cultures. To illustrate, Malaysia’s myths concerning progress are influenced by its relationships with other Asian countries (e.g., the impact of Japan and Singapore on Malaysia’s Look East program and Malaysia Inc.), as well as by its participation in a wider, international Muslim community. Therefore, even though Malaysia’s economic situation has been largely influenced by its colonial legacy and subjugation by Western interests, its ideas about, and methods of attaining “progress” are also unique unto Malaysia. Moreover, within Malaysia “progress” can mean many things to many different people, especially considering the multiracial, multiethnic, and multireligious composition of the country’s citizens.

A. Myths from Malaysia

Although I have discussed the history of “myth” from a Western perspective, there also exists scholarly work addressing the socio-cultural importance of

⁴⁸ As per a Western understanding of technology, as discussed further in Chapter 6.

Malaysian myths. This literature primarily addresses myths of different religious and ethnic groups within Malaysia. For example, there exists academic literature on myths surrounding the Malay Wayang Kulit, a shadow puppet play that features stories of good versus evil (that draws upon the Ramayana, a Hindi story of life, origin, and spiritual tales).^{49 50} There is also scholarly work on Chinese myths. For instance, in his article “Festival of the Nine Emperor Gods in Malaysia: Myth, Ritual, and Symbol,” Malaysian academic Hock Tong Cheu offers an insightful discussion of the mythology surrounding this Malaysian Taoist and Buddhist festival which takes place on the ninth day of the ninth moon during the Chinese lunar calendar. Also, Anil Singh provides an interesting look at the historical myths surrounding the Deepavali festival that takes place in Malaysia during the seventh month of the Hindu calendar to mark the triumph of good over evil. These examples offer some insight into the wide range of literature addressing myths of different religions and ethnic groups in Malaysia. However, these myths, although culturally relevant, are not pan-Malaysian; they do not transcend distinct communities within the country.

1. *Alatas and Myth.* One of the foundational texts on myth in Malaysia is Syed Hussein Alatas’ Myth of the Lazy Native (1977). In this work, Alatas takes to task the ruling elite of Malaysia which have, he argues, perpetuated the colonialist idea that Malays are the “lazy,” “backwards,” and in need of help from a benevolent

⁴⁹ Although the Wayang Kulit is especially popular in the state of Kelantan, the PAS party has recently banned the plays, arguing that they do not adhere to traditional Islamic policies.

⁵⁰ See for example Amin Sweeney’s Malay Shadow Puppets: The Wayang Siam of Kelantan (1972) and The Ramayana and the Malay Shadow-Play (1972).

leader cum dictator. For Alatas, UMNO's appropriation of their former colonizer's discourse demonstrates that there was "no intellectual break with British ideological thinking... and is a distorted ideology of a Malay ruling party sharing the false consciousness of colonial capitalism" (152). In fact, he contends that members of the Malay elite use terms that are even more derogatory than what the colonialists once used while, at the same time, trying to distance themselves from being lumped into the same category as their "lazy" fellow Malays. As Alatas writes, "[w]hile they attempted a detailed criticism of the Malays, they avoided a similar detailed treatment of the ruling elites... [i]t is a reflection of their position in the power structure" (163). A primary target of Alatas' critique is Mahathir's famous book, The Malay Dilemma, which he argues epitomizes this neo-colonialist course of thought.

Alatas' work is useful on a number of fronts. It provides insight into Malaysia's post / neo-colonial history and the rationale behind the development and ongoing government support of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and Bumiputra rights (discussed in the next chapter). It also offers some historical context for understanding Mahathir's plans for a pro-capitalist "Western" mode of "modernization." Alatas' work also demonstrates the power of myths – the myth of the "lazy native" was, and arguably continues to be an emotional and powerful ethos in Malaysian society. However, Alatas appears to have conflated the concepts of "myth" and "ideology." For him, myths are stories which are consciously used by the elite to distort reality, negate history, and obscure power relationships. Drawing upon the work of Ellul, I have argued that myths should be viewed as something

which the elite tap into in order to promote their ideology. Although Alatas does argue that the “myth of the lazy native” is used to maintain the Malaysian status quo, he does not discuss how myth and ideology are distinct from one another and how the latter is dependent upon the former’s emotional draw for its longevity. Moreover, his concentration is on myths (which he considers to be false stories) concerning Malaysia’s Malay population. In comparison, over the course of the next three chapters, I will be looking at myths that concern the entire Malaysian population.

CHAPTER 5

CONTEXTUALIZING MALAYSIA'S MYTH OF MODERNITY, PROGRESS, AND DEVELOPMENT: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, new forms of ICTs are surrounded by utopian rhetoric that promotes their transformative social, political, and economic powers. To take full advantage of the power of these new technologies, many countries have chosen to build high-tech research parks with the American Silicon Valley as their model. These Silicon Imitators are expected to cultivate domestic high-tech sectors, attract valuable foreign direct investment (FDI), and help society “leapfrog” into a more prosperous future. As I will argue in the following three chapters, this is clearly the path of development that has been chosen by the government of Malaysia.

In the mid 1990s, under the leadership of former Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, Malaysia began construction of an international high-tech hub or Silicon imitator. Named the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) this hub was designed to launch Malaysia into a position of power and independence in the new global information economy. The project is a key element in a larger government strategy called Vision 2020, designed to steer Malaysia towards the status of a “developed nation” by the year 2020. In essence, the strategy is a social manifesto encouraging Malaysians to work hard, remain united, and embrace ICTs as a means of ensuring the country’s economic, social, and political development. Together, ICTs, the MSC, and Vision 2020 play a critical role in Malaysia’s myth of

modernity, progress, and development. According to this myth, Malaysia has successfully overcome its colonial legacy in order to become modern, and is now on its way to achieving the status of a *fully* developed nation.

Chapter 6 is dedicated to exploring how the government has promoted this myth, both at home and abroad, through the use of symbolic language and physical symbols. The former includes government speeches and policy documents, particularly Vision 2020 and the National Vision Policy, as well as promotional materials concerning the MSC. Physical symbols include large-scale urban projects and mega-projects such as the Petronas towers located in the heart of the capital city Kuala Lumpur, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, as well as the twin cities of Cyberjaya and Putrajaya, the headquarters of the MSC and Malaysia's new administrative capital respectively. In addition to illustrating Malaysia's modernity and fostering national pride, these promotional devices are used to encourage domestic and international financial investment by demonstrating the country's technological capabilities, economic stability, and potential growth. In so doing, the government promotes the power of ICTs in general, and the MSC in particular, to enhance projects of social and economic development.

However, these powers are limited by two important factors. First, ICTs and the MSC operate within a neo-liberal economic environment that benefits the elite at the expense of the "average" Malaysian. In Chapter 6, I will examine pressures that Western governments, international financial institutions, and transnational corporations have exerted on Malaysia to accept neo-liberal economic policies, as well as the role played by the local elite in willingly facilitating and implementing

them. Second, ICTs and the MSC must operate within an undemocratic environment, one in which the Malaysian government restricts a wide range of civic rights, including freedoms of expression, speech, assembly, and press. Thus, although ICTs are used in projects dedicated to social, political, and economic development within Malaysia, the government works to ensure that such usage does not disrupt the political and economic status quo.

As discussed in Chapter 2, myths only remain alive if they continue to be relevant to society and thus part of societal discourse. Consequently, Chapter 7 is dedicated to exploring methods used by the government to ensure the relevance and longevity of myths that are in its best interest. Attention will be focused on the government's use of consensus-building and coercive techniques to keep myths alive, emphasizing its control of media and educational institutions, and well as its use of repressive laws.

The purpose of this current chapter, then, is to provide some historical context for understanding Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development, as well as the contemporary socio-cultural, political, and economic situation in which the myth operates. It includes an overview of Malaysia's colonial and post-colonial history, emphasizing changes that have occurred in the country's ethnic, religious, political, and economic environment since Mahathir came into power in 1981. In particular, the chapter profiles three key economic policy initiatives: the New Economic Policy (1971-1990), the National Development Policy (1991-2000), and the National Vision Policy (2001-2010). The chapter closes with a

descriptive overview of the MSC, its objectives, physical attributes, and Flagship Applications.

Since a considerable portion of the information and arguments presented in the following three chapters is based on research conducted in Malaysia, this chapter opens with a discussion of research methodology.

I. Research Methodology – Choosing Malaysia

My decision to study Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development was based primarily on two factors. First, I was interested in how and why the Malaysian government has so heavily promoted its country as modern, ICT-oriented, high-tech, and computer-savvy. Malaysia offered an appealing case study of how a developing, or "newly industrializing" country, has embraced ICTs as an ideal agent / driver of development. Second, I was interested in the extreme reactions that Mahathir's⁵¹ policies, programs, and projects have engendered from the Malaysian population, as well as from foreign governments and institutions. Mahathir has drawn sharp criticism, both domestically and internationally, for repressing civil liberties, developing extravagant mega-projects, engaging in political patronage, and making unilateral policy decisions. At the same time, however, he has drawn praise for dramatically improving and diversifying his country's economy, defending the rights of the developing world, and balancing domestic diversity. He has condemned the West for promoting a form of friction-free

⁵¹ In October 2003, Mahathir stepped down as Prime Minister of Malaysia. As discussed later in this chapter, his former Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, succeeds Mahathir.

globalization (discussed below) that is only of benefit to the developed world, while also willingly embracing the very engines of this mode of capitalism (e.g., privatization, liberalization, and deregulation). Moreover, he has criticized Western economics, politics, and even “Western values,” at the same time as courting Western companies to relocate to the MSC.

These contradictions within “Mahathirism” thus make for a complex and interesting case study. In addition, as Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, Mahathir has played a central role in shaping the country’s current economic and political environment, as well as in the construction of its myth of modernity, progress, and development. As a result, over the course of the next three chapters I will refer often to Mahathir’s “prolific writings and speeches, and outspoken views, [which] dominate the country’s political landscape” (Kelly, “Metaphors” 728). For, as one observer notes, “[t]o read the tea leaves of Malaysian politics is to always refer to the man who calls the shots” (Jayasankaran).

II. Research Methodology – Primary Sources

The information and arguments presented and discussed in these chapters are based on both primary and secondary research. Primary research was conducted during a ten-month period in Malaysia from August 2000 to May 2001. As there is an inevitable lapse in time between being in “the field” and the actual writing process, the former has been supplemented by continued personal communication

with members of the Malaysian communities described below, as well as from recently published academic and media sources.

A. Locations and Funding

The bulk of the primary research described above was conducted in three locations within Malaysia. These locations include: 1) the island of Penang in the Northwest corner of peninsular Malaysia; 2) the capital city of Kuala Lumpur; and 3) the country's new administrative capital, Putrajaya, and its sister city, Cyberjaya, which are located in the heart of the MSC. In addition, I conducted limited research in the state of Sarawak, East Malaysia. Specifically, I interviewed academics at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) in the state's capital city of Kuching. Although a considerable amount of research time was spent in Kuala Lumpur,⁵² my home base was located on the island of Penang. In addition to its quieter lifestyle, Penang is home to numerous non-government organizations (NGOs) and its principal university, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), boasts a core of critical academics. As one academic explains, "Penang presents a case where autonomous political space is relatively well developed among certain segments of the population relative to other locations in Malaysia" (Kelly "Developing" 61).

Research funding for this dissertation was provided by a Rotary International Scholarship, as well as in-kind support from USM. As part of the scholarship's requirements, I presented public talks at Rotary functions and club meetings

throughout peninsular Malaysia. Fortuitously, these events provided me with an opportunity to meet club members who were a part of Malaysia's political and economic elite. These members often acted as a personal liaison between myself and political / industry leaders whom I wished to meet / interview.⁵³

B. Design Strategy

The primary data for this "field" research was gathered through participant observation combined with sixty-nine unstructured and semi-structured interviews. The interviewees belonged to a variety of different Malaysian communities, including academic institutions, mainstream and alternative media organizations, and non-government associations (these affiliations were not, however, mutually exclusive as many interviewees belonged to more than one community). I also interviewed public servants working for federal and state-level government agencies and ministries, as well as employees within the information and communication technology industry.⁵⁴ In addition, I met with representatives of the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) and toured MSC facilities in four out of the country's five MSC-designated zones.⁵⁵ I also conducted five unstructured interviews with individuals from academic and media institutions located in other Asian countries (within the context of two international conferences, held in

⁵² Travel and accommodations were often graciously provided by, among others, Dzof Azmi (formerly of the Ministry of Education), Anil Netto (Aliran), and Avvari Mohan (Multimedia University).

⁵³ Of particular note, the members of the Rotary Club of Bayan Baru, Penang (especially Mr. Beh Hong Pin) were extremely generous with their time and support.

⁵⁴ Refer to Appendix 1 for a complete list of interviewees and their affiliations.

Singapore and Kuala Lumpur, concerning ICTs and press freedom in Asia). In addition, I was invited to give a public address for faculty members and government officials at the Multimedia University (located in Cyberjaya) and to guest lecture in the Department of Communication at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM). The feedback⁵⁶ from these activities provided invaluable insight into many of the issues addressed in the dissertation.

1. *Emergent Design Flexibility.* The design strategy of the fieldwork described above was based on what sociologist Michael Quinn Patton refers to as “emergent design flexibility”:

[w]hile the design will specify an initial focus, plans for observations, and initial guiding interview questions, the naturalistic and inductive nature of the inquiring makes it both impossible and inappropriate to specify operational variables, state hypotheses, or finalize either instrumentation or sampling schemes. A naturalistic design unfolds or emerges as fieldwork emerges. (44)

As noted in the introductory chapter of this dissertation, the original intention of my research was to study the MSC initiative and issues related to Malaysia’s domestic digital divide (including those associated with fault lines in terms of access to new forms of ICTs). Once in the field, however, the focus of my research shifted towards an examination of how the Malaysian government has promoted myths

⁵⁵ To conduct these interviews, I received official research clearance from my host academic institution, Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), which is approved by the Malaysian Ministry of Information.

⁵⁶ Faculty members Indrajit Banerjee (now at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore) and Zaharom Nain were particularly generous with their time and insights.

concerning the power of the MSC and ICTs to leapfrog the country into a more prosperous future. As a result, some of the interviews I conducted in the initial stages of my research do not appear to be reflected in the dissertation. The reason for this is twofold. First, a number of these interviews were not particularly relevant to the revised focus of my dissertation. As an example, within the first three months of research I interviewed seven academics and members of NGOs whose work was dedicated to issues concerning women's access to and usage of ICTs. Although I make reference to their work in Chapter 7 (under "Fault Lines"), these interviews did not play a significant role in my revised thesis. Second, although I have not directly quoted many of my interviewees, the information and insight that I gained during my interview with them aided in my development of a fuller, more in-depth picture of Malaysia's social, political, and economic landscape. For instance, during an informal open question interview with Dinesh Nair (IT consultant) and Dzofrain Azmi (formerly of the Ministry of Education) I gained a list of potential future interviewees from the public and private sector, as well as a better understanding of how the relationship between these two sectors has impacted the development of ICT-oriented programs and policies within the country.

Therefore, an emergent design flexibility strategy also incorporates a "snowball" or "chain sampling" approach to qualitative research. Prior to arriving in Malaysia, I contacted key academics at Universiti Sains Malaysia and established meeting times and places. However, once in the field the vast majority of my interviews were purposefully selected through a chain sampling process which "begins by asking well-situated people: 'Who knows a lot about ____? Whom

should I talk to?’” (Patton 237).⁵⁷ I then contacted these potential interviewees via email and / or telephone for further discussion and, if possible and appropriate, to determine an interview time and place.

To be clear, this method is not random. Rather, it involves purposeful qualitative sampling in which individuals, groups, events, etc., are considered to be “‘information-rich’ and illuminative, that is, they offer useful manifestations of the phenomenon [e.g., the micro-myth of the MSC], not empirical generalization from a sample to a population” (Patton 40). For instance, at an early stage in the research process I conducted a semi-structured interview with Ng Wan Peng, a senior manager of the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) responsible for the MSC’s Flagship Coordination Unit. During our interview, she directed me towards useful secondary sources / background reading material regarding the MDC, MSC, and Flagship Applications. She also offered names and coordinates of other individuals working with / for the MDC which she considered to be “‘information-rich” (these included Azman Ibrahim, Rodhiah Ismail, Ariffin Bin Wan Ismail, and Ismal Mohamed⁵⁸).

However, once I left the “field” and began to write the dissertation I realized that there were other individuals that could have also been interviewed. These individuals include: a member of the PAS party (the Parti Islam Sa-Malaya), labour organizations connected to Cyberjaya / Putrajaya, government officials in East Malaysia and in the more traditional Islamic states in northern peninsular Malaysia, as well as public relations personnel in the Prime Minister’s office and the Ministry

⁵⁷ Additional interviewees were determined via secondary sources while in the field (e.g., from academic and media texts)

of Education. However, this is one of the inevitable drawbacks of writing once removed physically and temporally from one's location of inquiry.

C. Information Collection

1. *Informed Consent.* Prior to each interview, I provided the individual(s) in question with an opening statement.⁵⁹ The purpose of this statement was to ensure that the interviewee was completely aware of my intentions and purpose for conducting the interview. After first introducing myself, I stated that,

I am a PhD student from Canada, studying at Carleton University in Ottawa. I am currently attached to the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang and am doing research for my PhD dissertation on information and communication technologies in Malaysia, looking at how the government is trying to bridge the country's "digital divide" and promote the MSC and other new technologies. I was given / found your name through _____. I would like to ask you a few questions about _____. These questions will be used to help me write my dissertation. If there are any questions that you would prefer not

⁵⁸ Their specific affiliations are listed in Appendix 1.

⁵⁹ There were, however, a few exceptions. For example, while conducting an unstructured interview within the Educational Technology Division at the Ministry of Education, I was introduced to another employee who chose to join the interview / discussion. At that point, the "original" interviewee informally explained to the "new" interviewee the purpose of my research project on behalf.

to answer or would like to do so under the condition of anonymity,
please let me know.⁶⁰

Also, I provided each interviewee with the option of reading my research approval form from Universiti Sains Malaysia and the Malaysian Ministry of Information.

Of note, I chose not to include an informed consent form for interviewee signature. This is because “an informed consent statement and asking for a signature can be awkward at best. To the extent that interviews are an extension of a conversation and part of a relationship, the legality and formality of a consent form may be puzzling ... or disruptive to the research” (Rubin and Rubin, qtd. in Patton 411).

2. *Interviews.* Most of the interviews I conducted during field research belong to the category of an “elite” interview. Elite interviewees are considered to be “in a position of authority, or especially expert or authoritative” on specific issues (Gillham, Case 63). For my research, these individuals included management level public servants, politicians, media personnel, and academics. The majority of these interviews were semi-structured in nature because the individuals in question possessed a considerable depth of knowledge about the given issue and as such were able to tell me what kinds of questions I “should be asking” (Gillham, Case 64). As such, the questions that I asked were more open rather than closed queries.

⁶⁰ However, this opening statement was at times altered to take into consideration specific circumstances – e.g., if I had already met the individual in a more informal setting and had previously described my research project, I shortened the statement.

However, some of these interviews were considerably more structured. For example, at the outset of my interviews with the following individuals, it was evident that they preferred to answer closed questions based on factual rather than conjectural information – Ariffin Bin Wan Ismail (MyKad), Resat Salleh (Information Department, Penang), Boonler Somchit (Penang Skills Development Centre), and anonymous interviewees from the Ministry of Information. Nevertheless, I also asked them some open questions based on their responses to my closed enquiries in an attempt to shift the focus away from “who,” “what,” and “where” types of questions and towards more “why” and “how” kinds of answers. As psychologist Bill Gillham contends, this kind of interplay demonstrates the value of an emergent design flexibility strategy because “[i]n a sense the structured-unstructured dimension is false. Expert interviewers [although I do not claim to be one] always have a structure, which they use flexibly according to what emerges” (Research 3).

As another example, in my interview with Ng Wan Peng, I asked closed questions to determine which government ministries were responsible for specific elements of the MSC’s Flagship Applications. These closed queries were therefore used to establish some basic facts. However, I also asked a number of open questions concerning the government’s / MDC’s desired outcome of the applications, future directions for the projects, etc. As such, most of my interviews would be classified as semi-structured as they included both open and closed questions.

Other semi-structured interviews conducted with “elite” public servants include the following: Othman Yeop Abdullah (MDC), Foong Mae Chan (Ministry of Education), Ghazali Mohamed Fadzil (MDC), Azizah Hamzah (Ministry of Energy, Communications & Multimedia, MECM), Rubaiah Hashim (MECM), Azman Ibrahim (MDC), Rodhiah Ismail (MDC), Mohammad Jaafar (Ministry of Human Resources), K.J. John (Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems, MIMOS), Eng Kooi Lim (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, MCMC), Anuar Maarof (Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit, MAMPU), Ismal Mohamed (MDC), Arif Mohamed Nun (MDC), Mohd Azahar Osman (MCMC), Fahmy Z. Rahman (Malaysian Industry Government Group for High Technology), Larry Validia (MDC), as well as anonymous interviewees from the City Command Centre of Cyberjaya, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Health,

I also conducted other semi-structured interviews with individuals considered to be “elite” in terms of their knowledge about issues related to ICTs / the MSC, but were not management level public servants. These individuals belonged to various academic, media, and NGO communities. They include: Mustafa K. Anuar (Universiti Sains Malaysia), Poline Bala (Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, UNIMAS), Noor Bathi Bararudin (University of Malaya), Cecilia S.K. Chan (Women’s Institute of Management, WIM), Steven Gan (Malaysiakini), Mohd Faisal Syam Abdol Hazis (UNIMAS), Badrul Hisham Jaafar (Malaysian Technology Development Corporation), Wee Your Lee (TV3), Francis Loh Kok Wah (Universiti Sains Malaysia), Dinesh Nair (IT consultant), John Nogey (Canadian High Commission),

Tam Pham (UNDP), Sankaran Ramanathan (Nanyang Technological University), Mansor A. Saman (University Sains Malaysia), Lim Kit Siang (Democratic Action Party), Bhag Sing (Lawyer), Siva Subramanian (National Union of the Teaching Profession Malaysia), Nellie Tan (WIM), Wong Chun Wai (The Star), and Halimah Badioze Zaman (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia). As well, I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of MSC status companies (listed in Appendix 1), anonymous faculty members of the Multimedia University, employees of the New Straits Times and The Star, an elementary teacher in a designated “Smart School,” and two journalists from an English Malaysian newspaper.

In addition, I conducted a number of interviews that would be considered more unstructured in nature than the ones discussed above. During these interviews I used more “natural” conversation within an informal, discussion format to ask questions regarding my research. These interviewees included: Arnifa Asmawi (Multimedia University), Dzofrain Azmi (Ministry of Education), Indrajit Banerjee (formerly of the Universiti Sains Malaysia), Bernice Low (Quack Concepts), Joanie McCollum (Stanford University), Avvari Mohan (Multimedia University), Zaharom Nain (Universiti Sains Malaysia), and Anil Netto (Aliran).

In addition to the interviews described above, I conducted a semi-structured phone interview with Farida Habib Shaw (Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia), as well as email interviews with Wan Rahim Ahmad (Department of Statistics) and Khaw Lake Tee (University of Malaya).

During the interviewing process I personally recorded the information that each interviewee provided. However, these notes are not verbatim as they were not

transcribed or recorded via a tape recorder. In addition the interviews, during my ten months of field research I kept a daily journal (totalling 21 books at the conclusion of my research) to record observations, ideas, potential questions for further study and interviews, etc.

3. *Primary Research: Participant Observation and Reflexivity.* As its name implies, participant observation requires a researcher to participate in a given cultural environment while simultaneously observing various elements within it. Since it is difficult to engage in both activities at once, a central component of participant observation methodology is self-reflexivity. “Although reflexive methods are yet to be thoroughly debated in media and communications research, many procedures have been identified within anthropology, including acknowledging one’s role as observer, writing in the first person... foregrounding an ethical concern of respect for the culture being studied... , etc.” (Livingstone 495-96). In other words, a researcher must recognize that a) qualitative research is at its core hermeneutic since it involves the contextualized interpretation of events, interviews, sources, etc., which means that b) personal subjectivity frames questions asked and conclusions drawn. A researcher must also critically reflect upon the impact that her presence may have within the given cultural community. As anthropologist Diane Bell explains, “who we are, how we behave in the field, the resources (both personal and material) which we bring to bear, our research design, interests, skills and prejudices, are all elements in our fieldwork” (26).

As such, I do not consider my research to be objective. Rather, I recognize that all individuals [including myself] are, as anthropologist Douglas Raybeck contends, “constrained to view the world in a narrow fashion by what are termed cultural filters... [they] predispose us to assess situations in terms with which we are already familiar” (2). In other words, my understanding of the Malaysian situation was, and continues to be, determined in part by the cultural baggage I have brought with me into the research process.

Although my field research did not involve the study of a specific and well-defined group, I functioned both personally and professionally within Malaysian society. At the same time, however, I also remained very much an outsider, often viewing issues and events from within a different cultural framework than my Malaysian counterparts. Also, as a North American, Caucasian, single, young female, my access to certain information in these environments was, at times, limited. This was particularly the case when, quite understandably, I asked public servants and government officials questions concerning issues deemed sensitive in nature such as press freedom, setbacks in the MSC, alleged corruption in the government, etc. However, some of these interviewees agreed to discuss sensitive issues under the condition of anonymity or asked that some portions of our interview be considered “off the record,” requests with which I have complied.

III. Secondary Source Research

In addition to primary research, the ideas and arguments presented in the following three chapters also draw heavily on a wide range of secondary sources. These sources include mainstream Malaysian newspapers, e.g., The Star, New Straits Times, New Sunday Times, and Sarawak Tribune, on-line alternative newspapers, particularly Malaysiakini, television newscasts and magazines, as well as publications from non-government organizations (e.g., Aliran Monthly, Third World Network). I have also utilized other Asian media sources (e.g., the Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiatimes.com), as well as state and federal level government documents (e.g., media laws, policy documents, speeches by the Prime Minister, promotional materials for the MSC). To capture the dialogue and tension between state-sponsored information and critical / academic interpretations of the country's economic, political, and social situation, I have also made use of a wide range of other Malaysian and non-Malaysian secondary sources.

IV. History of Malaysia: A Brief Overview

To offer some preliminary insight into Malaysia's current political, socio-cultural, and economic situation, the following sections provide an overview of the country's colonial legacy and its post-independence struggles to promote political stability, nationalism, economic growth, and autonomy.

A. Colonial History and the Post-World War II Era

The Portuguese were the first of three European powers to colonize sections of Malaysia when, in the early sixteenth century, they took control of the strategically positioned city of Melaka located on the Southwest coast of what is now peninsular Malaysia. They lost control of the city to the Dutch in the mid-seventeenth century who were, in turn, replaced by the British a little over a century later. Within a few decades of taking over Melaka, the British Empire controlled almost all of peninsular Malaysia, Singapore, and northern Borneo (southern Borneo, Sarawak, was governed by British “white rajas” who were descendants of the British adventurer James Brooke). To support their expansive global empire, the British started to import cheap labour from China and India in the early twentieth century to work in Malaysia’s agricultural and mining operations. Although originally expected to be temporary labourers, many of these migrants remained in the country, setting the foundation for Malaysia’s current ethnic diversity.

For almost two centuries, the British controlled most of the Malaya confederation (present day Malaysia). However, during World War II the Japanese invaded the region and within two months of their arrival had conquered the entire peninsula. Many Malayan Chinese, still grieving from a previous Japanese occupation of China in the 1930s, organized armed resistance against the invasion.⁶¹ Nevertheless, the Japanese remained in control of Malaya until the Hiroshima and

⁶¹ Chinese resistance would later resurface in the form of communist insurgencies against the British, which were met with comprehensive crackdowns by colonialist forces

Nagasaki bombings in 1945, after which point the British regained its dominion.

(Europa; Harper; Hilley Malaysia; Musa).

The Malayan Union⁶² remained under British control until 1957, the year it gained its independence (“Merdeka” in the national language of Bahasa Malay) and became a constitutional monarchy with Tunku Abdul Rahman as the country’s first Prime Minister (Europa 2608). With the inclusion of Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak in 1963, Malaya officially changed its name to Malaysia. Singapore, however, separated from Malaysia in 1965, only two years after joining the newly decolonized country. Although based on a number of issues, including “the conflicting personalities of the leaders of the two entities,” the primary reason for the split was the “unsettling impact on the racial dynamics of an overwhelmingly Chinese Singapore on the predominantly Malay federation” (Musa 229). In particular, Singapore refused to grant special constitutional rights to Malays living in their state, which angered the Malaysian Prime Minister and his party. On the other side of the causeway, the Singapore Prime Minister (Lee Kuan Yew) verbally “attacked” Malaysia “because it denied full rights to the ordinary Chinese, inhibiting their integration” (Kershaw 91). Today, Singapore and Malaysia share a friendly / competitive relationship – their economies are closely intertwined but are also in competition for foreign direct investment, skilled workers, and international interest in their respective high-tech research parks.

Although Malaysia remained a British colony for more than a decade after the Second World War, it is important to note the influence of the Japanese and the

⁶² In 1946, the eleven states of Malaya decided to form the Malayan Union, renamed the Federation of Malaya two years later.

Americans during the post-war era. As Benedict Anderson explains, “Americans intervened politically, economically, militarily and culturally” in the affairs of most South East Asian countries after the war, making “every effort to create loyal, capitalistically prosperous, authoritarian and anti-Communist regimes.” These interventions had a lasting impact on how most countries, including Malaysia, cultivated capitalist economies over the next half a century (with the obvious exceptions of China and North Korea). Also, in the aftermath of atomic collapse and “assured of its political and military dominance over Japan, and eager to make the Japanese economy a cornerstone of capitalist strength in Asia,” Washington encouraged its former adversary to invest in other Asian economies and to promote a capitalist mentality throughout the region (Anderson). As a result, when Mahathir came into power in 1981, he used Japan’s business culture as a successful capitalist model for Malaysia to emulate (via his Look East Policy, discussed below), and encouraged Japan as a premier export destination for Malaysian products.

Today, the Federation of Malaysia is home to approximately 23.5 million people, living in thirteen states spread out over two major land masses. Peninsular Malaysia, which stretches from Thailand in the north to Singapore in the south, is composed of eleven of these states. The remaining two states of Sabah and Sarawak are located in East Malaysia on the north coast of Borneo, an island shared with Brunei Darussalam and the Indonesian province Kalimantan. Politically, Malaysia is a constitutional monarchy with a king as head of state (elected every five years by the nine Sultans of the country), and a bicameral federal parliament system that

includes the Senate (Upper House) and the Lower House of Representatives (UNDP Human Development Indicators).

B. Ethnic, Religious, and Political Affiliations

The Bumiputras (also known as Bumiputeras) comprise the largest ethnic group in Malaysia. Meaning “sons” or “princes of the soil,” the Bumiputras represent almost sixty percent of the population and include all ethnic Malays and the country’s small percentage of Orang Asli or “original people.”⁶³ Chinese Malaysians constitute the second largest ethnic community, representing approximately thirty percent of the population, followed by the Indian community at almost ten percent. The ethnic diversity within Malaysia roughly corresponds to its religious affiliations. As all Malays are Muslim, Islam is the largest (and the official) religion of the country. Buddhism is Malaysia’s second largest religious affiliation, reflecting the country’s substantial Chinese population, while Hinduism is practised by most of the Indian community. In addition, some sections of the Chinese and Indian communities follow Christianity, Confucianism, Taoism, Sikhism, or Islam, while the majority of the country’s Orang Asli possess animist religions, although some have also converted to Christianity or Islam.

Malaysia’s ethnic and religious diversity also corresponds roughly to its political affiliations. Although political parties in Malaysia should not be conceived as ethnic blocks, they have encouraged “ethnic political mobilisation and

consciousness” throughout Malaysia’s post-independence history (Gomez and Jomo 1-2). The coalition party currently in power, the Barisan Nasional (BN) (National Front), demonstrates well the correlation between ethnicity and political affiliation. The coalition, which describes itself as “big, strong, diverse, fair and successful,” is comprised of fourteen different political groups. The largest of these groups is the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), followed by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The leader of the largest group, UMNO, automatically becomes Chairman of the coalition. And, considering that UMNO has been in power since Malaysia’s independence, for all intents and purposes this individual also becomes Prime Minister of the country. Mahathir Mohamad held this top position from 1981 until October 2003,⁶⁴ at which point he stepped down from power and promoted his former Deputy Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, into the role of Prime Minister.

Since UMNO and BN have remained in power for decades, they enjoy a certain level of political security. However, critics argue that both party and coalition have retained their position via questionable electoral processes. As political scientist John Hilley contends, although “open, competitive elections and political opposition are permitted in Malaysia, electoral contestation remains circumscribed by gerrymandering (giving weighted priority to the mainly Malay rural constituencies⁶⁵) and a broad array of underhand strategies designed to

⁶³ Although the Orang Asli belong to a number of different indigenous ethnic groups, most face similar problems including land dispossession, poverty, and a lack of adequate access to essential services such as health care and education. The majority of these people live in rural East Malaysia.

⁶⁴ Over the course of the next three chapters, I will refer often to Mahathir’s 2004 Budget Speech. To clarify, the speech was given 12 September 2003 in regards to the subsequent fiscal year, and Mahathir stepped down from office the following month.

⁶⁵ “The priority weighting of rural over urban constituencies is entrenched in the 1957 Constitution. Although amended several times, the principle, allowing greater representations to

marginalise the opposition, such as bans on outdoor opposition rallies” (Malaysia 39). Moreover, since the government controls all of the domestic mainstream media, prior to elections it only allows BN parties to have access to media outlets.

Although the government’s political monopoly has been challenged in the past, it has always managed to maintain its political control. In 1999, for example, the Islamic Parti Islam Sa-Malaya (PAS) won political seats in the northern states of Terengganu and Kelantan. Since these states are composed primarily of rural Malays, it appeared that UMNO’s base of Malay voters was in jeopardy. Many Malays had left UMNO as part of a backlash against Mahathir’s 1999 imprisonment and treatment of Anwar Ibrahim, his former Deputy Prime Minister (prior to Badawi).⁶⁶ However, in the country’s most recent elections (March 2004), the popularity of PAS dipped, allowing Badawi’s new “reformed” UMNO party to regain some lost ground.

In addition to joining PAS, some Malays also became members of other, more left-wing, parties. These alternative parties joined forces to create a new coalition, the Barisan Alternatif (BA, Alternative Front). Although BA promised that it would offer the greatest opposition to the ruling coalition, two of its major players – Anwar Ibrahim’s KeADILan party (now led by Anwar’s wife) and the Parti Rakyat Malaysia – have left the group to form their own party, the Parti Keadilan Rakyat (Peoples’ Justice Party) (Netto Personal interview). In addition, the Democratic Action Party (DAP), a stronghold in the country’s Chinese community (widely considered to be the primary alternative to the MCA party for Chinese

Malays, gives the government a substantial majority in the Dewan Rakyat [the People’s Council]” (Hilley 45).

Malaysians), also left the coalition. DAP is now the country's official opposition party and the only group offering any measure of opposition to Badawi's new government.

Even though Badawi has managed to win back many Malay voters, he still faces some serious challenges as the country's new Prime Minister. He must quell the ongoing uproar over Anwar's imprisonment, address accusations of corruption in the government, and develop a more robust ICT-skilled workforce to attract additional foreign companies to the MSC and high-tech export processing zones. At the same time, Badawi has been under pressure to ensure that UMNO remains Malaysia's foremost Malay party, while also balancing the wide spectrum of Islamic perspectives that exist within the country. Some Malaysians have voiced their concern that Badawi might adopt more conservative Islamic laws to appease potential UMNO defectors. However, he does not appear to be taking PAS's calls for stricter Islamic sharia laws throughout the country seriously.

V. The Malaysian Economy

Since the objective of the colonialist system is the "accumulation at the centre rather than at the periphery," British colonialists extracted "a limited range of agriculture and mineral products" from Malaysia that served the needs of the former rather than the latter (Stenson 3). In particular, they focused on Malaysia's abundant stores of tin and rubber, which could be exported directly to Britain or to one of her many other colonies (Stenson 4). Only with significant restructuring of its economy

⁶⁶ The "Anwar affair" and its ramifications are addressed in Chapter 7.

after independence would Malaysia be able to diversify its agricultural products and develop an industrial manufacturing sector. In so doing, Malaysia was able to boost its Gross National Product (GNP), expand its base of primary exports, and thus gain a measure of economic stability.

Over the past decade the government has, as described below, focused much of its attention on increasing Malaysia's level of high-tech exports in the hopes of becoming a central player in the new global economy. By 2001, these exports comprised a significant 57% of the country's manufactured exports, a notable increase from 36% in 1990 (UNDP, Human Development Report 287). To provide some additional context for understanding Malaysia's current economic situation, in 2001 the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was US \$8,750 (\$11,580 CDN) (UNDP, Human Development Report 238), while the unemployment percentage of the country's total labour force was 3.9% (between 2000-2002) (World Bank 51).

These figures represent a significant upswing in the Malaysian economy, which can be traced back to the 1970s when, under the leadership of former Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak (Malaysia's second administration), the government introduced its New Economic Policy (NEP). As described in the following section, NEP was essentially a broad action plan designed to help steer the country towards greater economic prosperity and autonomy from its former colonizers, as well as socio-political stability in the aftermath of civic unrest in the late 1960s.

1. *New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-1990) – Bumiputra Rights and the Introduction of Neo-Liberal Economic Policies.* As Mahathir explains in his book The Way Forward, the objective of the NEP policy was primarily two-fold: “The eradication of poverty irrespective of race [and] the elimination of the identification of race with economic function” (9). The government therefore used NEP to introduce preferential policies designed to help Bumiputras improve their economic standing in the country (particularly vis-à-vis the prosperous Chinese Malaysians).⁶⁷ These policies included Bumiputra quotas for positions in the public service, universities, and colleges, as well as for “private corporate enterprises, for stock ownership in corporations and for government contracts” (Bunnell, “(Re)positioning” 109). In part, these preferential policies stemmed from Malay / UMNO concerns that although the “Merdeka Constitution supported the ‘special rights’ of the Malay ethnic or *bangsa* as the ‘rightful inhabitants’ of Malaya”, the Malays had been unable to improve their economic position (Bunnell, “(Re)positioning” 109). Frustrations over economic disparities, combined with a better than expected showing of Chinese opposition parties in the country’s 1969 general elections, led to riots in the streets of Kuala Lumpur and hundreds of people being injured or killed. Less than two years later, the government had introduced the NEP policy, promising to continue the special privileges the Bumiputras had been given under the constitution, “but with greater aggressiveness and decidedly more massive funding” (Musa 113).

⁶⁷ Although the Orang Asli are also Bumiputra, the government has been criticized for failing to adequately address issues concerning their standards of living.

The idea of introducing Bumiputra preferential policies can also be directly linked to Mahathir's 1970 book, The Malay Dilemma, in which he argued that Malays (and other Bumiputras) deserved "special privileges... because first, they are the 'definitive' people or 'rightful owners' of Malaysia and second, they lag behind the other races and therefore merit extra help" (qtd. in Musa 3). Therefore, the goal of the NEP was to ensure that "[w]ithin one generation, Malays and other indigenous peoples... would own and manage at least 30 percent of all commercial and industrial activities of the economy in all categories and scales of operation" (Milne and Mauzy 52). However, Mahathir did not want Malays to become dependent upon government subsidies because such a socio-political norm clashed with his "own philosophy of a more competitive, market-oriented world" (Mehmet 2). Instead, he wanted to develop "a Malay middle class, educated and confident and ultimately independent of government handouts" (Mehmet 4). Consequently, when he became Prime Minister in 1981, Mahathir retained preferential policies, but also introduced two new strategies designed to make Malaysia a strong and competitive country. These strategies – Malaysia Incorporated and the Look East Policy – marked a significant shift in Malaysia's economic trajectory. In part, they were designed to streamline a public service that had become "a bloated bureaucracy, [with] inferior services, economic inefficiency, high costs, low productivity and limited innovation" (Gomez and Jomo 75-76). However, Mahathir also used these policies to divest the public sector of many of its responsibilities, moving key elements of the economy into private hands, promising that the shift would improve efficiency and the country's overall competitiveness.

At the same time that Mahathir was charting a course for greater privatization, the political pendulum in the West had begun its swing towards the right of the spectrum. In response to widespread civic unrest in the 1960s and 70s, many Western governments had started to construct citizen activism as a serious threat to national and international democratic stability. This conservative counter-movement culminated in 1975 with the submission of “The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission.” Written by Michel Crozier, Samuel P. Huntington, and Joji Watanuki, this influential document claimed that excessive public participation in the form of social movements and demonstrations, combined with the work of adversarial intellectuals and cultural enclaves, had caused an inordinate amount of strain on government and promoted democratic instability. At the forefront of this conservative thrust, the Reagan and Thatcher administrations argued for the moderation of democracy and an alternative to the Keynesian welfare state that had taken a beating with the 1973-74 oil crisis and subsequent economic stagflation. As their solution, Reagan and Thatcher introduced neo-liberal economic policies of liberalization, privatization, and deregulation. In concert with “major multilateral financial agencies, such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund,” they also encouraged / pressured other countries around the world, including Malaysia, to embrace similar economic policies (Gomez and Jomo 79). At the same time, Malaysia felt the added strain of its own economic recession that had, in part, resulted from market collapses in some of its biggest export products⁶⁸ (Gomez and

⁶⁸ In addition, the Malaysian economy was suffering from domestic corruption scandals, which included the domestic banking system (Gomez and Jomo 77-79).

Jomo 77-79). As a result, Malaysia found itself relying increasingly on foreign loans from the very institutions that promoted neo-liberal economic policies.

Consequently, in the 1980s Mahathir began the process of privatizing, liberalizing, and deregulating large swaths of the Malaysian economy. For example, in 1985, he liberalized Malaysia's "guidelines for foreign equity ownership in manufacturing," followed a year later by "even more liberal conditions for foreign equity and expatriate staffing" (Loh Kok Wah 42). By the late 1980s, Mahathir had deregulated Malaysia's media institutions (Hilley, Malaysia 131). Privatization, however, particularly "appealed to Mahathir's own inclinations, which led him to believe that the profit-seeking private sector had an incentive to 'deliver the goods,' which was lacking in the government sector" (Milne and Mauzy 56). As such, the private sector was handed the task of replacing the public sector as the country's primary engine of economic growth. Concurrently, the government itself began to shift towards a more business-oriented corporatized model of operation,⁶⁹ using market criteria as benchmarks for success.

As noted above, the Malaysia Incorporated plan played a central role in these shifts in the Malaysian economy. Modelled on the Japan Inc. program, it presented Malaysia as a "company" requiring the full partnership of the public and the private sector in order to be successful (Mahathir, "New Government" 306). The Look East Policy also used Japan, as well as South Korea, as examples of successful capitalist economies for Malaysia to emulate (rather than relying on the West, e.g., the United States or Britain, for inspiration). According to Mahathir, the Look East Policy

“stressed qualities that were worthy of emulation, such as diligence, discipline, loyalty, the promotion of group rather than individual interest, high quality and good management systems in business, etc.” (Milne and Mauzy 55).⁷⁰ Mahathir urged the Malay population in particular to try and emulate the Japanese model, believing that the “Malay Dilemma” could be solved through diligence and hard work (Malay Dilemma). At the same time, there was an undeclared, silent policy of looking to the South, towards Singapore, as another example of efficiency and dedication to “the logic of the developmental state” (Mehmet, “Malaysia” 4).

To summarize, together the Malaysia Incorporated plan and Look East Policy were used by Mahathir as a means of exhorting “a sleepy nation, used to state protection, into the modern world of privatisation, competition and materialism” (Mehmet, “Malaysia” 3). However, these strategies also received their fair share of criticism. Privatization initiatives, for example, were seen by some as “an ideal vehicle for achieving the aims of the NEP... [which] called for the employment of more Bumiputera in business, particularly as entrepreneurs” (Milne and Mauzy 56). Although Mahathir appeared to be retreating from preferential policies by placing the private sector in the fore, specific Malay businessmen were given the opportunity to take over newly privatized companies (Gomez “Politics”; Gomez and Jomo; Hilley Malaysia; Milne and Mauzy; Williamson). As John Hilley explains, privatization “offered a new means of reconfiguring the NEP state through the transfer of wealth and resources to selectively designated political-corporate elites.

⁶⁹ Corpportization occurs when “public sector organizations are encouraged and/or compelled... to pursue commercial opportunities more aggressively and to adopt corporate forms of organization” (Murdock and Golding 114).

The ‘contradiction’ of privatisation in Malaysia thus lay in the particular use of deregulated state resources to strengthen UMNO / proxy corporate control” (Malaysia 59). In fact, as one observer noted, “[t]hrough support for new business ventures as well as UMNO-business alliances the scope of state intervention in the economy *expanded* – although the intervention was not direct” (Nasr 109, emphasis added).

It is also important to note that non-Malay elites, particularly Chinese businessmen, also benefited from these economic changes. As Edmund Terence Gomez argues in his book dedicated to the topic, Chinese Business in Malaysia: Accumulation, Ascendancy, Accommodation, most of the economic elite in Malaysia today have become rich as a result of close relationships with the Malay political elite (i.e., UMNO). He contends that this relationship between the upper echelon of the Chinese business community and the Malay political community has proven to be mutually beneficial – “Chinese capital remains very subservient to the UMNO-led government, and to remain productive, dynamic and to develop their corporate base, [the Chinese] have no choice other than to link up with the Malay political elite” (22).

As the following discussion demonstrates, initiatives undertaken by the government during the NEP period have had a lasting impact on Malaysia’s economic, social, and political landscape. Bumiputra rights have remained intact, even though they are not as openly promoted as they once were in the 1970s and 80s, and neo-liberal economic policies of privatization, liberalization, and

⁷⁰ This policy provides an early indication of how Mahathir has differentiated between “Asian values” and “Western values,” a division which has played a central role in his domestic and

deregulation have become firmly entrenched in the Malaysian economy. There are, however, growing concerns that over the last few years some of Malaysia's large-scale privatized enterprises have required government bailouts. Recent examples include Malaysia Airlines (MAS), the light-rail projects in Kuala Lumpur, and the national car company, Proton. Critics have argued that these corporate failures can be directly attributed to the fact that they are owned and operated by politically well-connected individuals who received government favour during the NEP years, rather than by more business-savvy business entrepreneurs.

2. *National Development Policy (NDP, 1991-2000) – Marketing Malaysia, Expanded Privatization, and Political and Economic Crises.* Introduced in 1991, the National Development Policy (NDP) retained the basic strategies of its NEP predecessor, but concentrated more on developing Bumiputra entrepreneurial skills while, at the same time, not overtly promoting their special privileges (Gomez and Jomo; Harper; Liu; Mahathir Way Forward).

During the NEP era, government rhetoric tended to characterize non-Malay Malaysians as either non-citizens or citizens that were not as fully Malaysian as their Bumiputra counterparts. In the 1990s, however, the government appeared to “shift away from the politics of ethnicism [i.e., improving the economic status of the Bumiputras] towards a politics of developmentalism [i.e., achieving the status of a ‘developed nation’]” (Loh Kok Wah 21). As urban geographer Tim Bunnell explains, official versions of Malaysia's national identity began to focus more on promoting harmonious ethnic relations and multiculturalism rather than on the rights

foreign policies (discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7).

of one group in the country (“(Re)positioning” 106).⁷¹ He argues that this shift in ethnic discourse has, however, been merely part of the government’s broader strategy “to negotiate and capitalise upon transnational phenomena” in the new “information age” (Bunnell “(Re)positioning” 106; Loh Kok Wah). In other words, ethnicity in Malaysia has become increasingly utilitarian and “privatized” – by showcasing its cultural diversity⁷² Malaysia hopes to attract tourism and foreign investment, as well as encourage domestic entrepreneurship and support for government-led projects. The following three examples illustrate how the government continues to employ Malaysia’s multiculturalism as a means of achieving these goals.

First, Malaysia’s cultural diversity is used to demonstrate to international investors that the country has close ties with other Asian cultures and business communities. The Malaysian Chinese, for example, possess valuable cultural insight and inroads into China / Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan. Malaysia’s Indian community has connections with India’s offshore software / ICT-savvy / “back-office” economy. Malaysia has also canvassed its geographical proximity to key Asian markets. As Mahathir boasts,

The Malaysians are made up of people of Malay, Indonesian, Indian and Chinese origin. We are only a few hours flight from the major Asian capitals. We have language skills and cultural knowledge that

⁷¹ However, Malaysia’s picture of diversity does not include the country’s multitude of foreign workers (the influx has been particularly heavy from Indonesia, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, as well as Thailand, Burma, and Pakistan). Although these workers are considered useful to Malaysia’s economy, primarily as cheap, low-skilled labour, they are not considered a *real* part of the Malaysian identity.

⁷² In domestic and international forums via, for example, tourist brochures, information packages about the MSC and other export processing zones, government and industry conferences and speeches, as well as domestic and international media sources.

can be very helpful. Most people speak English as well as one or more languages such as different Chinese or Indian dialects, or Malay. ... Malaysia will be a highly efficient and effective hub for the region. (qtd. in Bunnell, “(Re)positioning” 114)

Therefore, the government has recognized the utilitarian economic advantages of promoting Malaysia’s non-Malay citizens. As Bunnell explains, the “perception of the economic importance of non-Malay transnational connections has served to reconfigure Malay-Centred constructions of national identity” (“(Re)positioning” 111).

Second, by portraying itself as an ethnically harmonious country, one that accepts and even celebrates its cultural diversity, Malaysia has tried to demonstrate its political stability and thus appear as a safe choice for foreign investment. In addition, as noted below, Mahathir has promoted Malaysia as a *moderate* Islamic nation to illustrate that Islam and capitalism peacefully coexist in his country.

Third, the government altered the “face of Malaysia” to one of cultural inclusivity because it recognized that non-Malay expertise is required for Malaysia’s high-tech multimedia sector to be successful. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, concerns have been raised that Malaysia lacks the skilled workforce necessary to build a successful high-tech sector. At the same time, it continues to lose top quality “knowledge-workers” to foreign markets (e.g., Chinese Malaysians moving to Singapore). Therefore, as part of its Brain Gain program, the government has used promotional materials to signal to economically advantageous workers, both at home and abroad, that the government *wants* them to stay / come back to

Malaysia. Tim Bunnell refers to this campaign as the “marketing of Malaysia” and contends that,

The political significance of these recent developments is potentially far-reaching, not least because a large proportion of the newly valorised ‘outstanding Malaysians’, ‘knowledge-workers’ and ‘world-class citizens’ are not only not Malay, but (and there is a difference in the Malaysian political context) are ‘non-Malay’ (that is, specifically ‘Chinese’ or ‘Indian’). Repositioning Malaysia is therefore seen to entail opening the nation to (suitably skilled) non-Malays.

(“(Re)positioning” 115-16)

As well, the government has begun promoting the use of English in the educational system for subjects it considers critical to the new information age, namely math and science. This shift marks a significant departure from earlier government mandates to promote Bahasa Malay as *the* national language of the country. However, Mahathir has repeatedly emphasized that the status of the national language, as well as that of the Malays, has not changed. Rather, the government has promoted the use of English “in order to facilitate rapid development and the achievement of ‘Vision 2020’” (Loh Kok Wah 30).

There are a couple of reasons, in addition to the ones provided above, as to why the Malaysian government has been willing to shift its focus towards cultural inclusion and diversity. First, an increase in the Malay population vis-à-vis other ethnic communities in the country signifies that “numerically at least, non-Malays are no longer considered to be such a ‘threat’” as they had once been (Bunnell

“(Re)positioning” 111). Second, the government has, as noted, recognized that it needs more than just the support of the Malay population for its high-tech sector to be successful. Therefore, it has tried to incorporate, or at least give the *appearance* of incorporating, *all* Malaysians in the process of nation building. To do so, the government has employed a “marketing vocabulary of ‘bridge building’, ‘sharing’, ‘linkage’, ‘partnership’ and ‘connectivity’, [which has] described and represented a world in which success is dependent upon adopting and forging unity at various levels” (Bunnell, “(Re)positioning” 113). In other words, rather than promoting a *political* nationalism, the government has shifted its rhetoric towards promoting an *economic* nationalism. “In place of politics, the defining quality of Bangsa Malaysia [a united Malaysian nation] is prosperity and the affluence of Malaysia... more a financial nationalism that promises Malaysians future prosperity rather than rights to public assembly and expression” (Williamson).

Development economist Amartya Sen argues that this strategy of placing economics before politics and civic freedoms is common throughout the developing world.⁷³ Political, ethnic, and cultural concerns are “temporarily” left to the side so that the country can focus on achieving its foremost priority – economic growth. However, this economic rationale is often used to justify the repression of civic rights and freedoms “for the good of the whole” (Sen 148-59). In Malaysia, for example, the government has advanced an *economic* or *financial* nationalism to promote economic growth, as well as to also justify the government’s tight control over the media, educational institutions, public assembly, etc. Although the

⁷³ Sen refers to this strategy as the Lee thesis after Lee Kwan Yew, the former Prime Minister of Singapore.

government views diversity as useful for economic purposes, it must be restrained to ensure that citizens work together and support a Malay leadership. As such, any type of civic unrest in Malaysia is treated as being dangerous to the country's economic stability and future growth (the political benefits of constructing a common external foe are explored in greater detail in Chapter 7). In other words, differences are depoliticized and are instead made functional – “[w]hen language, culture and educational matters are discussed nowadays, it is often their utilitarianism and their relationship to development, indeed self-help development efforts, that are highlighted” (Loh Kok Wah 35).

This shift in Malaysia's ethnic discourse does not, however, mean that Bumiputra rights have been abandoned. Rather, as noted above, preferential policies are no longer as overtly advocated or publicly discussed as they have been in the past. To illustrate the continued importance of these policies to the Malay community, in 2000 the Malaysian Chinese Organisations' Election Appeals Committee (Suqiu) published a memorandum which stated that the viability of Bumiputra quotas should be readdressed. Suqiu argued that “[a]ffirmative action should be based on the protection and enhancement of the status of the weaker sectors and not on race, social background and religious belief” (Cordingley 23). Many Malays read the memorandum as a call for Bumiputra quotas and other privileges to be abolished, which led to the censuring of Suqiu and its actions. Mahathir even likened Suqiu to the Communist insurgents of Malaysia's past, a pernicious comparison that incensed many Chinese Malaysians (Crisp and Oorjitham). This incident thus reveals a disjuncture between Mahathir's promises

regarding ethnic inclusion and his public condemnation of a relatively mainstream Chinese community group.

Notwithstanding this outburst, during his tenure as Prime Minister, Mahathir was, for the most part, quite successful in managing the sensitive issue of Bumiputra rights. It is clear that he recognized that, for political reasons, he could not afford to abolish Bumiputra rights for fear of losing UMNO's base of Malay voters. However, for economic purposes he could not promote the rights as publicly as in the past for fear of aggravating non-Malays that he considered to be useful for building a prosperous "knowledge-based" economy.

In addition to maintaining Bumiputra rights, the National Development Policy (NDP) also strengthened Malaysia's commitment to the neo-liberal economic policies introduced in the early 1980s. Under the policy, the government privatized large-scale development projects (e.g., the Kuala Lumpur International Airport, a new bridge to Singapore), as well as a wide range of enterprises that provide Malaysians with basic services. These enterprises included: "Telecoms Malaysia, the National Electricity Board, the Malayan Railways, and other bodies supplying water, treating sewage, collecting rubbish, etc." (Loh Kok Wah 43). Mahathir explains that throughout the NDP era, his administration tried to make,

[t]he private sector, not the public sector, the primary engine of growth. We accelerated our industrialisation drive. We worked hard to expand our medium and small scale industries. We turned forcefully to export-led growth, thus relying on the whole world as

our marketplace. We opened and liberalised our economy. (“Other Side”)

As Malaysia’s economy steadily improved throughout the 1990s, it appeared as though these new policies were working. However, within only a matter of months of Mahathir making the above statement, the 1997 Asian financial crisis hit the region, putting Malaysia’s currency and banking system into serious jeopardy. In the spring of 1997, Mahathir travelled abroad for a two-month vacation, placing then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in charge of the government. Upon his return home, Mahathir was greeted with a severe devaluation of the Thai Baht and subsequent crisis of the Asian economic system. In response to the situation, Mahathir censured international investors and criticized currency traders and speculators (particularly George Soros) for having caused the disaster.⁷⁴ Although Mahathir’s accusations were considered by many to be well-justified, when coupled with a refusal of loans offered by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (in part out of fear that it would mean removing Bumiputra preferential rights⁷⁵), his allegations may have only served to worsen Malaysia’s financial situation (Malhotra 82; Europa 2611). In addition, Mahathir placed currency controls on short-term capital from 1998-99, a move which was rebuked by the United States and the IMF.⁷⁶ Although many predicted that these controls would be disastrous for the Malaysian economy,

⁷⁴ In 2003, Mahathir restated his stance on the issue. He claimed that “there are the rogue currency traders who destroyed the economies of half the world, threw tens of millions out of work, bankrupted banks and thousands of businesses, caused the collapse of Governments and precipitated anarchy; all so that half a dozen individuals can make billions for themselves” (“Inaugural”).

⁷⁵ As Mahathir explained in a speech given in 2003, “Malaysians are passionately independent. Borrowing from the IMF and placing our economy under their direction would mean a loss of independence. Besides we have special problems which the IMF would not allow us to resolve effectively. We have to reduce the economic disparity between the Malays and the non-Malays through affirmative action” (“Luncheon”).

they actually proved to be rather successful as the country's post-crisis recovery "in 1999-2000 was among the strongest of the Asian crisis economies" (Liu 2).

However, in the fallout from the financial crisis Mahathir faced more of a political backlash rather than an economic one, due to his treatment of former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim. In the mid to late 1990s, Anwar publicly raised the issue of corruption within the government and openly objected to Mahathir's handling of the Asian financial crisis. When Anwar was removed from his position in 1999 and later incarcerated, Mahathir faced recrimination both at home and abroad for his allegedly undemocratic actions. As discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7, the reverberations from the "Anwar affair" continue to impact the country's political landscape.

To summarize, the Malaysian economy as a whole experienced significant growth throughout much of the NDP era. However, the 1997 Asian financial crisis raised some serious concerns about the economic health of the so-called Asian Tigers. Although Malaysia emerged relatively unscathed from the ordeal in comparison to many of its neighbours, its trajectory of economic development had suffered a bit of a setback. Moreover, the government's handling of the Anwar affair incited civic unrest, leading investors to question the country's political and economic stability. Consequently, the government wanted the policy that succeeded the NDP to be geared towards ensuring greater political stability and economic autonomy (specifically from the West) in the new "information age." At the same

⁷⁶ The controls "made trading in the Ringgit [Malaysia's national currency] illegal outside Malaysia, fixed the exchange rate of the currency against the US dollar, and placed time limits on the

time, the Mahathir administration wanted to maintain neo-liberal economic policies and ties to valuable sources of FDI (primarily from Western countries), as well as the Bumiputra rights that ensured UMNO its political base of Malay support.

3. *National Vision Policy (NVP, 2001-2010)*. The NVP, which operates concurrently with Malaysia's Vision 2020 strategy,⁷⁷ carries forward most of the objectives outlined in the NDP, particularly national unity (including the rescription of national identity, particularly in the aftermath of the Anwar affair), economic development and autonomy. The policy was also designed to harness the powers of ICTs in general, and the MSC in particular, for projects of economic and social development. How exactly they are expected to do so is the primary focus of the next two chapters.

The NVP also retains Malaysia's commitment to privatization as the cornerstone of economic growth. However, the government continues to control the private sector via proxy (i.e., key industries are owned and operated by UMNO / BN supporters). It has also played an active role in developing export processing zones, the MSC, and a domestic high-tech sector. In addition, as Mahathir has noted on numerous occasions, the government has a central role to play in ensuring domestic political stability as a precursor for economic development.

repatriation of investments" (Kelly, "Metaphors" 733).

⁷⁷ The country's Economic Planning Unit, located within the Prime Minister's Office, oversees five-year long "Malaysia plans" to accompany longer planning cycles like the Outline Perspective Plans (OPP), including the most recent Third Outline Perspective Plan (OPP3), which runs from 2001 to 2010. Confusingly, these OPPs also incorporate the New Economic Policy (NEP), the National Development Policy (NDP), and the National Vision Policy (NVP). The OPPs encompass the overall development objectives for the country, while the NEP, NDP, and NVP provide the policies that are expected to carry out the objectives. The most recent OPP3 and the NVP also support and operate concurrently with the overarching Vision 2020 strategy, which is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

However, as noted above, critics have argued that the Malaysian government employs coercive means to maintain this stability (e.g., denying Malaysians the freedom of expression, speech, press, and assembly). Yet, when he was in office, Mahathir made no apology for such strict measures, arguing that the developing world needs benevolent dictators rather than a “Western-style democracy” in order to keep up with the challenges of globalization (“‘Good’ Dictators”). His position provides an excellent example, as per Amartya Sen’s thesis, of a leader in the developing world arguing the necessity of placing economics before politics as a means of justifying his government’s use of undemocratic laws and actions. To offer proof of the viability of this political philosophy, Mahathir often cited the significant growth that occurred in the Malaysian economy during his reign as Prime Minister.

When Mahathir became Prime Minister in 1981, “the country was underdeveloped, predominantly rural. It suffered from severe problems of unemployment, especially among the youth and graduates, and almost half the population (two-thirds of rural Malays) lived in poverty” (Mehmet, “Malaysia” 2). Today, Malaysia’s economy is stronger than many other countries in the region (with the obvious exceptions of Singapore, Japan, and South Korea). In 2003, Malaysia’s external debt was considered relatively modest, it had positive foreign exchange reserves, and the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange showed moderate growth (Balfour; Europa).⁷⁸ Moreover, according to the 2003 World Competitive Yearbook, Malaysia ranked as the fourth most competitive country in the world (out

⁷⁸ These economic improvements can, in part, be attributed to the finding of significant oil reserves off the coast of Sabah in 2002.

of countries with more than 20 million citizens), a significant increase from its 2001 standing of tenth (Mahathir “Federal Budget 2004;” “World Competitiveness”).⁷⁹

There are concerns, however, that downturns in either the American or Japanese economy would jeopardize Malaysia’s financial stability. As Malaysia’s leading export destinations and critical sources of FDI, these two countries are critical to Malaysia’s economic future. As the UNDP explains, since Malaysia is a “trading nation, ranking seventeenth largest in the world... [its] economy is vulnerable to shifts in the economic conditions of its external trading partners, and of its comparative advantage with others” (UNDP in Malaysia). Therefore, two key objectives of the NVP include: 1) attracting higher levels of FDI, which has become increasingly important as investors are lured away to other low-wage economies (particularly China); and 2) stabilizing the economy, making it “resilient” to global fluctuations. The MSC was designed to provide some of this stability by transforming Malaysia into *the* regional hub for ICT development and investment (Mahathir “Federal Budget 2004”).

However, in order to understand how the government tries to “sell” the idea of the MSC to its citizens, there is another important element of Malaysian society which needs to be taken into account – Islam. As such, the following section describes some of the issues related to the government’s plans for “progress” vis-à-vis its diverse Malay Muslim population.

⁷⁹ Factors taken into consideration in the ranking process include economic performance, government efficiency, business efficiency, and infrastructure.

VI. Complexity, Development, and Islam

Within Malaysia, there exist tensions between what can be referred to as traditional Islam and modern Islam. Traditional Islam is not only religious but also political in nature as it works to reconfigure the nation-state and society according to Islamic law and principles.⁸⁰ This is because, as Ozay Mehmet contends, “[t]he Islamic world-view, shaped by the oneness of God and the indivisibility of the *Umma* (community of believers), is confronted by nationalism, the ideology of the nation-state... rebuilt on ethnicity and territoriality” (*Islamic* 1). Therefore, as the leader of a multiracial country with a majority Muslim population, the Malaysian Prime Minister must address “the Islamic dilemma – how to reconcile Islam with modernity” (Mehmet, *Islamic* 4). However, this task is considerably more difficult when there exists significant inequalities within the domestic Muslim community.

In Malaysia, this inter-Malay inequality can be traced back to the late 1960s / early 1970s when a rise in urbanization disrupted rural, relatively homogenous Islamic communities and helped create a distinction between socio-economic classes of urban versus rural Malay Muslims. Although the New Economic Policy with its Bumiputra affirmative action rights and quotas was supposed to help improve the socio-economic status of all Malays, it was less than effective in bridging this divide. The policy succeeded in launching “the Malays from the backwaters into the mainstream of the Malaysian economy,” but it did not eradicate poverty or

⁸⁰ However, it is important to recognize that the traditional versus modern dichotomy renders Islamic perspectives in an overly simplistic light. As such, it is important to recognize that there exists an entire spectrum of Islamic thought. Moreover, it should be clear that the label of “traditional” is not synonymous with a militant Islamism.

restructure inequality (Mehmet, Islamic 109). Instead, “it polarized the Malays not only into rich and poor, but also along political and religious party lines... Malay politics became patronage politics in which rewards such as subsidies and scholarships were distributed, not by merit, but by influence and favouritism” (as discussed in greater detail in the following chapter) (Mehmet, Islamic 109). This inter-Malay inequality played a significant role in the development of an Islamic revival or “dakwah” in Malaysia (Nagata Reflowering).

As well, the Islamic revolution in Iran under the Ayatollah Khomeini fed into the popularity of a theocracy, giving a significant boost to domestic traditional Islamic politics. This “so-called ‘resurgence’, which moved to the centre stage in the 1960s and 1970s” (Nagata, “Islam” 64), manifested itself in increased participation in Islamic cultural activities, education, and media, as well as a renewed interest in various Muslim movements (Nagata Reflowering).

After this point, the separation within Malaysia between a traditional Islam supportive of theocracy and a modernist Islam that was pro-nation-state and arguably pro-capitalist became increasingly apparent (a debate which became known as the Kaum Tua / old order versus Kaum Muda / new order

A. Anwar, PAS, and UMNO

We can see how these tensions play out in the case of the Anwar affair. Prior to his involvement with UMNO, former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim was considered to be more of an Islamic traditionalist. In the 1970s, he founded

Angkatan Belia Islam Malaysia (ABIM), the Islamic Youth Movement of Malaysia, “and built it into a powerful vehicle of an Islamic resurgence” (Teik “Anwar”). He was also instrumental in building the International Islamic University, the only one of its kind outside of the Middle East. In the early 1980s, Anwar joined Mahathir’s more modernist administration. His move not only strengthened UMNO’s Malay voting base, but also represented a significant political victory for the more modernist Mahathir. As Malaysian academic Khoo Boo Teik explains, for Anwar “Islam had nourished a moral critique of society under capitalism. Now he fell in with Mahathir for whom Islam meant a work ethic to serve Malaysian capitalism” justifying “his co-optation as a mission to ‘change things from inside’” (“Anwar”). Some have argued that Anwar abandoned his traditional Islamic politics and gave into the call of power during the sixteen years he served in UMNO (as Deputy Prime Minister since 1993). Others argue that he worked to infuse an unstoppable Mahathir train of material progress with Islamic ideals, while also trying to soften the Prime Minister’s international image for Western audiences. As one Malaysian human rights observer has argued, although Anwar may legitimately be labelled as a “putative anti-Mahathirist even before the roof collapsed on East Asia... one shouldn’t be blind to Anwar’s habitual use of the ‘standard operating procedures’ of UMNO politics under Mahathir” (T. Netto).

However one may choose to see Anwar’s role in the BN coalition, when he was removed from his political position and incarcerated on questionable charges of corruption and “unnatural sex” (the Anwar affair is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 7), Mahathir bore much of the brunt of domestic (and international)

criticism. As a result, Mahathir lost a considerable section of his Malay voting base, particularly in the more traditional Islamic northern states of Terengannu, Kelantan, and even his home state of Kedah. Many Malays were especially upset with the sex-related charges brought against Anwar and his reputed unethical treatment while in jail, actions by the government and Mahathir that were deemed to be against Muslim ideals. As such, many have argued that the resurgence of PAS in the 1999 federal elections reflected less the popularity of the party and more a disenchantment with Mahathir and UMNO.

Nevertheless, PAS has tried to capitalize on its surging popularity by highlighting Mahathir's dedication to Western ideals of material progress, an unrelenting pursuit of Malay capitalism, and a devotion to the market economy. For many modernist Malays, Mahathir's dedication to building economic prosperity within Malaysia helped ensure the country's political and economic autonomy. However, the more traditional PAS party has argued that Mahathir's plans for progress do not reflect the needs of Muslims who should be more focused on advancement in the afterlife rather than on material progress in life here on earth. Therefore, they have chastised Mahathir for taking on the perspectives and beliefs on the country's former colonizers which includes similar notions concerning what constitutes "progress" (an argument forwarded by Syed Hussein Alatas in his book The Myth of the Lazy Native). As anthropologist Judith Nagata explains, "PAS pursues its opposition to UMNO in a crusading spirit of moral religious righteousness as the true protector of Islam in Malaysia, a counterpoint to the allegedly materialistic corrupt agenda of a federal government seduced by the

blandishments of a decadent ‘Christian / Zionist’ west” (“Islam” 70). Mahathir has fired back by arguing that Malays must improve their situation in this life rather than only waiting for the hereafter.

In order to counter the traditional Islamic influence of PAS and thus solve the “Islamic dilemma,” throughout his time in office Mahathir tried to fashion himself as a moderate Islamic leader, legitimize his Islamic authority, and demonstrate his party’s commitment to Islamic principles. Mahathir strategically placed “friendly” academics in positions of prominence in domestic educational institutions, founded and developed the International Islamic University (of which Anwar was a key player) as well as the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilization (ISTAC, a prominent Malaysian think tank). By drawing domestic and international scholars and clergy to these Islamic centres, Mahathir and his government have tried to stave off “PAS attacks against UMNO [which] have been premised on what they argue is the latter’s questionable religious credentials and secular approach to politics” (Liow 3). Moreover, as will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 6, Mahathir has used Islamic architecture in Kuala Lumpur, Cyberjaya and Putrajaya to symbolically demonstrate to Malaysians and to the rest of the world that Islam and capitalism are not mutually exclusive and to demonstrate to Malay Muslims that the government is loyal to an Islamic state.

As a further example, in September 2002 Mahathir publicly announced that Malaysia was already a “model Islamic country” (T. Netto). The purpose of his statement was clear: to curtail the popularity of PAS and win back Malay voters prior to the next election (and to argue that the state of Terengannu need not

introduce Syariah legislation). However, Mahathir's statement was rather surprising considering that,

[h]itherto, Umno had maintained that Malaysia should not be an Islamic state because it would be unsuitable in a multi-racial, multi-religious country. Malaysia could have Islamic practices and laws in banking, insurance, family matters, and inheritance. But these would run parallel with prevailing secular laws and practices, a sort of one government-two nearly parallel systems that was pragmatic in that it would be able to appease fervent Muslims while reassuring non-Muslims (T. Netto).

Not surprisingly, Mahathir's statement provoked a variety of reactions. BN coalition parties (e.g., MCA and MIC) rushed to assure their voters that the government had not moved towards theocracy but was simply trying to demonstrate to Malay Muslims UMNO's commitment to Islamic ideals (however, Mahathir's statement drew the following response from the PAS party President: "the only thing Islamic about Malaysia now is there are mosques, and there are Moslems here... that does not qualify us to call ourselves an Islamic state" (Liow 3)). These kinds of rhetorical debates demonstrate that although "PAS shows little evidence of opposing economic success or wealth *per se*...[t]he public battle is as much moral and verbal as substantive, and its score depends heavily on the rhetorical and casuistic skills of *ulama* [religious scholars of Islam] spokesmen on both sides" (Nagata, "Islam" 70).

To ensure that its Islamic authority is widely disseminated within Malaysia, in 2000 the government (under the Ministry of Home Affairs) curtailed the circulation of the PAS party newspaper Harakah from twice a week to twice a

month. The Ministry also stipulated that the paper could only be distributed to PAS members, which meant that it could not be sold in public locations such as newsstands (i.e., potential UMNO defectors could not legally be sold the paper). Also, an editor for Harakah and the paper's printer were indicted on sedition charges for criticizing the trial and treatment of Anwar. As a result, PAS has spoken out in favour of no censorship of the Internet. Recognizing that the Internet offers their party a venue for reaching Malaysian and international audiences without fear of censorship, PAS has actively promoted its online readership. Harakahdaily.net has now become one of the most popular websites in the country.

B. Obstacles to Development

In sum, the “politicisation of Islam, defined as the mobilisation of Muslims for political power, has become a key feature on the Malaysian political terrain” (Liow 1). It is central to an understanding of issues regarding myths dealing with political, social, and economic “progress,” as well as some of the obstacles in the way of the government’s ability to promote its ideology. In order to “sell” his social, political, and economic ideology, including the role that ICTs are expected to play in a more prosperous future for *all* Malaysians, Mahathir needed to demonstrate his political savvy in order to gain support from various groups within the country. As Nagata writes, “[f]or the federal government, the path to its goal of economic modernity by 2020 is strewn with obstacles both national and religious and to overcome these it must be seen to join and promote them, if sometimes but

symbolically” (“Islam” 84). In particular, the government needs to take into account the fact that many Malays have felt left out of development projects.

“Developmentalism has proved to be an illusion: it promised the masses more than it could deliver. As a result, the credibility of the nation-state, and its secular ideology, have come under increasing attack from Islam” (Mehmet, Islamic 3).

As I argued in previous chapters of this dissertation, in order for an elite group to be successful in promoting its ideology, it needs to be able to tap into the emotional value of myths. Over the course of the next two chapters, I will describe how the Malaysian government has promoted its progressive ideology to Malaysians, including Muslim and non-Muslim communities. I will explain how Mahathir has utilized the emotional draw of competition and the promise of the MSC as a project capable of uniting all Malaysians towards a common goal of social and political development. However, in order to tap into citizens’ emotions, the government needs to be able to tailor its efforts to different factions within its society. These efforts are reflected in the rescription of national identity and cultural liberalization designed to placate various groups for economic political purposes (i.e., Mahathir and UMNO needed the support of the Chinese population, beyond its coalition partner MCA, to ensure the viability of its pro-capitalist, ICT-oriented programs and to gain greater political stability after its poorer than expected results in the 1999 elections). To win over Malay Muslim factions, the government has tried to legitimize its Islamic authority, promote the necessity of material improvements in this life (in addition to the importance of the hereafter), and

symbolically produce national Islamic unity through Islamic architecture in Kuala Lumpur and the new administrative and high-tech capitals of the country.

VII. Overview of the MSC

Considering the central role that the MSC is expected to play in ensuring and advancing Malaysia's economic independence, the following section offers a descriptive snapshot of the project, including its physical dimensions, specific objectives, and Flagship Applications. This overview provides the background material necessary for discussing Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development, in which the MSC figures prominently. Of note, in Chapter 7, I will discuss some of the successes and setbacks of the MSC, demonstrating how the government has kept alive its version of the myth by promoting the former and downplaying the latter.

A. MSC Objectives

As noted above, the MSC is at the heart of Malaysia's Vision 2020 strategy. In describing the goals of the project, Mahathir has stated that, "[w]e see the MSC as a global test bed, where the limits of the possible can be explored and new ways of living, working and playing in the new era of the Information Age can be tested. We hope to build a multi-cultural 'web' of collaborating companies and smart-regions

that will mutually enrich all those who come into contact with it” (Malaysia, Multimedia iv).

Although Mahathir is generally considered to be the driving force behind the MSC’s development and implementation, the project’s blueprint “also shows the rhetorical and ideological influence of Kenichi Ohmae”, a well-known Japanese business strategist, info-tech consultant, proponent of the end-of-geography thesis (described below), and an acquaintance of Mahathir (Bunnell, “(Re)positioning” 112). Drawing on Ohmae’s vision for the project, Mahathir designed the MSC to make “Malaysia attractive to mobile capital in the ‘borderless world’”; an international technological hub promoting friction-free capitalism (Bunnell, “(Re)positioning” 112).⁸¹ Moreover, Mahathir expected that the MSC would launch Malaysia’s domestic high-tech sector, help bridge the country’s digital divide, and ensure Malaysia’s economic and political autonomy in the new “information age.”

In physical terms, the MSC is a 15-kilometre wide by 50-kilometre long “greenfield” corridor that stretches from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) at one end, to the newly constructed cities of Putrajaya (Malaysia’s new administrative capital) and Cyberjaya (the MSC’s business and residential headquarters) at its other end. According to government regulations, all companies with MSC status – i.e., ones that can take advantage of the Bill of Guarantees listed below – must locate part of their operation in one of the country’s MSC zones. These zones include Cyberjaya (also home to the Multimedia University), the KLCC (including the

⁸¹ Although Ohmae was a member of the MSC’s International Advisory Panel, he quit in protest over the Anwar affair.

Petronas Towers), Technology Park Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaya – Malaysian Technology Development Centre, and the KL Tower.

Recognizing that it faces stiff competition from other countries with similar ICT hubs, the Malaysian government introduced a number of measures designed to make the MSC particularly attractive to foreign investors. These measures include: 1) the promise of an economically and politically stable country with which to do business; 2) a qualified workforce with low labour costs (particularly in comparison to its neighbour to the south, Singapore); 3) the personal commitment of the Prime Minister to the success of the project⁸²; and 4) a Bill of Guarantees promising that the Malaysian government will:

- 1) Provide a world-class physical and information infrastructure,
- 2) Allow unrestricted employment of local and foreign knowledge workers,
- 3) Ensure freedom of ownership by exempting companies with MSC Status from local ownership requirements,
- 4) Give the freedom to source capital globally for MSC infrastructure, and the right to borrow funds globally,
- 5) Provide competitive financial incentives, including no income tax for up to 10 years or an investment tax allowance, and no duties on import of multimedia equipment,
- 6) Become a regional leader in intellectual property protection and cyberlaws,
- 7) Ensure no Internet censorship,
- 8) Provide globally competitive telecommunications tariffs,
- 9) Tender key MSC infrastructure contracts to leading companies willing to use the MSC as their regional hub,

⁸² Although, at this point, Badawi's level of commitment remains to be determined.

10) Provide an effective one-stop agency – MDC.

(Abdullah; Malaysia Why MSC; Nun; Tee)

As the MSC's "one-stop agency," the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) plays a particularly important role in the project's success. The MDC facilitates applications for companies interested in relocating to the MSC and is responsible for marketing the project both at home and abroad. It "also shapes MSC-specific laws, policies and practices by advising the Malaysian government and standardises MSC's information infrastructure and urban development" (Malaysia About MDC). The MSC also receives external advice and guidance from an International Advisory Panel that meets annually and is chaired by the Prime Minister. The panel is composed of a number of prominent high-tech members, including Bill Gates (Microsoft), John Gage (Sun Microsystems), Michael D. Capellas (Compaq), Nobuyuki Idei (Sony), Peter Job (Reuters), Craig R Barrett (Intel), Derek Williams (Oracle), Ragnar Back (Ericsson), and Louis Gerstner Jr (IBM)⁸³ (Malaysia International Advisory).

The government has also established a number of "cyberlaws" to offer MSC companies "legal protections against abuses of e-commerce and intellectual properties" (McDaniel 97). The 1997 Digital Signature Act, for example, "allows for the development of, among others, e-commerce by providing an avenue for secure and legally recognized on-line transactions through the use of digital signatures" (Taylor 99). Other cyberlaws include 1) 1997 Copyright (Amendment) Act (designed to protect intellectual property); 2) Computer Crimes Act (1997); 3)

Optical Discs Act (2000), which was introduced “to deal with the problem of illegal copies of copyrighted works in the form of optical discs such as VCD, DVD, CDs, and the like” (Taylor 100-01)⁸⁴; and 4) Personal Data Protection Act, established in 2004 to “regulate the collection, holding, processing or use of personal data by any person to provide protection to an individual’s personal data and safeguard his or her privacy interests” (“Personal Data” 18). The government has promoted these cyberlaws as being unique to Malaysia, thereby arguing that it can offer international investors the security that other countries in the region cannot.⁸⁵

In addition to these “soft infrastructure” elements, the MSC also guarantees companies a high-speed backbone, a sophisticated technological network,⁸⁶ and cost-competitive telecommunication tariffs (Abdullah; Nun). Also, as described below, the government has promised domestic and international companies that Cyberjaya will be a worker-friendly environment with low-density housing, an abundance of green spaces, and a multitude of leisure activities.

B. MSC Flagship Applications

As a central component of the MSC project, the government has introduced seven Flagship Applications. These applications have three main objectives: 1) to increase the country’s economic productivity; 2) to decrease Malaysia’s digital

⁸³ However, panel members often send proxies to attend meetings in their place.

⁸⁴ For a useful overview of each of these acts, see Taylor (pages 99-102).

⁸⁵ However, Malaysia is not a member of the Convention on Cybercrime, an international treaty to deal with crimes committed against or with the help of computer networks (e.g., the Internet).

⁸⁶ The entire area is supported by “a 2.5-10 gigabit fiber-optic and coaxial network with direct links to Japan, the US, and Europe” (Bunnell, Barter, and Sirat 362-63).

divide, especially between urban and rural areas of the country⁸⁷; and 3) to offer concrete ICT-oriented business opportunities for domestic and international companies. They are, in sum, “intended to transform core elements of Malaysia’s technology infrastructure and social system,” thereby helping to fulfil the objectives of the NVP and Vision 2020 (Taylor 107). The first four Flagship Applications, listed below, are categorized as being socially-oriented and dedicated to closing Malaysia’s digital divide.

1. *Electronic Government / E-Government.* According to the Malaysian government, this first Flagship Application is expected to facilitate greater interaction between the government and its citizens, as well as between government and industry. It is also supposed to improve efficiency within the government by using ICTs to create a paperless administration⁸⁸ (this application is overseen by the Malaysian Administrative Modernisation & Management Planning Unit, MAMPU, an agency within the Prime Minister’s Department) (Mahathir “Federal Budget 2004”; Maarof; Malaysia Flagships; Taylor 107).

2. *Multipurpose Card.* Promoted by the government as being the first of its kind in the world, this card, promoted to the public as MyKad, consolidates eight forms of Malaysian identification, including a citizen’s driver’s license, passport, and health data. It also operates as a multipurpose payment card for automated teller

⁸⁷ 41.9% of the Malaysian population lives in rural areas of the country (UNDP, Human Development Report 251).

⁸⁸ In August 2003, MAMPU introduced the Public Sector ICT Strategic Plan (ISP) “to ensure the planned ICT initiatives are parallel to the public sector’s ICT vision, which is to provide an efficient and quality services” (Malaysia Public Sector).

machines (this initiative is managed by Bank Negara / Ministry of Home Affairs) (A. Ismail).

3. *Smart Schools.* The Malaysian Smart School initiative was designed to provide students with the skills the government deems necessary for coping in the new “information age.” It incorporates ICTs into the classroom to help produce “a thinking and technology literate workforce” as per the goals of Malaysia’s National Philosophy of Education (Malaysia Malaysian Smart; Malaysia National Philosophy). By the year 2010, every school in Malaysia is expected to become “smart” learning environment (Chan; Malaysia Malaysian Smart; Pardas).

4. *Telehealth.*⁸⁹ According to Malaysia’s Ministry of Health, this application is dedicated to developing “one of the most advanced health systems of the world by harnessing the power of information and multimedia technologies to transform the delivery of healthcare and improve health outcomes” (Malaysia, Telemedicine1). There are four pilot projects in operation under this flagship application. They include Teleconsultation, Mass Customised / Personalised Health Information and Education, Lifetime Health Plan (LHP), and Continuing Medical Education (CME).

The government also launched three Multimedia Environment Flagship Applications designed to provide domestic and international companies the opportunity of working with other members of the multimedia industry, as well as

⁸⁹ This application was originally titled Telemedicine. However, the Ministry of Health considered Telehealth a broader, more inclusive designation.

with research and academic institutions, in a collegial environment. These last three applications include 1) Research and Development Clusters, which are the responsibility of the Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment; 2) E-Business – World Wide Manufacturing Web & Borderless Marketing, overseen by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry, as well as the MDC; and 3) Technopreneur Development, under the auspices of the Ministry of Energy, Communications & Multimedia and the MDC.

VIII. The Importance of History for Looking Ahead

The above discussion of Malaysia's recent history is useful for contextualizing the country's current socio-cultural, political, and economic environment, including its macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development. As discussed in the next chapter (6), this myth is part and parcel of the government's promise that Malaysia can advance in the new, high-tech global economy according to its own rules, cultural values, and vision for the future. Therefore, the myth is based on the premise that Malaysia is no longer dependent and "developing," but is instead already modern and well on its way to becoming fully developed.

Over the course of the next two chapters, I will discuss various methods the government has used to disseminate and keep alive this myth, as well as the micro-myth of the MSC. I will begin by looking at some of the consensus-building / hegemonic mechanisms the government has employed to generate support for these myths. These measures are separated into two categories: 1) symbolic language in

the form of speeches and policy documents; and 2) the physical symbols of urban structures and other mega-projects. In the subsequent chapter (7), I will turn to discuss some of the more coercive measures the government has used to guarantee compliance with these and other myths. In my final analysis (Chapter 8), I will compare Malaysia's macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development with the Western macro-myth of progress discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. I will also examine similarities and differences in how each of these myths is kept alive in their respective locales.

CHAPTER 6

MALAYSIA'S MYTH OF MODERNITY, PROGRESS, AND DEVELOPMENT

Malaysia is taking a single-minded approach to developing the country using the new tools offered by the Information Age.

(Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, Excerpts 30)

The identification of science and technology as markers of progress and modernity is strong and relatively uncontested in Malaysia.

(Wendy Mee 66)

In his last federal budget speech as Prime Minister and Finance Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir proudly referred to his country as “an advanced and progressive Islamic nation,” which had “received significant progress as well as gained recognition and respect of the world” (“Federal Budget 2004”). Mahathir’s remarks are at the heart of Malaysia’s myth of modernity, progress, and development. When combined with physical symbols of Malaysia’s modernity, this kind of symbolic language is used by the government to advance an image of a modern country that is no longer “developing,” but well on its way to becoming “fully developed,” a critical distinction inexorably linked to the leapfrogging concept.

This distinction signals to the world that Malaysia has prevailed in its plans to “modernize” in spite of its colonial legacy and continuing adversity in a global neo-colonial environment. The government has also portrayed Malaysia as modern as a means of enhancing its appeal to foreign investors looking for a stable and economically prosperous country with which to do business. As part of that stability

and outward appeal, the government has also promoted Malaysia's modernity to its own citizenry to generate national pride and encourage support for government-led development projects. For example, initiatives associated with the MSC, the National Vision Policy (NVP), and Vision 2020 frequently use the catch-all slogan "Malaysia Boleh!" ("Malaysia can!") to foster local pride in all things Malaysian. As Mahathir has stated, the slogan "was adopted to convince Malaysians they can do anything other people can do" ("Luncheon"). As such, significant efforts have been focused on creating buy-in, mobilizing public opinion and cultural articulation to align social goals with those of the government's. Malaysians are encouraged to strive for greater development at the micro / individual level, thereby collectively leading to development at the macro / national level. As a result, the myth of modernity, progress, and development is customized for, and disseminated to, the external and internal audiences that are equally important to the success of the NVP, Vision 2020, and MSC – the former are targeted for their investment capabilities, while the latter are conscripted for their labour, as well as political and economic support.

I. The Symbolic Language of Vision 2020, ICTs, and Leapfrogging

As its speeches and policy documents demonstrate, the Malaysian government has placed significant stock in the power of ICTs in general, and the MSC in particular, to leapfrog Malaysia into a prosperous new social, political, and economic future. As a result, new technologies are expected to play a central role in

achieving the objectives of the government's Vision 2020 strategy. Therefore, the following section begins with an overview of the strategy, followed by a discussion of the leapfrogging potential of ICTs and the MSC.

A. Vision 2020 and ICTs – “Mahathir’s vision of modernity for Malaysia” (Teik and Wah 6).

As noted in the previous chapter, within a year of becoming Prime Minister, Mahathir had introduced his Look East Policy. The objective of this policy was to encourage Malaysians to “emulate the work ethics and culture of the Japanese and Koreans that emphasises dedication, discipline and loyalty as well as diligence towards attaining national development” (Mahathir “Federal Budget 2004”). Established in 1991, Mahathir’s Vision 2020 strategy is a broad-based social manifesto designed to carry the objectives of the Look East Policy over into the new “information age.” The purpose of the strategy is to incite Malaysians to remain united in the face of an increasingly globalized world, and to work together to reach the objective of becoming a fully developed nation by the year 2020. In order to reach this status, Mahathir has argued that Malaysians need to fulfil the following nine objectives:

- (1) Establish a united Malaysian nation made up of one Malaysian race;
- (2) Create a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society;
- (3) Foster and develop a mature democratic society;
- (4) Establish a fully moral and ethical society;
- (5) Establish a mature, liberal and tolerant society;
- (6) Establish a scientific and

progressive society; (7) Establish a fully caring society; (8) Ensure an economically just society, in which there is a fair and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth; and (9) Establish a prosperous society with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient. (Excerpts 16-17)

As these objectives demonstrate, the symbolic language of Vision 2020 supports the government's project to rescript Malaysia's national identity towards greater cultural inclusivity (described in Chapter 5). As John Hilley remarks, the "populist message of Vision 2020 lies in its base sentiment of common national development. It plays upon constructed symbols of national unity, invoking a *vox populi* of social belonging and common purpose: 'Malaysia boleh' (Malasia can)" (Malaysia 19). Not surprisingly then, Vision 2020 has, for the most part, been well received by non-Bumiputras. As Malaysian political economist Edmund Terence Gomez explains, "the rhetoric behind this grand plan, and the government's economic and cultural liberalization initiatives have attracted the support of non-Bumiputeras who appear content with a Malay leadership whom they believe to be more accommodative of their (non-Malay) interests since it is now more secure, both politically and economically" (Chinese 136).

Notwithstanding its popular acceptance, many of the challenges outlined in Vision 2020 are rather vague in meaning and purpose. For example, it is unclear what is meant by a "psychologically liberated," "fully moral," or "mature" society. What *is* clear, however, is that ICTs and the MSC are the tools to produce this society. As Mahathir stated in a 1997 live television broadcast urging Malaysians to

embrace new technology, “the widespread expansion of IT would be critical to the realisation of future economic development, national integration and enhanced prosperity for *all sections* of Malaysian society” (qtd. in Hilley, Malaysia 132, emphasis added).

As such, ICTs and the MSC are expected to help fulfil the economic, as well as the socio-cultural objectives of the Vision 2020 strategy. For example, Mahathir has promised Malaysians that the country’s primary source of economic growth from 2001-2010, “will be from productivity gains arising from improvements in technology and production process as well as increased use of information and communication technology (ICT)” (“Third Outline”). At the same time, Mahathir established the National Information Technology Council (NITC) in 1994 to harness the transformative *social and political* powers of ICTs and the MSC. The NITC is a high-level think-tank composed of public and private interests, which advises the government on all matters pertaining to ICTs and national development. The Council is chaired by the Prime Minister, while the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS, a private research and development organization) acts as its Secretariat. In turn, the NITC oversees Malaysia’s National Information Technology Agenda (NITA). Launched in 1996, the goal of NITA is to use ICTs to improve the “quality of work and life... for *all Malaysians*... [creating] a value based knowledge society in the Malaysian mould where the society is rich in information, empowered by knowledge, infused with a distinctive value-system, and is self governing” (Malaysia DAGS, emphasis added).

Therefore, in like manner to promises made about the transformative powers of earlier forms of technologies discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, the Malaysian government has pledged that ICTs and the MSC will produce economic, social, and political development for all Malaysians, thereby “leapfrogging” the country into a more prosperous future.

B. Leapfrogging Towards Vision 2020

As a means of encouraging Malaysians to embrace the transformative powers of ICTs and the MSC, Mahathir and other members of his government have played on the fear of being “left behind” in the new “information age.” Similar to the races described in Chapter 4, at the heart of Malaysia’s Cyber Race is the fear of what will happen if the country fails to harness the powers of new technology. As Mahathir has warned, “[w]e missed the industrial revolution entirely. Now we are faced with the technological revolution. If we miss it, I don't think we will ever recover this time. Developing countries must work to keep up with technological developments” (“‘Good’ Dictators”). The Malaysian Minister for Energy, Communications and Multimedia has voiced similar concerns: “Either we adapt to the changes or we will forever be left behind not only in ICT, but will also miss the vast opportunities that come with it” (Tawie). Consequently, Malaysians are exhorted to embrace new technologies as *the* means of development and progress. As Mahathir has stated, “It [computer technology] will help you in your business, your daily lives, your communication with family members and friends and, most importantly, you can

impart it to your children. I urge all Malaysians to make a wise decision by being computer literate today... If we don't start now, when others are learning this new skill, we will be left behind" (qtd. in "Mahathir Laments").⁹⁰

As discussed in the next chapter, the government also uses the theme of a race to define Malaysia's relationship with its neighbours, particularly Singapore, India, and China. To gain a competitive edge in its efforts to attract foreign direct investment (FDI), it has tried to make the MSC *the* ICT-multimedia hub for the entire region.

1. *The MSC Solution.* To ensure that Malaysia does *not* get left behind in the new information age, the government has cultivated a number of export processing zones (EPZs), also known as free trade zones, free industrial zones, special economic zones, and export processing factories. In essence, EPZs are delimited geographical enclaves that support export-oriented enterprises and benefit from government support initiatives such as tax incentives, tariff and labour exemptions, etc. In the past two decades, these enclaves have multiplied throughout the developing world as transnational corporations expand their search for new markets, cheap labour, and accommodating national laws (Emadi-Coffin 9-10; Sussman 114). The Malaysian government hopes that its EPZs⁹¹ will attract these corporations and thus serve as a "catalyst for widespread industrialization by providing international linkages that bring knowledge and expertise on marketing, distribution and sales" (Malhotra 19).

⁹⁰ According to the World Bank, in 2002, 7.8 million Malaysians were classified as Internet users. As well, in 2001 there were 198 telephone mainlines (per 1,000 people) and 314 cellular subscribers (per 1,000 people) (UNDP Human Development Indicators).

⁹¹ EPZs were "later renamed free industrial zone[s] following 1990 amendments" to Malaysia's original 1971 Free Trade Zone Act (Sussman 112).

The EPZs are also expected to attract valuable FDI, produce local jobs, and diversify Malaysia's export economy, and produce local jobs. One of Malaysia's most "successful" EPZ is located in the state of Penang. Known for its production of electronics and electrical manufacturing, notably in the area of semi-conductor chips, this zone is lauded for developing a thriving industrial economy in the region.⁹² However, the most important EPZ in Malaysia has been the Multimedia Super Corridor.

For a newly industrializing country with a long colonial legacy and a desire to become a successful player in the global economy, the MSC appeared to be *the* tool that could help Malaysia achieve its ambitions. Malaysia was not, however, unique in its decision to build this kind of high-tech hub. In Asia alone, India, Singapore, China, South Korea, Taiwan, Bangladesh, Brunei, the Philippines, and Indonesia have all constructed some type of ICT-oriented, multimedia imitation of the original Silicon Valley. Most of these countries (Malaysia included) jumped on the technology bandwagon at a time when high-tech sectors were booming throughout North America, Japan, and in parts of Europe. They witnessed ordinary people and business tycoons alike investing extraordinary amounts of money into dot-com companies, believing that the technology "revolution" would bring unimaginable financial remuneration (Cassidy; Nevaer).

Silicon Valley played a particularly important role, both materially and symbolically, in the development of this so-called revolution and the world-wide clamour to be a part of it. The success of the Valley has been attributed to a number

⁹² The Northern Growth Triangle is another example of a successful EPZ. The triangle stretches across the northern states of Perlis, Kedah, and Penang, includes the southern provinces in

of factors, the foremost of which is the rebellious entrepreneurship of its start-up companies and their ability to think “outside of the box.” However, the Valley also received significant venture capital and support from the American Department of Defense, particularly during the Cold War eras,⁹³ as well as from nearby Stanford University (Castells and Hall 229; Leslie 49). Even with this kind of backing, it still took decades for the Valley to gain the momentum necessary for it to be considered financially successful (Sturgeon 16). Notwithstanding the unique circumstances surrounding Silicon Valley’s success, other countries have tried to emulate it, believing it to be the “Holy Grail of economic development,” as well as the answer to a wide range of social ills (Sturgeon 15).

In Cloning Silicon Valley: The Next Generation High-Tech Hotspots (2001), David Rosenberg examines six of these countries (located in both the developed and developing world), and gauges the success of their respective “Silicon Valley Imitators.”⁹⁴ In each case, Rosenberg argues, the Silicon Imitator is composed of a number of high-tech companies, which are located within close proximity to one another and supported by 1) government patronage; and 2) at least one post-secondary education institution to supply it with research partners and ICT graduates. He contends that the basic requirements needed to construct these kinds of Imitators are not difficult for most countries to produce. For example, all of his case studies were able to develop the necessary technological networks, research

Thailand, as well as the Northeast coast of the Indonesian state of Sumatra. Together, these areas promote tourism and the exploration of natural gas and fishing.

⁹³ Nevertheless, the importance of military funding to the Valley’s success is often overlooked. As Stuart W. Leslie remonstrates, “[m]issing in virtually every account of freewheeling entrepreneurs and visionary venture capitalists is the military’s role, intentional and other wise, in creating and sustaining Silicon Valley” (49).

institutions, skilled workforce, and accommodating national laws necessary to attract high-tech investors. However, he argues that it is significantly more difficult and complicated for them to generate the “basic chemistry” of a successful Imitator, including such social and cultural intangibles as a risk-taking entrepreneurial mentality, a strong venture capital community, intercultural marketing skills, etc. In his final analysis, Rosenberg pinpoints how each of his case studies has, in fact, failed to get the “chemistry” right enough to really be able to emulate the success of the original Silicon Valley.

In their 1994 book, Technopoles of the world: the making of twenty-first-century industrial complexes, Manuel Castells and Peter Hall argue against comparing Silicon Imitators, or what they refer to as “technopoles.” For them, each technopole is in fact unique and the regions in which one finds them diverse. The MSC, for example, would be considered unique to Malaysia in terms of the enormous financial *and political* resources that the government in general, and Mahathir in particular, has dedicated to ensure its success. The government has also designed Malaysian-specific incentives to attract investors, including the MSC’s Bill of Guarantees and cyberlaws described in the previous chapter. Of particular note, Castells and Hall make a critical distinction between technology parks and technopoles. The former, they argue, “merely seek investment in and employment using existing industrial techniques and technology, the latter are concerned with research and development – the creation of *new* technology” (Bunnell, “Multimedia” 271-72).

⁹⁴ His case studies include Cambridge, England; Helsinki, Finland; Tel Aviv, Israel; Bangalore, India; and HsinChu-Taipei, Taiwan. Of note, Rosenberg does not mention Malaysia’s

Clearly, as a means of securing technological and economic independence, the Malaysian government has tried to turn the MSC into a technopole rather than allowing it to become merely a technology park or export-processing zone (EPZ). In order to do so, the government has invested a significant amount of research and development money into the MSC, specifically through its R&D Grant Schemes administered by the MDC. Also, through its three Multimedia Environment Flagship Applications, especially the Research and Development Clusters Application (noted in Chapter 5), the government has developed “incubators” to encourage domestic and foreign companies to work together in the common pursuit of new technology creation (however, as discussed in the next chapter, there are concerns that the MSC has been unable to advance past the stage of “technology park” because it lacks the skilled workforce and venture capital necessary to support a technopole).

It would seem, then, that despite differences between the perspectives of Rosenberg and Castells and Hall, all Silicon Imitators / technopoles have two important elements in common. First, they demonstrate that the end-of-geography thesis is untenable. As Vincent Mosco explains, proponents of this thesis “underestimate the importance of face-to-face contact and of informal networks whose contacts are based partly on and certainly facilitated by geographical propinquity” (“Webs” 39). However, the purpose of these ICT hubs is to physically assemble domestic and international high-tech companies (and their employees) in one geographic location. In Malaysia, for example, companies are granted MSC status (thus allowing them to take advantage of the government’s Bill of Guarantees)

MSC at any point in his writing.

only if they agree to locate part of their operation in one of the country's designated MSC zones. Also, as discussed below, the MSC *as a physical entity* plays an important symbolic role in the government's strategy to define Malaysia as a "modern" country.

Second, the creators of these Silicon Imitators / technopoles believe that their respective projects will play a central role in altering their country's future for the better. As Castells and Hall note, they are viewed as "the panacea for countries, regions and cities struck by the painful adjustments needed in an era of technological and economic transition" (222). The Malaysian government, for example, declares that,

Malaysia has embarked on an ambitious plan to leapfrog into the Information Age by providing intellectual and strategic leadership... As a first step, Malaysia has created the Multimedia Super Corridor – a world-first, world-class act – to help companies of the world test the limits of technology and prepare themselves for the future. The MSC will also accelerate Malaysia's entry into the Information Age, and through it, help actualise Vision 2020. (qtd. in Hilley, *Malaysia* 133)

As a corollary, Malaysian government and industry often employ the terms "smart" and "intelligent" to refer to projects unique to the MSC and its Flagship Applications. Through their "smart partnerships"⁹⁵, for example, the public and private sector have jointly built "smart and intelligent homes," "intelligent cities"

⁹⁵ As Hilley explains, "'Smart Partnerships' can be seen as a key term in the lexicon of Vision-speak, informing middle-class media discourse and MSC marketing language alike. In a message applicable to both, Mahathir's basic claim is that 'in enriching the other, you enrich yourself'" (134).

(e.g. Putrajaya and Cyberjaya), “smart cards,” “smart schools,” and an “intelligent government.”

Despite the government’s proclamations that the MSC represents a new and innovative plan to launch Malaysia into the “information age,” the project is not, however, a significant departure from earlier development plans. Rather, the MSC represents a decades-long ambition to resist new forms of colonialism and technological subjugation. As Tim Bunnell explains, “attempts to become a Silicon-Valley-style generator, rather than importer, of technology resonate with the quest for technological independence that has been a feature of [Malaysian] state development since at least the early 1970s” (“Multimedia” 267). In a similar vein, sociologist Wendy Mee writes that,

Colonialism was an early lesson in vulnerability in the face of superior technology (both military and industrial). No wonder then that a belief in the progressive force of science and technology was a theme in proto-nationalist writings... an orientation to science and technology has been written into the principles of Malaysian nationhood, that is, the *Rukunegara*. The final clause of the declaration of national unity affirms Malaysia’s commitment ‘to building a progressive society’ oriented to ‘modern science and technology.’ (61)

It is hardly surprising, then, that Malaysia has placed so much stock in the power of the MSC, and ICTs in general, to help it leapfrog towards a more prosperous future. As such, the following critique of the leapfrogging thesis should

not be read as an attack on the power of the MSC or ICTs to act as tools of economic or social and political development. On the contrary, over the course of the next two chapters, I will argue that the MSC *can* produce positive economic results in Malaysia, its Flagship Applications *can* help bridge the country's digital divide, and ICTs *can* play an important role in processes of political and economic development. However, there are a number of problems associated with the concept of leapfrogging which must also be addressed.

2. *Leapfrogging*. Prior to discussing some of these issues, it is instructive to make a distinction between two different kinds of leapfrogging. The first kind refers to the use of technology to jump over stages of economic and / or socio-political development. A second form of leapfrogging can be viewed “in a technical sense to signify skipping over the technological frontier or product cycle” (J.P. Singh 5). These two forms of leapfrogging are often intertwined, as they are in the Malaysian context, because jumps in technical acquisition are often expected to help communities leapfrog states of economic and / or socio-political development. However, the idea of leapfrogging these so-called stages is problematic for a number of reasons, two of which are discussed below.

First, the idea that a culture or society is able to leapfrog *stages* of development feeds a social evolutionist perspective that, as discussed in Chapter 3, 1) views development as a linear evolutionary chain; and 2) considers some cultures to be further along this evolutionary chain than other cultures. Although technologies are used as tools in projects of development, development need not

occur according to universally defined stages (particularly considering that these stages are determined and naturalized primarily by the developed world).

Second, leapfrogging theories tend towards technological determinism. They assume that new technologies act as agents of change, while often failing, or choosing not to take into account the social, political, and economic context in which the technology is introduced and used in a given environment. However, as also noted in Chapter 3, new technology is *always* incorporated into existing sets of power relationships rather than acting as independent instruments of economic, social, political transformation. To understand how technology operates within the Malaysian context, for example, is to take into consideration government and industry structures and priorities, as well as differences according to citizens' economic status, gender, ethnicity, age, education, and political and civil liberties.

As a corollary, to understand how a given technology operates within a particular environment it is also important to distinguish between having access to a technology and the ability, as well as desire, to use it. Moreover, if an individual does have the access, capability, and desire to use a technology, one must also ask what this individual uses the technology for, and how this usage relates to activities associated with civic engagement, democratic participation, and economic enhancement (i.e., the objectives of Vision 2020). In Chapter 7, I will re-address this issue of access to, and usage of, technology vis-à-vis programs introduced by the Malaysian government to bridge the country's digital divide. I will argue that although the government has established and funded a number of useful programs to encourage widespread ICT usage, it has focused too heavily on the "build it and they

will come” formula, rather than addressing how Malaysians actually use ICTs, and how their usage may or may not improve their social, political, and economic lives.

Although I have cautioned against viewing technology as simply a tool to jump over “stages of development,” I have also noted that technology can, in fact, be used to enhance economic and socio-political democratic activities. The latter is the focus of the following section.

II. Recognizing the Potential Power of ICTs

As noted in Chapter 2, some scholars have argued that ICTs are inherently dialectical in nature. Arjun Appadurai, Nick Dyer-Witheford, and Peter J. Smith, for example, contend that although ICTs have been used by the global elite to gain greater political and economic control, periphery communities have also used these technologies as tools to alter and circumvent circuits of domination. As Pippa Norris remarks, this kind of optimism expresses “hope that digital technologies will shift some of the global disparities in power as well as wealth, by fostering a worldwide civic society countering the role of international agencies, strengthening the voice of the developing world, dissolving some of the boundaries of the nation-state, and reinforcing the process of democratization” (8).

In a discussion of what he refers to as “deep democracy,” anthropologist Arjun Appadurai contends that the global diffusion of human rights discourse owes much of its success to “transnational advocacy networks” operating within and between nation-state borders (“Deep” 26). These networks, he argues, have

benefited enormously from new forms of ICTs (particularly the Internet), which have proven useful for disseminating information, co-ordinating on-the-ground citizen activism, and facilitating communication between geographically dispersed communities.⁹⁶

In a similar vein, political economist Nick Dyer-Witheford has used Karl Marx's work on the dialectical possibilities inherent in technology⁹⁷ to argue that ICTs advanced by contemporary political and economic elite may, in fact, turn out to be the seed of their own demise. He describes how ICTs have been used for purposes of control – e.g., in facilitating a new international division of labour, monitoring employees, privatizing databases, etc. However, he proposes that ICTs are also used as circuits of struggle against this control – e.g., in developing networks of social activism, distributing information, providing alternative forms of media, etc. He therefore makes the argument that capital, “in its drive to extend the scope of the market... has so thoroughly disseminated and made familiar the technical means of communication as to open the door to a series of individual and collective reappropriations”(121). In the Malaysian situation, for example, the government has vowed not to censor the Internet in order to attract international companies to the MSC (part of its Bill of Guarantees).⁹⁸ However, in an example of Dyer-Witheford's “collective reappropriation,” the Internet has been used for on-line

⁹⁶ Pippa Norris provides some examples of activities undertaken by these transnational advocacy networks, including the mobilization of “protesters concerned about the World Trade Organization meetings in Seattle and Washington, D.C., the anti-landmine campaign, the anti-sweatshop manufacture of Nike shoes, and opposition movements in Burma, linking indigenous groups in developing societies with a diverse mélange of Norwegian environmentalists, Australian trade unionists, and European human rights organizations” (8-9).

⁹⁷ Which, as noted in Chapter 3, demonstrates that despite popular belief to the contrary, Marx was not a technological determinist.

⁹⁸ To support this promise, Section 3 (3) of the Communications and Multimedia Act stipulates that “Nothing in this Act shall be construed as permitting the censorship of the Internet” (Communications).

critical journalism (e.g., Malaysiakini, discussed in Chapter 7), which circumvents the government's strict control over Malaysia's mainstream media.

Political scientist Peter J. Smith is particularly interested in how citizens have used new forms of ICTs to challenge the policies and trade agreements of the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI). In like manner to Dyer-Witheford, Smith contends (in conjunction with Elizabeth Smythe) that, "[t]he very processes and means of communicating that made globalization possible... are making globalization contestable. Information and communication technologies (ICTs), primarily the Internet, have facilitated new forms of expression and connection among groups and the growth of new public spaces which are not easily controlled by states and ruling elites."

As a corollary to Appadurai, Dyer-Witheford, and Smith's supposition, ICTs have been indispensable for members of diaspora groups wanting to maintain ties between geographically disparate individuals and communities. As Karim H. Karim explains, the "ability to exchange messages with individuals on the other side of the planet and to have access to community information almost instantaneously changes the dynamics of diaspora, allowing for qualitatively and quantitatively enhanced linkages" ("Globalization" 287). This example of diasporic use of ICTs demonstrates well Amartya Sen's famed "development as freedom" thesis. Sen contends that technology can be used as a tool to advance projects of economic and social development. However, the *freedom* to be able to access and use technology must also be considered as development in and of itself. By viewing development in

this manner, our attention is thus directed “to the ends that make development important, rather than merely to some of the means that, *inter alia*, play a prominent part in the process” (Sen 3). In other words, development for Sen pivots on providing people with choice and freedom; the freedom to pursue economic and educational opportunities, to engage in democratic activities, to have access to technology, etc. These are, for Sen, the “*constituent components* of development,” and they need not always be directed towards projects of economic, or even political, development (as Karim’s quote demonstrates) (5).

Accordingly, concerns have been raised over what will happen to periphery countries and marginalized groups if they are unable to gain access to new forms of ICTs. Concerned individuals, groups, and organizations have argued that if the gap between technological “haves” and “have nots” is not closed, then already existing economic and political inequalities will further deepen, and projects of development rendered impotent.

A. Bridging the Digital Divide

As the following section illustrates, a wide variety of organizations have developed programs designed to address the issue of global and domestic digital divides. The United Nations, for example, has established a task force of thirty-nine countries to examine issues related ICTs in developing countries. The G8 Digital Opportunity Task Force, or Dot Force (co-ordinated by the UNDP), was developed by the G8 heads of state to bring together government, private, and non-profit

participants from the developed and developing world to create the Genoa Action Plan. The purpose of this plan is to “identify ways in which the digital revolution can benefit all the world’s people, especially the poorest and most marginalized groups” (Dot Force). In conjunction with other public and private partners, the International Telecommunications Union developed the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) to address the same issues (ITU WSIS; Jussawalla, “Role” 257). Other organizations, including the Global Knowledge Partnership, the World Economic Forum’s Global Digital Divide Initiative, and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), are also working to bridge the digital divide and to encourage the use of ICTs as tools for sustainable development. These initiatives are matched by those of countless other government and non-government organizations around the world.⁹⁹

An example of a successful bridge-building project in the developing world is the Grameen Telecom initiative in Bangladesh. Grameen Telecom is a not-for-profit company, which operates under the umbrella of the for-profit Grameen bank that offers microcredit loans, specifically to rural women entrepreneurs (Wahid and Hsu). The bank provides women “with credit to buy cell phones from Grameen Telecom. The women then provide mobile pay phone service in their shops, the local market, and elsewhere, charging a markup agreed on with Grameen Telecom” (Jussawalla “Role”; Lawson and Meyenn 1). Considering that the average Bangladeshi is unable to afford a cellular phone, and most rural areas in the country do not have the infrastructure for land lines, this project provides a village the

⁹⁹ For an overview of international, smaller-scaled, grassroots “success stories,” refer to “Stories from the Field,” UNDP. 10 May 2004

opportunity to afford and use one collectively. The phones are used for both personal and business purposes, and the operators average a net income of “about \$US 52 a month after covering all their costs, good earnings in a country in which per capita GDP in 1997 was \$US 262” (Lawson and Meyenn 2).

An example of a successful initiative in Malaysia is the E-Bario project located in the highlands of Sarawak, East Malaysia. E-Bario is a community-based project, which is supported financially by Canada’s International Development Research Centre (IDRC), as well as the Malaysian government (through its DAGS scheme, an important funding mechanism described in the next chapter). The goal of E-Bario is to bring ICTs, particularly the Internet, to a remote group of people called the Kelabit (Bala; Harris et al.; Hazis). Researchers from Universiti Sarawak Malaysia (UNIMAS), two of whom I interviewed while conducting research in Sarawak, developed this program to see if, and how, new technology could improve the social and economic lives of these people. Working in conjunction with the Kelabit, the UNIMAS researchers established computers in two local schools, developed a telecentre for the wider community to use, and installed a copier and fax machine. The Kelabit have used this technology to, among other things, sell local products, check financial markets, and encourage tourism to their region. They have also used “special software to record family trees... [which] will eventually be put up on the Web.” This project is particularly important because “[w]ith a population of around 5,000 worldwide, the Kelabit attach great significance to establishing who is related to whom” (Statham).

<<http://www.sdnpu.org/it4dev/stories/stories.html>>, or “ICT for Development (Portal),” Development Gateway. 10 May 2004 <<http://www.developmentgateway.org/ict/>>.

There are, of course, a multitude of other success stories around the world that are comparable to the Grameen cellular phone network and E-Barrio Internet projects. As access to, and usage of, ICTs expands with the support of these kinds of bridge-building projects, the argument advanced by Appadurai, Dyer-Witheford, and Smith, appears increasingly viable. For, with a greater number of marginalized people using ICTs, opportunities to challenge the power of the status quo simultaneously increase. However, these projects must be understood within a larger political and economic framework in which, “the distribution patterns of new communications technologies match the global distribution and control of wealth” that have been in operation for decades (Murdock and Golding 123). In other words, although new forms of ICTs offer the potential for struggle and development, they are still subject to the same controls as previous forms of technology (e.g., the telegraph and train discussed in chapter 3).

According to the symbolic language used by the Malaysian government to describe ICTs and the MSC, new technologies are the engine of economic growth and social and political development. However, as discussed in the following two sections, these technologies operate within an environment that curtails their ability to be used as tools, or “constituent components,” of development. For, although many Malaysians have access to ICTs, and may use them for individual and collective forms of development, their power is constrained by the fact that technologies must be used within 1) a neo-liberal economic environment; and 2) under an undemocratic regime.

B. ICTs and the MSC in a Neo-Liberal Economic Environment

Despite Mahathir's anti-Western rhetoric, he and his government have built the MSC with the American Silicon Valley as its model and have explicitly courted Western-based transnational corporations to take part in shaping the project's development. As discussed above, Mahathir has also willingly adopted the same neo-liberal economic policies (e.g., privatization, liberalization, and deregulation), which he has criticized the West for using. These policies assume that the market will allocate resources efficiently, and thus Malaysians are promised that benefits accruing from the MSC and EPZs will trickle down to all of society. Undoubtedly, Malaysia's economy has improved significantly over the past three decades. As Mahathir proudly stated in his 2004 Federal Budget speech, "Malaysians from all walks of life have benefited from the economic growth, with per capita income increasing from RM1,132 [\$395 CDN] in 1970 to RM13,683 [\$4,777 CDN] in 2002." According to the World Bank, in 2002, Malaysia experienced an annual GDP growth rate of 4.1% per year, which is significantly up from its 1998 post-financial crisis growth of -7.4%. As well, since the early 1970s, life expectancy in Malaysia has risen from 63 to 73.1 years of age (UNDP Human Development Indicators). And, in 2001, Malaysia was placed at the high end of the "Medium Human Development" section of the UNDP's Human Development Report, with a ranking of 58th out of 175 countries (242).

Of concern, however, is the fact that, the objective of neo-liberal economic policies is economic growth regardless of the resultant inequalities in the distribution of income or other benefits. According to the World Bank's 2003 World

Development Indicators and the Asian Development Bank's 2001 Key Indicators of Developing Asian and Pacific Countries, the lowest 20 percent of Malaysia's income earners possess only 4.4 of the percentage share of income or consumption. In comparison, the highest twenty percent of the population took in 54.3 percent. As a result, Malaysia's Gini Index, which calculates "income shares by percentiles of population," registered 49.2 in 1997 (the most recent year of data available). On this scale, zero indicates perfect equality of wealth distribution while 100, perfect inequality. For comparison, Canada's Gini Index for the same year was 31.5, Indonesia – 32 (in 1999), India – 37.8, and China – 40.3 (excluding Hong Kong) (Asian Development Bank, 2001 40; UNDP Human Development Indicators; World Bank). Although more recent statistics for Malaysia are unavailable, the country's Gini Index for 1975-1988 was 48, suggesting that the gap between the country's rich and poor did not change over the span of two decades (Asian Development Bank, 1995 9). One could make the argument that although this gap has not been bridged, since overall incomes in Malaysia have increased, everyone in the country has benefited on an equal scale. However, it also indicates that the same demographic subset continues to possess the greatest opportunity to control the largest percentage of the wealth, which is not egalitarian.

Mahathir has explained away differences in domestic economic prosperity by blaming state governments for failing to help and protect their citizens. In particular, he has targeted Islamic states (an obvious affront to the PAS party):

We sympathise with those in some states, who remain entrapped in poverty and sufferings in the midst of our prosperity. This is because

the leaders whom they elected are incompetent and incapable of bringing development to the states. Even worse, they claimed poverty and sufferings are fated and should be accepted. They believe that it is also fated, if Islamic states are poor, backward and undeveloped.

(Mahathir “Federal Budget 2004”)

Notwithstanding Mahathir’s accusations, the economic disparity within Malaysian society can be directly linked to economic policies that, as noted above, have placed newly privatized sectors of an increasingly deregulated economy into the hands of select individuals supportive of UMNO / BN. In so doing, the government has given a few individuals the opportunity to amass personal fortunes. As John Hilley contends, the symbolic language found in the National IT Agenda (NITA) “offers an ideological rationale for the MSC, allowing the government to promote its populist elements while the private sector and UMNO proxies derive the key benefits” (Malaysia 135). In addition, the government’s economic policies have negated a truly competitive marketplace and, as noted above, opened the door for the need of using taxpayers’ money to bailout unsuccessful privatized mega-projects.

In addition, the government’s liberalization policies, which have played a central role in attracting companies to the MSC, have tended to benefit the already existing economic elite. As Tim Bunnell remarks, a “pervasive liberalising faith is reflected in the incentives and benefits for investors in the MSC’s Bill of Guarantees” (“Multimedia” 277), which allow freedom of ownership (thereby exempting foreign companies from local ownership requirements) and unrestricted employment of foreign workers. Therefore, even though “[s]tate and corporate high-

tech discourse and representation imagine the MSC as a ‘multimedia utopia’ benefiting all Malaysia and all Malaysians” (Bunnell, “Multimedia” 279), the privatization and liberalization of this and other high-tech spaces have, in large part, financially excluded the majority of Malaysians. To substantiate his claim, Bunnell offers evidence from his field research on the displacement of plantation workers in the construction of the MSC, particularly individuals who lived and worked on the land slated to become a part of the new administrative capital, Putrajaya. He describes how, when negotiations were underway to build Putrajaya, these individuals were forced to relocate to settlements outside of the MSC zone, forcing them to be completely excluded “from the high-tech urban environment replacing their homes” (“Multimedia” 283). Therefore, he contends, the MSC is unable to live up to the nationalist, utopian rhetoric promised of it by the government as it is “associated with new manifestations of national scale disparity and marginalisation” (“Multimedia” 268).

1. *Privatization of Flagship Applications.* The Malaysian government has allowed the private sector to become fully immersed in its MSC Flagship Applications. To gain insight into the potential ramifications of private sector involvement in areas designed to achieve the socio-cultural objectives of the Vision 2020 strategy, this next section begins with a comparison between the Flagship Applications and the Community Access Program (CAP) in Canada.

The purpose of the CAP program, which is a key component in the larger Connecting Canadians strategy¹⁰⁰, is to provide citizens with access to the Internet in libraries, schools, and community centres located throughout Canada, particularly in traditionally underserved regions (Canada Community). In addition to public funding, the program receives financial support from a variety of private interests, including the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation which provides libraries throughout North America with technology to help narrow domestic digital divides (Smeltzer 98). Although the foundation provides these public institutions with valuable technology, once inside the library system¹⁰¹, it “spreads Internet Explorer, Microsoft Windows, and Microsoft Office and BackOffice into every nook and cranny... Eventually, libraries will become dependent on Microsoft products, and Gates and Microsoft will benefit handsomely from his minimal largesse” (Gutstein 42). In the end, the CAP program has helped facilitate the greater privatization of a public institution.

Also of concern, CAP falls under the purview of the Ministry of Industry Canada. The mandate of this ministry is to, “foster a growing competitive, knowledge-based Canadian economy... to improve conditions for investment, improve Canada's innovation performance, increase Canada's share of global trade and build a fair, efficient and competitive marketplace” (Department). Concerns have therefore been raised that the ministry in charge of bridging the country's digital divide tends to focus more on Canadians as *consumers* of ICTs, rather than as

¹⁰⁰ As the name implies, Connecting Canadians strategy was developed by the federal government to make Canada the most connected country in the world (for further information, refer to the strategy's website at: <www.connect.gc.ca>).

¹⁰¹ The CAP program works in conjunction with the LibraryNet program to introduce new forms of ICTs, particularly the Internet, into Canadian libraries. For additional information

citizens that can use ICTs as tools to improve their social, political, as well as economic situations.

In comparison to the CAP program, the MSC's Flagship Applications have even greater private sector involvement. These applications, it will be recalled, are supposed to help bridge Malaysia's digital divide and act as the link between benefits accruing from the MSC and the general population. However, since many of these applications "involve sectors of great social significance" (e.g., health and education), it should be of great concern that private companies have been offered substantial input into their development and implementation (Jackson and Mosco 36).

For example, a private company, GMPC Corporation, administers the Multipurpose Card (also known as MyKad) on behalf of the Ministry of Home Affairs. Since the card carries sensitive social and economic information, including the owner's social insurance number, driver's license, health information, automated teller machine access, etc., there are concerns that private sector involvement in this kind of project may place citizens' personal privacy at risk for commercialization, data-mining, etc.

In regards to Telehealth, Malaysian academics Zaharom Nain and Mustafa K. Anuar argue that many of the advantages associated with this application are financially out of reach for most Malaysians. For example, the "price of services such as Customised / Personalised Health Information, Continuing Medical Education, Teleconsultation, and Life Health Plans... are likely to be prohibitive,

concerning LibraryNet and its relationship to CAP and the Connecting Canadians strategy, refer to the program's website at: <<http://ln-rb.ic.gc.ca/e/index.asp>>.

especially for those in lower income groups.” Nain and Anuar have also expressed concerns that private sector involvement in this application has exacerbated Malaysia’s two-tiered health care system, rather than “democratizing” it as per the stated mandate of the Telehealth’s Flagship Application.¹⁰²

2. *Privatization of Education (including Smart Schools).* Over the past decade, the public education system in Malaysia has also become increasingly corporatized and privatized. As the Ministry of Education has stated, Malaysia “possesses a market-sensitive education system,” which emphasizes “profitable” ICT-oriented fields of study and relies on the financial support of private sector interests (Malaysia Message). For example, the government-owned Malaysian Technology Development Corporation “promotes linkages among companies, technologists, researchers and financial institutions, and provides venture capital for the commercialisation of university research projects” (Malaysia Industry and University).

Also in the past decade, a number of private universities and colleges have been established in Malaysia, offering courses primarily in ICT-related fields of study (including multimedia, engineering, as well as international business). Perhaps the most important post-secondary private institution in Malaysia is the Multimedia University (“In Brief”).¹⁰³ With its primary campus located in

¹⁰² In addition to its involvement in the MSC’s Flagship Applications, the private sector (quite often foreign companies) is also actively involved in other projects aimed at bridging Malaysia’s digital divide. For example, Coca-Cola (in conjunction with the UNDP and Malaysian government) and Apple Malaysia have launched their own respective “E-Learning for Life Campaigns” to introduce computers into local schools.

¹⁰³ Also, the Telekom Training College (TTC), owned by Telekom Malaysia, trains students in practical telecommunications skills to help support Malaysia’s high-tech sector.

Cyberjaya,¹⁰⁴ the university's foremost objective "is to support the growth and success of the MSC project," which means that it only offers "information technology and multimedia-based courses" ("In Brief"). Even though it is officially a private institution, one that shares close affiliations with high-tech domestic and international companies, the university remains on a government tether. Of the eight members that comprise the MMU Board of Directors, four belong to the government, three come from the private sector, and only one is an academic. Moreover, the Chancellor of the university is Dr. Siti Hasmah binti Haji Mohd Ali, the wife of former Prime Minister Mahathir. Therefore, in like manner to many other sectors of Malaysia's economy and society, the education system has become increasingly privatized. Yet, it has done so according to specific government guidelines and requirements. Of particular concern, staff and students of MMU are not allowed to publicly criticize the MSC or critique government policies and programs designed to produce a knowledge-based economy. Therefore, as two MMU faculty members noted (anonymously) during field research, staff and students of the university are not only constrained by the government, but also by the fact that much of their funding comes from MSC status companies.

In like manner to their senior counterparts, the government has also allowed for heavy private sector involvement in Malaysia's elementary and secondary school system. As an example, Telekom Malaysia (a private telecommunication company) has become fully immersed in the Smart School Flagship Application. In addition to having input into the development of curriculum that uses the company's

¹⁰⁴ MMU's other campus is located in Malacca / Melaka (on the Southeast coast of Peninsular Malaysia).

technology, in July 2002, Telekom “signed a main licensing agreement with the Ministry of Education.” The agreement gives the company “a 50-year copyright to market and promote the Smart School components such as teaching [and] learning courseware and Smart School management to both local and foreign markets” (Telekom Malaysia). A strong correlation can clearly be made between this scenario and Microsoft’s infiltration of Canadian public libraries via the government’s CAP program. And yet, the involvement of Telekom Malaysia in shaping the future of a *public* institution has received very little critical attention in Malaysia, and has not been cause for concern among government employees directly associated with the application.

It is important to note, however, that neither the corporatization / privatization of schools, nor the desire to “wire” them with the latest in ICTs, is unique to Malaysia. In North America, for example, the “urgent appeal to enter the 21st century with schools fully ‘wired’ to the emerging global communications network has been unrelenting” (Moll 109). With budget cuts and the emasculation of public institutions in both Canada and the United States, there is also a strong appeal of using corporate money to stay ahead in the ICT connectivity race. Projects such as Channel One in the U.S. and the Youth News Network (YNN) in Canada have stepped into the void left by these budget cuts, offering cash-strapped schools an attractive solution to their financial problems. In return for ICT / audio-visual equipment, students watch private programming which is broadcast right into their classroom. As a result, private companies are given access to a captive audience inside a public educational institution. Moreover, in like manner to their Malaysian

counterparts, post-secondary institutions in North America have begun placing greater emphasis on “profitable” fields of study, allowing liberal arts programs to feel the brunt of money being directed to more lucrative fields such as engineering and business.

C. ICTs in an Undemocratic Environment

During field research, I met and interviewed a wide range of academics, mainstream and alternative media personnel, public servants, and non-government organization activists. The majority of these individuals had both positive and negative things to say (on and off the record) about Mahathir and his administration. However, none of these individuals was opposed to the *idea* of the MSC as a Silicon Imitator, and all could see potential benefits accruing from such a project. Yet, some raised concerns that the government had developed the MSC in a top-down manner, and had done so at the expense of other important issues such as affordable housing and basic services in rural areas. When asked about ICTs in general, *every* interviewee indicated that new technologies played a central role in Malaysia’s development, many noting that the country could not afford to be left behind in the new “information age.” At the same time, however, numerous interviewees also voiced concerns about the government’s heavy-handed repression of human rights and freedoms, often commenting on how ICTs had provided an opportunity for Malaysians to circumvent government restrictions. This dichotomy clearly illustrates the potency of the myth of modernity, progress, and development, and the

role that ICTs play in fulfilling its promises. It also demonstrates the effectiveness of the government's hegemonic / consensus-building methods of keeping the myth alive, while still being able to maintain the political status quo (an issue that I will return to in the next chapter).

In other words, although ICTs can be used for social and political development, the government tries to restrict any usage that might challenge the current political and economic environment. It is, therefore, difficult to understand how the government intends to fulfil its Vision 2020 promise of using ICTs to promote socio-cultural development if it is unwilling to address issues related to freedoms of speech, assembly, expression, and press. Without such freedoms, a democratic civil society in Malaysia cannot be achieved (with or without ICTs), because citizens are unable to openly debate and freely discuss their visions for the country's future, or to contribute in any meaningful way to the process of myth-making.

Over seventy years ago, John Dewey argued that American society needed to shift its focus away from how technology was supposed to induce progress, and instead needed to concentrate on reconstructing its institutions to advance democracy (Dewey). Therefore, in contrast to Walter Lippmann's recommendation of using expert organizations to guide decision-makers, Dewey argued on behalf of a strong, free, aesthetic, public, critical press to create a great community (Czitrom). Similarly, societies today do not require the fastest or the most efficient forms of information and communication technology in order to achieve greater democracy. Although these technologies can be used to help facilitate democratic development

(e.g., by providing greater access to domestic and international political information, coordinating the activities and communication efforts of human rights groups, providing up-to-date stock prices and new markets for small to medium-sized entrepreneurs), they alone cannot produce a more democratic society. Rather, a democratic society needs to have a free press, one which is allowed to operate within an environment that supports other fundamental human rights (including freedoms of speech, expression, and assembly).

For example, the most popular on-line critical newspaper in Malaysia (Malaysiakini) is able to circumvent the state-controlled press and offer citizens (at least those with access to the Internet) an alternative perspective on domestic and international politics. However, the paper's office is monitored (and sometimes vandalized), and its journalists are subject to threats of government reprisals.¹⁰⁵ More importantly, Malaysian citizens are only able to discuss issues presented in this and other critical newspapers within a limited environment for fear of being subjected to some of the country's more repressive laws. In particular, the government threatens use of its Internal Security Act (which is described in considerable detail in the following chapter) to limit discussion of issues and ideas that challenge the status quo. Consequently, even though Malaysians can use new forms of ICTs to encourage freedoms of press, speech, expression, and assembly, to challenge the status quo, and to create a public sphere that is not completely controlled by the state, the Malaysian government is still able to place restrictions on the actions and expressions of its citizens.

¹⁰⁵ As described in greater detail in the next chapter, the government has used a variety of measures to restrain the paper and control the actions of its employees. Some of these control

D. Understanding the Complexity of the Malaysian Situation

To be clear, I am not suggesting that the idea of improving access to, and usage of, ICTs in the Malaysian context is flawed. Nor am I proposing that the methods undertaken by the Malaysian government to try and “connect” citizens are without merit.¹⁰⁶ I also do not wish to imply that the MSC is a misguided project, as Silicon Imitators can have a positive impact on local economies and can help establish “the ongoing process of technology skills upgrades necessary for participation and competitiveness” in the new global economy (Schement 247). Consequently, the MSC and ICTs can be instrumental in, and constituent components of, economic, social, and political development. However, to reiterate, if they must operate within an environment characterized by neo-liberal economics and restricted civic freedom, then it is difficult to understand how they can be expected to benefit *all* Malaysians.¹⁰⁷

To make things more complex, although the Malaysian government may be held responsible for restricting civic freedoms, it is not solely responsible for constructing its neo-liberal economic environment. Rather, Malaysia finds itself on the receiving end of foreign pressures to embrace a friction-free mode of capitalism, and to do so according to rules determined primarily by Western governments,

mechanisms have been documented on the paper’s website, as well as on other critical sites including that of the human rights group, Aliran.

¹⁰⁶ Rather, as discussed in the next chapter, many of the programs and policies undertaken by the government, and various ministries therein, have proven quite successful.

¹⁰⁷ In a similar vein, Zaharom Nain and Mustafa K. Anuar write, “by pinning its faith in the logic of the market — with all its inherent contradictions — through greater ‘liberalisation’ and ‘deregulation’, the current administration has all but cast aside the potential public service role that IT

international financial organizations, and transnational companies. Therefore, in this section, I will discuss briefly some of these external pressures and explore Malaysia's (particularly Mahathir's) response to them. This discussion is not, however, intended to serve as a comprehensive overview of the multitude of foreign pressures exerted on developing countries. Rather, it is included to illustrate the complexity of the Malaysian situation and to give some insight into local and international power relations.

III. ICTs and the MSC Within a Global Political and Economic Paradigm

In his book The Road Ahead, Bill Gates described perfect capitalism as being friction-free. In his ultimate scenario, buyers and sellers could easily locate one another, while production locations would be highly flexible. Speed bumps and barriers to capital's diffusion, including taxes, tariffs, and the meddling of cumbersome and inefficient governments, would be eliminated as policies supporting liberalization, privatization, and deregulation are established to provide capitalism's structural framework. As the following section demonstrates, Malaysia has felt increasing pressure from Western governments, international financial institutions, and transnational corporations to adopt these engines of global hyper-capitalism.

As such, the global dominance of the core (composed primarily although not exclusively of the Western world) is not, for the most part, about forced military leadership. Certainly, we have witnessed the flexing of (particularly American)

can — and must — play if an 'economically just', 'secure', 'united' and 'caring' Malaysian society is

military might against “rogue” nations and nation-states; a coercive method of asserting a homogenous form of democracy and international economic uniformity in the core’s best interest. Instead, the core’s dominance is based more on its ability to pressure periphery regions to follow in its economic and political footsteps. However, the periphery is encouraged to do so only to the extent that it *remains on the periphery* and continues to be of use to the core (e.g., through cheap labour, raw materials) – Andre Gunder Frank’s concept of the development of underdevelopment.

Consequently, in order to be a part of the global economy, periphery regions must liberalize their markets, join free trade agreements, assent to non-intervention by the state, and follow rules of democratic and economic engagement as determined by the core. Periphery countries, including Malaysia, are thereby incorporated into “a carefully-structured international policy-making environment, so as to ensure that they adopt the rules and standards of the West, by integrating... [them] more closely with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank” (Soederberg, “New International” 175). As one scholar notes, the role of these international institutions, which many argue are led and controlled by Western interests, is to “help create and maintain *the* [sic] *rules* for the global economy. They sustain its momentum and make sure that any alternative vision proves impractical and unworkable” (qtd. in Hilley, Malaysia 60).

At the centre of the core is the Washington Consensus, so named for the power of the United States in international economic and political policy-making. The Washington Consensus is composed of, among other organizations, the U.S.

Treasury Department, the IMF (whose Structural Adjustment Policies are of particular relevance to the developing world), the WTO, and the New International Financial Architecture (NIFA, developed in the aftermath of the Asian crisis to deal with the governance of world finance) (Soederberg, “New International” 175; “On the Contradictions”). The foremost objective of the Washington Consensus is to promote a friction-free global capitalism supported by open, deregulated markets, free trade, and minimal state intervention. Of particular concern to this project, the Consensus has promoted neo-liberal economic policies in sectors related to ICTs, information, media, and cultural industries.

The WTO, for example, has argued that “dismantling barriers to the free flow of information...[is] essential for economic growth” (Thussu 85). To that end, it established GATS (General Agreement on Trade in Services), a multilateral agreement designed to reduce and / or eliminate impediments (e.g., customs tariffs, local subsidies) to the international trade of a wide range of services. In particular, in 1998 the WTO inaugurated the GATS Fourth Protocol on Basic Telecommunication Services, requiring all participating countries (Malaysia included) to liberalize its telecommunication sectors. “All technological means of transmission – cable, radio and satellites – are included in the agreement... It obliges the signatories to provide market access and equal treatment to international telecommunication corporations” (Thussu 87). As a result, transnational corporations can penetrate emerging ICT-oriented markets, thereby making it difficult for local companies to compete and keeping periphery countries technologically dependent upon external sources. Therefore, even though the WTO

may claim “that the expansion of capital through the transnational corporations has contributed to the transfer of skills and capital to the global South,” in reality, this free flow has “contributed to widening the gap between rich and poor” on a global scale (Thussu 115).

In addition, the IMF and World Bank have encouraged periphery countries to adopt development strategies favouring export expansion. In so doing, these organizations have dismissed “the caution against excessive trade dependence voiced by political economists” (Moon 7). As noted above, despite a significant diversification of its export economy, Malaysia’s economy remains vulnerable to shifts in foreign markets. According to an IMF Occasional Paper, since late 2000, “downside risks for Malaysia have increased. Heavy dependence on electronic exports made Malaysia highly sensitive to the global slowdown in information technology” (Liu).¹⁰⁸ Moreover, since the United States is “Malaysia’s biggest export market, especially for the electrical and electronic goods that account for around 60 percent of the country’s exports,” any slowdown in the American economy has a significant impact on Malaysia’s fiscal health (Asian Development Bank, 2001 86).

Therefore, despite the activities of international organizations to try and bridge the digital divide, core countries with advanced economies and the support of an international financial framework are in a position to pull further ahead in the new “information age.” As Pippa Norris comments, a “few middle-level economies... may manage to leverage themselves profitably into niche markets within the global

¹⁰⁸ In 1999, 52 percent of all total goods exports from Malaysia fell into the category of “High-technology” (UNDP Technology).

marketplace, servicing international corporations based elsewhere by providing software development or manufacturing silicon chips” (5). So, although Malaysia may wish to be at the head of the economic and technological race, it remains a part of this second tier. As part of its plan to achieve greater economic independence, it developed EPZs to facilitate technology transfer and produce local jobs. However, these zones have only served to incorporate Malaysia into a new international division of labour (NIDL) that is not in the best interest of the average Malaysian.

A. ICTs and the New International Division of Labour (NIDL)

A century and a half ago, Karl Marx argued in the Grundrisse that capital uses technology to circulate as many goods as possible, at the highest velocity, over the greatest distance, and to as many people as possible. Today, capital makes use of the newest forms of technology, particularly digitization, to expedite and strengthen this process of accumulation by providing better tools for corporations to co-ordinate economic activities, transfer goods and services, control operations, monitor workers, etc. As such, ICTs have played a central role in the development of a new international division of labour that allows corporations to decrease their dependency on location-specific skilled and unskilled labour pools. Therefore, new technology offers corporations the flexibility of being able to operate in almost any location around the world, including places where labour is cheaper and often non-unionized. As Michèle Martin explains further, “instantaneous control at a distance allows capitalist producers facing union organizations, strikes, and wage increases in one

country to move their labor process to a more accommodating country where the labor force, often constituted of women, has few means of resistance” (55). In the Malaysian situation, for example, women are at particular risk of being exploited in the country’s NIDL-supported EPZs which rely on “female suitability / docility” to remain “trouble-free / union-free” (Mohamad, Ng, and Hui 66).

Therefore, although the NIDL system works to support greater capital accumulation, it does so primarily to the benefit of the core, Western world,¹⁰⁹ as well as for the local elite (discussed below). The end result is that periphery regions / developing countries are often pushed into a “race to the bottom” to attract transnational companies – e.g., changing national laws, offering tax, environmental, labour incentives, etc. – and remain a part of the world economy.

As discussed in Chapter 5, the objective of the British colonial system was the “accumulation at the centre rather than at the periphery,” as resources deemed valuable to the colonialists were cultivated and extracted from the colonized regardless of what the latter needed or desired (Stenson 4). In today’s global economy, one that is powered by a NIDL and more efficient ICTs, the same system of accumulation appears to be at work. As an export-oriented country heavily reliant on FDI, Malaysia manufactures products useful to core countries, is focused on developing workforce skills to support foreign companies operating in its EPZs, and is willing to offer a wide range of incentives (e.g., the MSC Bill of Guarantees) to attract these companies to Malaysia rather than lose them to one of the country’s competitors (e.g., Singapore, India, or China).

¹⁰⁹ It is worthwhile to note that in this new NIDL, labour issues have been abandoned by the WTO and have instead been relegated to the International Labour Organization (ILO). Of concern,

B. Mahathir Fights Back

As Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Mahathir has openly challenged the core-periphery power relationship described above and has questioned the motives of the West in processes of globalization. In fact, he has a long and colourful history as an outspoken leader on behalf of the developing world, continuously calling for a new world order that resists neo-colonial policies and activities. In September 2003, for instance, Mahathir accused the West of "using the WTO to push forward their agenda for economic colonisation. If we do not oppose this agenda, our efforts to implement the National Development Policy, which safeguards the interests of domestic entrepreneurs, including Bumiputera as well as the objective of promoting domestic industries, will not be achieved" ("Federal Budget 2004").¹¹⁰

Mahathir's willingness to verbally challenge and denounce the actions of international financial organizations like the WTO, which he believes operate solely according to Western interests, has garnered him accolades from countries in the developing world, as well as from concerned communities and individuals in the developed world. He has also targeted foreign, particularly Western, media for

the ILO wields relatively little power as it does not possess effective regulation and control mechanisms.

¹¹⁰ To address these kinds of concerns, in November 2001, the WTO established the Doha Development Agenda which included measures to give developing countries a louder voice in the organization's negotiations. Member states met in Doha, Qatar to engage in a set of multilateral agreement discussions which, when combined with the subsequent round of talks held in Cancun in 2003, appeared "to herald a new and positive paradigm for North-South co-operation in the WTO and greater attention to developing country interests" (Sevilla). However, developing countries continue to criticize the WTO for focusing too heavily on trying to decrease nation-state protectionism and for encouraging international liberalization as a method of development. In addition, many countries, Malaysia included, are concerned that they do not have the financial resources to implement some of their WTO obligations and are frustrated that trade liberalization benefits more the developed, rather than the developing world. Moreover, they are disappointed that despite some changes at Doha, they still have very little input into how the global economy actually operates.

portraying him and his country in a negative light. Yet, he has not openly challenged or criticized transnational corporations, most likely because the Malaysian economy is so reliant upon their presence and investment in local EPZs (Kelly, “Metaphors” 731). Perhaps Mahathir’s best-known act of rebellion was, however, non-verbal – the implementation of currency controls following the Asian financial crisis. As noted above, his actions were censured by the IMF and the United States as they reflected the developing world’s tendency “to rely on a form of state intervention that runs directly against the neoclassical spirit of the Washington consensus” (Soederberg, “New International” 186-87). However, Mahathir stood his ground and refused to give in to external pressures, and in the end proved that currency controls benefited the domestic economy.¹¹¹

C. Mahathir Fights Back?

In examining his verbal and non-verbal actions, it is clear that Mahathir has tried to position “Western values” and “Asian values” as binary opposites. In so doing, he has constructed a common external foe – the West – for Malaysians to rally against. As described by one scholar, Mahathir has “used bouts of anti-Westernism to unify Malaysian politics, and perhaps even to help mould an internal transethnic single identity for his state, partly defining it in contrast to the West” (Sheridan 103). Therefore, his construction of the Western antagonist may be useful

¹¹¹ As Mahathir proudly explained, “we rejected the IMF formula and its loans and devised our own way towards recovery... we succeeded, we recovered. Now many agree that the IMF is not the only way to deal with a financial crisis. In fact the IMF is a ticket to disaster. Even if recovery is achieved the debts owing to the IMF would keep the country indebted to the IMF for years and years. There would be no financial independence” (“Luncheon”).

for building patriotism and unity in a multi-religious, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic decolonized country. However, as examined in the next chapter, this construction may also be viewed as a justification for repressive laws limiting citizens' freedoms of expression, assembly, and press as any form of civil unrest or challenge to government policy is treated as traitorous to Malaysia and an attempt to undermine the country's independence.

Of concern, Mahathir has actually vilified Western political, social, moral, and economic values on a number of occasions. For example, in his 1995 book (with Shintaro Ishihara), The Voice of Asia: Two Leaders Discuss the Coming Century, he states that, "Western societies are riddled with single-parent families, which foster incest, with homosexuality, with cohabitation, with unrestrained avarice, with disrespect for others and, of course, rejection of religious teachings and values" (81). More recently, he offered the following, more tempered statement in reference to Western elites and the Washington Consensus:

Relieved of the need to compete with the Communists, the capitalist free traders have ceased to show a friendly face. Their greed knows no bounds. They want countries which had fought hard to gain independence, to give up that independence, to do away with their borders, to allow the capitalists free access to do what they like to the economies of these countries. They call this free competition. As they merge and acquire each other, they become monstrous giants against whom the small businesses in the developing countries will not be able to compete. What is the meaning of competition if you cannot

win at all. In the end a few of these monsters will control the economy of the whole world. The sad thing is that they are not above cheating and corruption. (“Inaugural”)

Although this longer quote may be more palatable to the reader (particularly a Western one) than his earlier comments, both statements offer insight into contradictions within Mahathirism. On the one hand, Mahathir has openly criticized the democratic practices of the West (particularly the United States), its hyper-capitalism, morals, and value system. He warns his citizens of the potential danger these outsiders pose to Malaysia: “We don’t like foreigners interfering in the country’s internal affairs. If this continues, don’t be surprised if one day they take over our country” (qtd. in Theophilus). On the other hand, the Malaysian economy is heavily reliant on FDI, which means that it must attract international investors and cultivate business relationships with Western partners. Ironically, Mahathir’s foremost target of castigation, the United States, is Malaysia’s number one export destination and second largest supplier of imports (Europa 2623).^{112 113} As one critic of the Mahathir administration writes, “it is great irony that the government woos capitalistic enterprise while at the same time complaining of its greed and domination. Taking its money to pocket with one hand, while damning its purchases with a shaking fist” (Rashid).

Despite Mahathir’s condemnation of the actions of core / Western countries, they are not solely to blame for economic disparities within Malaysia, nor, as argued

¹¹² However, to some people’s surprise, Mahathir recently improved relations with the Bush Administration by cracking down in Islamic militants in the aftermath of September 11th and the subsequent “war on terrorism” (even though Malaysia did not support the recent American-led invasion of Iraq).

above, can they be held entirely responsible for Malaysia's continued dependence on Western economies. Rather, as Malaysian academics Maznah Mohamad, Cecilia Ng, and Tan Beng Hui argue, "[b]oth neo-liberal globalization forces and the national state collude in their pursuit of profit maximization" (67).

To better understand the complexity of the global economic system and the role local elites play therein, it is instructive to make mention of Johan Galtung's theory of structural imperialism. Galtung's theory recognizes that elites within periphery countries will often facilitate policies of core countries even if these policies are not in the best interest of their home country as a whole. In the Malaysian situation, for example, the government may want what is best for the majority of its citizens. At the same time, it also wants to remain in power, and its political and economic supporters want to retain their personal financial privileges. As such, Galtung's theory can be used to challenge a type of dependency theory that views developing countries as monoliths beholden to core countries. Galtung instead argues the importance of examining "the roles of the often unrepresentative elites in the South in maintaining and indeed benefiting from the dependency syndrome" (Thussu 66).

However, the situation is even more complex than this structural imperialism perspective takes into consideration. As Arjun Appadurai argues in his book, Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization, relationships of power and agency within the global cultural economy operate within "a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of

¹¹³ In 2003, Mahathir noted that Malaysia was trying to diversify its trading partners, and thus decreasing its dependence on its "traditional partners like the U.S." ("Luncheon").

existing center-periphery models” (32).¹¹⁴ To address this complexity, Appadurai forwards a dynamic model of five overlapping dimensions or “scapes” of global flows – ethnoscaples, mediascapes, technoscapes, financespaces, and ideoscapes. These scapes allow for the study of global flows of people (e.g., labour, migrants), media (e.g., media technologies and the images they produce), high and low technology, capital (e.g., the NIDL), and ideas (discussed below).¹¹⁵ These scapes are fluid, interjoining spheres of influence that Appadurai argues can be used to gain insight into the extreme complexity inherent in the dynamics of global interactions. Although perhaps a bit overstated, he contends that these scapes are “something like a human version of the theory that some scientists are calling chaos theory” (Modernity 46). His understanding of ideoscapes is of particular interest to this discussion. He defines them as being,

composed of elements of the Enlightenment worldview, which consists of a chain of ideas, terms, and images, including *freedom*, *welfare*, *rights*, *sovereignty*, *representation*, and the master term *democracy*... But the diaspora of these terms and images across the world... has loosened the internal coherence that held them together in a Euro-American master narrative and provided instead a loosely structure dysnopticon of politics, in which different nation-states, as part of their evolution, have organized their political cultures around different keywords. (Modernity 36)

¹¹⁴ An argument that appears to differ from his later, more optimist perspective on “deep democracy” discussed earlier in this chapter.

¹¹⁵ Notably, Appadurai omits flows of military power, or what Anthony Giddens refers to in his list of the dimensions of globalization as the World Military Order (Consequences).

As an example relevant to this discussion, Asian leaders (Mahathir and Badawi included) have tried to find a “regional consensus on what ‘democracy’ should mean in Asia. In political terms, the elites and their intellectual supporters have tended to spurn ‘Western liberal democracy’ as a form of government worthy of emulation outside of the ‘West’” (Teik, “Nationalism” 51). Mahathir has, in fact, openly stated on numerous occasions that Malaysia does not want the kind of “democracy” that he believes is practised in the West. He argues that it “is not the easiest way to govern. More often than not it fails to bring about stability, much less prosperity. It is disruptive because it tends to encourage sudden changes in policies and directions with each change in government” (qtd. in Teik, “Nationalism” 57). Of note, his perspective not only assumes a unified Western vision of democracy, but also ignores the fact that there are competing notions of what constitutes democracy within his own country. As I have indicated at various points throughout this dissertation, critical academics, members of non-government organizations, alternative media, and opposition parties within Malaysia have challenged their government’s conception of democracy, arguing that it restricts individual and collective freedoms (or in the case of PAS, does not sufficiently adhere to Islamic law).

In sum, although Appadurai’s project of trying to capture the chaos of the global cultural economy may be viewed as overly ambitious, it serves to illustrate the complexity of the situation in which Malaysia finds itself. It also highlights the contradictions inherent within Mahathirism and the heterogeneity of power relations at work on both a domestic and international level.

IV. Physical Symbols of Modernity, Progress, and Development

As discussed in Chapter 3 (The Myth of Progress), the Enlightenment project of reason, rationality, and the humanist intellect signalled a rejection of traditional authority and a concomitant shift towards a new authority of science and technology. Enlightenment philosophers, including Condorcet and Saint-Simon, promoted science and technology as the means through which society could progress socially, politically, and economically. New inventions of the time, including the telegraph, the train, and electrification, not only produced social and economic improvements, but also provided proof that society, was indeed, progressing. Although this myth of progress has lost much of its lustre in the intervening years, a sobering in the wake of negative uses to which technology has been employed, it has not disappeared (despite arguments made by many postmodernists to the contrary). As demonstrated by the utopian rhetoric surrounding the proliferation of Silicon Imitators / technopoles described above, new forms of technology are viewed as a panacea for social, political, and economic ills in both the developed and developing world. The MSC, for example, is expected to play a central role in helping Malaysia progress socially, politically, and economically, thereby fulfilling the country's quest to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020. The Malaysian government has also used ICTs and the MSC to showcase the country's technological and economic capabilities, demonstrating how modern Malaysia has *already* become (particularly in light of its colonial legacy).

Therefore, in this next section I will examine a variety of structures and mega-projects located within the Kuala Lumpur – MSC corridor designed to symbolize Malaysia's modernity. Particular attention will be focused on large urban structures such as the Petronas Towers, as well as the "intelligent" cities of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya, and the "world-class" city of Kuala Lumpur. I will argue that these physical symbols of Malaysia's modernity are expected to attract international investors looking for a technologically adept, modern country with which to do business. In addition, they are intended to cultivate national pride, as well as offer proof that the government has steered Malaysia in the right direction for the future.

A. Putrajaya and Cyberjaya

The Prime Minister's office and residence are two of the newest, most impressive and expensive symbols of Malaysia's modernity. Designed to rival those of any head of state in the world, these structures are located in Putrajaya, the new seat of Malaysia's government and the country's administrative capital. Built on what were once palm oil plantations, Putrajaya has been promoted by the government as a high-tech, "intelligent" city capable of "modernizing" Malaysia's system of government.¹¹⁶ Putrajaya is expected to house, when fully completed, 79,000 civil servants and another 59,000 private sector employees. The cost of the city, including the residence and office, key ministerial offices, a central mosque,

¹¹⁶ The construction of Putrajaya was based, in part, on "a real need for expansion of government offices, many of which tended to be concentrated within or near the business district of Kuala Lumpur, where land costs had shot up sharply during boom times in the early 1990s. The concentration of government offices close to the city center contributed to congestion that had become more and more intolerable" (McDaniel 95).

and other primary infrastructure has been estimated at approximately \$10 billion CDN (Jussawalla, “Bridging” 18). The opulence of some of these structures has caused critics to argue that the money spent could have been directed towards more useful projects (e.g., low-income housing).¹¹⁷ Mahathir has defended the expense by promising that “all these things are done not for today. They are done for the future,” boasting that Putrajaya is “a well-planned and beautiful city, *a model for other countries*” (“Federal Budget 2004”, emphasis added).

As Putrajaya’s next door neighbour, Cyberjaya operates as the nerve centre of the MSC and is home to domestic and international transnational corporations and their workers, the Multimedia University (MMU), and Technology Park Malaysia. The government expects that Cyberjaya will be home to a working population of 150,000, and a living population of 100,000. Recent estimates have put the cost of building the city and its telecommunications network at approximately \$26 billion CDN, a significant investment of both taxpayer and corporate money into Malaysia’s new ICT-oriented future (Jussawalla, “Bridging” 18). As one Malaysian reporter enthusiastically wrote in 1997,

Cyberjaya’s name says it all. This will [be] a city devoted heart and soul to the wonders of information technology. It will be a zone to link Malaysia to the world, in a big way and the MSC’s backbone of development in IT and multimedia technology. (qtd. in McDaniel 96-97)

¹¹⁷ These critics have “dubbed it [the residence] the *Mahligai*, which, in Malay really means an otherworldly or celestial palace” (Mohamad).

Adding to the image of modernity and planned perfection, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya have fully wired “smart” homes and buildings, supported by a sophisticated security and transportation system (via the Cyberjaya City Command Centre, CCC) (CCC Personal interview). In addition, to make them world-class, modern *living* environments, both cities were designed to include abundant green spaces and outdoor leisure activities. According to their promotional materials, the government and the MDC have placed emphasis on “preserving nature and maintaining high degree of landscape. It is not uncommon for visitors to remark that Cyberjaya resembles a resort city rather than the stereo type [*sic*] high-tech city... it is important to maintain an utopian environment like this to ensure high productivity and creativity of our residents” (Malaysia [About Cyberjaya](#)).

Putrajaya and Cyberjaya have also fed into the myth of the technological sublime described in Chapters 3 and 4. According to this myth, when technology becomes the object of veneration and begins to engender an almost spiritual reverence once dedicated to nature, then its importance begins to supersede that of the natural world. In the Malaysian situation, for example, rapturous attention has been bestowed upon man-made high-tech mega-projects, particularly the MSC and its “intelligent” cities of Putrajaya and Cyberjaya. These projects appear as oases or mirages, emerging out of nothing but palm oil plantations, i.e., nature, to transform Malaysia from a developing country dependent upon raw resources into a modern, technologically advanced country capable of competing with other industrialized, knowledge-based economies and societies (Mosco, “Webs” 51-52). Therefore, in Malaysia, the technological achievements located within the Kuala Lumpur – MSC

corridor are intended to evoke a sense of wonder and awe in Malaysia's modern capabilities and its ability to overcome its dependence on the natural world.

1. *Islamic Architectural Influences.* In addition to symbolizing Malaysia's modernity, many of the buildings in Putrajaya and Cyberjaya (particularly the Prime Minister's office and residence) also reflect Malaysia's status as an Islamic nation. By infusing these structures with strong elements of traditional Islamic architecture, the government has tried to convey the message that Islam and "Asian values" are *not* mutually exclusive from modernity and high-tech capitalism.¹¹⁸

However, domestic and foreign media often construct Islamic factions within Malaysia as constituting a feud between "modernity" and "traditionalism." This dichotomy is, of course, overly simplistic as it fails to take into account the myriad of perspectives and beliefs within the domestic Islamic community. There is, nevertheless, a growing tension between calls for stricter Islamic laws (primarily from the PAS party) and appeals for greater moderation (particularly from the growing urban Malay middle class and non-Muslim Malaysian communities). For the government, moderation is viewed as essential to maintaining political and, therefore, economic stability in a multi-cultural, multi-religious country. It is also economically advantageous in terms of attracting foreign investment, particularly recently as the government has raised concerns that the "war on terrorism" has deterred investment in Islamic countries.¹¹⁹ As the Minister of International Trade

¹¹⁸ Similarly, many buildings in Kuala Lumpur, including the "Hijjas Kasturi's "LUTH" tower and Menara Maybank", also articulate "a Malay-centered conception of national identity" (Bunnell, Barter, and Sirat 361).

¹¹⁹ A concern that has been compounded by unconfirmed mainstream Western news reports that the terrorist group Al Qaeda may have sleeper cells operating in Malaysia.

and Industry promised in a speech to international investors, Malaysia is “a model of a moderate, developing Muslim country... safe to do business with and to invest in” (Malaysia Seminar). As such, Mahathir’s choice of architecture may, in part, be a strategic attempt to signal to the domestic Islamic community that although Malaysia is moving towards high-tech development in a new global economy, a move the administration believes requires a moderation of faith, it will not forgo its religious roots nor the centrality of Islam to contemporary society.

At the same time, however, the Islamic influences found in government structures, particularly in the administrative capital of Putrajaya, raises some serious concerns about the role that non-Islamic Malaysian communities – i.e., Chinese, Indian, and non-Muslim aboriginal groups – are expected, or even allowed, to play in the country’s political process.¹²⁰ In fact, the architecture seems to undermine the “marketing of Malaysia” program described in Chapter 5. Rather than an exclusive cultural policy that focuses on the rights of the Bumiputra, the government has tried to rescript and market Malaysia’s identity as diverse and culturally inclusive. And yet, as Bunnell comments, the “MSC – and Putrajaya in particular, with its strongly Islamic urban design references – have been cast by some as a project for specifically Malay-Muslim integration into information economy and society” (“Multimedia” 285). It appears, then, that other communities can take part in Malaysia’s economic future, but only up to the point that they remain useful to the political status quo.

¹²⁰ For a useful overview of how non-Malay architecture is noticeably absent in primary national edifices, refer to Holland, “Whose Heritage?”

B. Petronas Towers, KLIA, and Others

1. *Petronas Towers*. Perhaps the most visible and internationally recognized symbol of Malaysia's modernity is the Petronas Towers (commonly referred to as the Twin Towers). Located in the heart of the Kuala Lumpur City Centre, KLCC,¹²¹ the towers are the tallest buildings in the world,¹²² standing at 452 metres and 88 stories in height. Completed in 1996, the towers "loom over Kuala Lumpur's skyline [as] inescapable [Vision] 2020 icons" (Williamson), symbols of Malaysia's modernity and a source of national pride. As John Hilley comments, the towers were constructed as "a celebratory statement of national achievement... a two-fingered gesture to the old colonial order" (*Malaysia* 3).

Of note, the KLCC is one of the five areas in Malaysia designated as a MSC zone. This means that any high-tech, multimedia, ICT-oriented business tenant in the towers can become a MSC-status corporation and thus benefit from tax breaks, reduced tariffs on equipment, etc.

2. *KLIA*. Located approximately 70 kilometers from the KLCC, the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) was also designed to symbolize Malaysia's modernity. According to its own website, KLIA is a "new-age," "space-age" "Airport of the Future." Finished in June 1998, KLIA is a massive structure¹²³ capable of handling substantial air traffic and "an annual capacity of 25 million passengers" (KLIA). It

¹²¹ In addition to the numerous (primarily high-end) shops and restaurants located in its six-story mall, the KLCC also includes "a concert hall for the newly created Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra; a luxury hotel... two further office blocks, Ampang Tower and Esso Tower... and a 50-acre public park" (Bunnell, Barter, and Sirat 362).

¹²² Until the completion of the Taiwanese Taipei 101 skyscraper in 2004.

was built to replace the small and ailing Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah International Airport (also known as the Subang Airport) located near downtown Kuala Lumpur. However, KLIA has been criticized for its size and expense; estimates have placed construction costs at approximately \$4.7 billion CDN (Jussawalla, “Bridging” 18). Mahathir has responded to such criticisms by arguing that the airport plays a key role in Malaysia’s economic future. It is meant to symbolize Malaysia’s “preeminence as the region’s technological and commercial leader”, as well as to support the country’s growing high-tech economy by serving “as the logistics hub for transportation of people and goods into and out of the country via its integrated electronic information networking” (McDaniel 96).

3. *Other Physical Symbols of Malaysia’s Modernity.* In addition to the KLIA, other technologies related to transportation have also been used to symbolize Malaysia’s modernity. These include the North-South Highway, which connects the prosperous island of Penang and Mahathir’s home state of Kedah in the north, to Kuala Lumpur, the MSC, and Singapore to the south,¹²⁴ as well as the Light Rail Transit (LRT) and electric rail commuter that services Kuala Lumpur and outlying areas. In addition, Mahathir is particularly proud of Malaysia’s national car, the Proton, as well as the country’s recently upgraded water ports (which he boasts are capable of handling “about 450 million tonnes of cargo”) (“Federal budget 2004”).

¹²³ The entire airport complex covers 10,000 hectares of land that were once plantations and home to an aboriginal settlement.

¹²⁴ However, the road transportation system in East Malaysia is significantly inferior to that found in peninsular Malaysia. Concerns have also been raised that the system fails to efficiently link peninsular Malaysia from East to West.

Malaysia has also made its mark on the international car-racing scene by constructing a world-class Formula One racetrack. The F1 track was designed to attract tourist dollars, foster national pride, and demonstrate to the world that Malaysia is as advanced as other countries capable of constructing a track that must adhere to strict international engineering racing regulations (Holland, “Welcome Mat”).

In 1998, Malaysia was given the opportunity to showcase its technological and organizational capabilities by hosting the Commonwealth Games, the second largest international sporting event in the world. As this marked the first time the Games had been held in an Asian country, Malaysia felt additional pressure to perform well. As one observer noted, “a successful Games can lift the national mood and show the world ‘can do’ [Malaysia Boleh] is still in the Malaysian lexicon... [Therefore] for all Malaysia’s economic woes, the Games venues have been built to world standards. A Western diplomat describes the Main Stadium, the centerpiece of the National Sports Complex at Bukit Jalil, south of Kuala Lumpur, as ‘remarkable’” (Oorjitham). Also, since the Games came on the heels of the Asian financial crisis and domestic upheaval caused by the Anwar affair, Mahathir flexed some serious security enforcement muscle to ensure that potential political unrest could be contained and thus not have a negative impact on Malaysia’s international image.

Mahathir has also stated that Malaysia is currently developing its aerospace industry. In addition to placing satellites into orbit, he has indicated that Malaysia is also interested in sending the first Malaysian into space (“Federal Budget 2004”). If

it were able to do so, it would send a clear and tangible message to the world that Malaysia is indeed modern and well on its way to becoming fully developed.

C. A World-Class City

Although a lot of attention has recently been directed recently towards Putrajaya and Cyberjaya, the capital city of Kuala Lumpur has also undergone a significant “modernizing” transformation over the last two decades (Kent; Sardar). Beginning in the late 1980s, the Mahathir administration embarked on an ambitious plan to turn Kuala Lumpur into a “world-class” global city. In addition to building visually impressive architecture and an efficient light-rail transportation system, the government also made the promise that Kuala Lumpur would become an “intelligent and wired” urban environment, capable of competing with other “modern” cities in the new “information age” (Mee 54; Sardar; Sirat). Urban geographers Tim Bunnell, Paul Barter, and Morshidi Sirat argue that, in like manner to many other countries in the Asia–Pacific region, the Malaysian government’s investment in its urban infrastructure can be viewed as “a national means of ‘plugging in’ to global political, economic, and social networks” (361). Although they are quick to point out that Kuala Lumpur has not “reached – or is likely to reach – the apex of conventional urban studies city hierarchies,” the capital can be “understood as *globalizing* and *globally oriented*” (361).

Although the “modernizing” transformation of Kuala Lumpur began prior to the construction of the MSC, the latter has “added a ‘high-tech’ urgency and emphasis to the ongoing globalization of the city-region” (Bunnell, Barter, and Sirat

363; Sirat). As part of this urgency, the government has reformulated the greater national capital area to now include the KLIA, Cyberjaya, and Putrajaya, as well as various technology parks and the Multimedia University (MMU, discussed in greater detail in the following chapter). As a result, the MSC has been folded into an extended world-class capital region, the existence of which the government views as a necessary precursor for a “modern” country. This project is thus in line with the activities of many other Asian countries, which have also used “high-rise business districts, global hub airports, super container ports, ultra high-speed rail transit and expressways for trucking and car movement... [in an] urban restructuring associated with over competition for world city status” (Douglass 2318).

There are, however, problems associated with densely populated “modern” cities. For example, Kuala Lumpur and the “heavily industrialized Klang Valley in its perimeter are experiencing many of the hyperurbanisation problems of other countries”, including increased pollution, traffic congestion, a lack of employment and affordable urban housing (Douglass 2320). Yet, these unseemly aspects of urban environments are left out of the myth of modernity, progress, and development, receiving relatively little coverage in mainstream media.

V. The Government’s Symbolic Language and Physical Symbols: Truly Malaysian?

I began this chapter by exploring how the government has promoted the macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development through symbolic language in the form of domestic and international speeches, as well as a variety of policy

documents. In particular, I focused on the most recent National Vision Policy (NVP) and Mahathir's overarching Vision 2020 strategy. In addition, I examined a number of physical symbols that the government has used to promote its modernity, including large urban structures and high-tech mega-projects (e.g., the Petronas towers, Putrajaya and Cyberjaya in the MSC).

Within this discussion, I addressed three reasons why the government has used these forms of symbolic language and physical symbols. First, at a very practical level, the government expects that projects like Putrajaya and Cyberjaya, the KLIA, the North-South Highway, etc., will drive economic growth by encouraging technology transfer from international companies to local ones, as well as facilitating the movement of people and information that support Malaysia's new high-tech, knowledge-based economy. Second, the government uses its speeches and physical symbols to tell the world that its country is modern, technologically adept, politically stable, and economically prosperous. In so doing, it hopes to encourage greater financial investment in Malaysia from both domestic and international sources. Third, the government uses symbolic language and physical symbols to foster domestic faith in the concept of Malaysia Boleh. By rallying citizens around common symbols of Malaysia's progress (e.g., Vision 2020, the Petronas Towers, the MSC) the government encourages civic pride and domestic unity. These symbols also encourage support for government-led projects, and offer proof that the Mahathir administration has successfully steered the country towards greater prosperity. Moreover, they act as symbols "of national autonomy and identity," demonstrating Malaysia's ability to rise above its adverse historical legacy

to become an independent country (Jackson and Mosco 28). As Mahathir himself has noted,

Malaysia wants to be fully and truly independent. From the very beginning we avoided offers of aid and loans. We try to live within our means. If we seem to be overspending it is because people assume that we cannot afford the projects we carried out. The new administrative Capital Putrajaya, the K.L. International Airport, the highest buildings in the world, the 800 km North South Highway – they all cost billions of dollars. They are big and they are costly but they are within our means. (“Luncheon”)

However, an argument could be made that some of the symbols used to promote Malaysia’s modernity are in fact inspired by the West. For example, the Petronas towers carry a certain resemblance to the former World Trade Center towers; which were international symbols of the West’s (specifically the United States) post-industrial economic prowess. In fact, the towers were not even designed or built by Malaysians. Rather, they were designed by architect Cesar Pelli, a transplanted Argentinean living and working in the United States¹²⁵, and built by Korean and Japanese contractors. Moreover, the government’s decision to build an F1 racetrack, combined with its bid to host the 1998 Commonwealth Games reveal its desire to be able to participate on an equal playing ground with developed countries (including its former colonialists) in internationally recognized activities.

In addition, the government has promoted the MSC as a project unique unto Malaysia – e.g., its special Bill of Guarantees, Mahathir’s personal dedication to the

project's success, the cultural diversity of the local high-tech workforce, etc. sets the MSC apart from its competitors. Notwithstanding these context-specific qualities, the MSC is still one of the world's many imitations of Silicon Valley. And, like all others of its kind, it is expected to act as a panacea for local economic and social problems. Moreover, the MSC is used to demonstrate to the world that Malaysia has become a member of an elite club of technologically adept, economically prosperous counties. As Wendy Mee writes (in particular reference to the MSC),

[D]evelopments in science and technology embody a peculiarly modern cultural and political imperative that 'advanced societies' publicly display their scientific and technological mastery. For this reason, in addition to the economic, research and development functions of the technopole, its significance lies in its contemporary relevance as 'an object lesson in the progress of civilization... high-technology precincts operate as 'membership badges of subscription to modernity and rational knowledge.' (59)

All told, under Mahathir's leadership, the Malaysian government has "coveted the 'modernist' imagery of growth as a sign of 'approval' from the West" while at the same time using this modernist imagery "as a post-colonial lingua franca to challenge Western norms and posit Malaysia's achievement as a specific product of the 'Asian Way'" (Hilley, *Malaysia* 3). In other words, Malaysia has locally appropriated Western symbols of modernity in an effort to encourage economic growth, while also insisting that its use of these symbols and its overall path of

¹²⁵ Pelli also developed the World Financial Center in Manhattan

development are uniquely Malaysian and will lead to greater economic and political autonomy for the country as a whole.

VI. Looking Ahead

In this chapter, I have explored how and why the Malaysian government has constructed and disseminated Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development through symbolic language and physical symbols. However, as I argued in the second chapter of this dissertation, myths only survive if they remain relevant to a given society and continue to be a part of societal discourse. Therefore, in Chapter 7, I will build on this discussion of consensus-building mechanisms by focusing on specific methods the government (particularly Mahathir) has used to encourage widespread usage of ICTs, support for the MSC, and political and economic stability.

From there, I will turn to discuss some of the more coercive measures the government has employed to ensure compliance with the macro and micro-myths that are in its best interest. I will argue that the government has used these techniques to stymie individual freedoms while, at the same time, promoting a myth that promises personal social and political development. Particular attention will be paid to the government's political and economic control of domestic media and educational institutions, arguing that it uses both hegemonic and coercive techniques to silence dissent from the status quo.

In the closing chapter of this dissertation, I will bring the discussion around full circle by comparing methods used by the Malaysian elite to construct, disseminate, and keep alive myths that are in their best interest, with those employed by the elite in the West (as discussed in Chapters 3 and 4). Through this comparison I hope to provide insight into how and why macro and micro-myths concerning technology and progress operate in both locales.

CHAPTER 7

KEEPING MALAYSIA'S MYTH OF MODERNITY, PROGRESS, AND DEVELOPMENT ALIVE: CONSENSUS-BUILDING AND COERCIVE MEASURES OF CONTROL

As noted in the previous chapter, Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development has been promoted and kept alive by the government through a combination of hegemonic techniques, as well as a number of more coercive measures of control. In Chapter 6, I described how the government has promoted this myth via various forms of symbolic language and physical symbols. Drawing on this discussion, the first half of this chapter will explore some specific forms of consensus-building methods used by the government to ensure the longevity of its myths. In particular, I will focus on how the government has kept alive the micro-myth of the MSC in the face of various challenges and setbacks in the project's trajectory of development.

In the early stages of the MSC's construction, the legitimacy of the myth increased in relation to growth in the Malaysian economy, the rise in its GDP, and the accolades from international investors and the project's international advisory panel. More recently, in his 2003 Federal Budget Speech, Mahathir announced that "the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) has succeeded beyond expectations," as demonstrated by the sizeable number of domestic and international companies that had achieved MSC status ("Federal Budget 2003").¹²⁶ Similarly, in October 2003,

¹²⁶ According to the Multimedia Development Corporation's main website, of April 5th 2004, there are 1013 MSC Status Companies (969 MSC technology companies, 35 Institutions of higher

the Minister of Energy, Communications and Multimedia stated that the MSC is “on track and on time” with a project revenue for 2003 of 6 billion Ringgit (\$2.1 billion CDN) (Malaysia MSC First). And, in April 2004, the Minister of Science, Technology and Innovation remarked that, “[w]e are very pleased with the developments and achievement of the MSC so far. It augurs well with what former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad had started and what the present government [under Badawi] wants” (Malaysia MDC).

However, despite the government’s use of such positive symbolic language, there have been widespread concerns that the MSC has not fared as well as once hoped, or hyped. In the following section, I will describe some of these concerns and discuss how the government has tried to quell them in order to maintain support for the project. Since a Gramscian understanding of hegemonic power considers that the most effective method of control is “to build consent by ideological control of cultural production and distribution” (Thussu 68), I will pay particular attention to restrictions that the government has placed on domestic media and educational institutions as a means of ensuring that only certain versions of this, and other myths, are published and promoted.

However, when these kinds of hegemonic methods fail to be effective, the government has been willing to employ more coercive measures to suppress public discourse / activities that are not in line with government interests. In other words, the government has a variety of techniques at its disposal to forcibly remove from

learning with MSC Status, and 9 Incubator companies) (MDC). The MDC bestows MSC status on companies that have met a number of key criteria (e.g., they have located part of their operation in one of the five MSC zones noted in Chapter 5, be a provider or a heavy user of multimedia services and / or products, etc.). Once a company has been granted MSC status, it can take advantage of the government’s Bill of Guarantees.

public forums any perspectives that challenge and / or call into question the status quo. Of particular concern to domestic and international human rights organizations are the laws (especially the Internal Security Act, ISA) that deny citizens their basic freedoms of press, speech, expression, and assembly. Although the government uses these laws in order to maintain control, it is the constant *threat* of their usage that is especially effective. As one Malaysian academic writes, “[t]he potential abuse of the law and state power remains a constant threat to the sustenance of democratizing impulses within Malaysian society” (Othman 128). The fear of government reprisals has thus created an environment of extreme self-censorship in Malaysia.

Since the Malaysian government has employed a combination of both consensus-building and coercive measures to maintain the status quo and ensure that its versions of micro and macro-myths are kept alive, it is important that we look “[b]eyond tired liberal notions of political pluralism and the more artificial simplification of countries as either democratic or authoritarian” (Hilley “Mahathirism”). Instead, we must recognize, as John Hilley argues, that “there is a continuum line between hegemony and domination. In its Gramscian sense, it illustrates how power is actually pursued and maintained, both through the increasingly vital space of civil organisation and the traditional state apparatus” (“Mahathirism”).

I. Challenges to the MSC

For a newly industrializing country with a long colonial history, the MSC appears to offer Malaysia the opportunity of becoming a successful player in the

global economy. As such, the government's choice of building this Silicon Imitator seems to be a rather judicious decision. And, to ensure the project's success, the government has dedicated an enormous amount of its financial and political resources to its construction and ongoing development. However, in addition to the 1997 Asian financial crisis and the global high-tech sector slowdown, the MSC has faced a number of other setbacks in its development.

Although the following section offers a critique of each of these setbacks, the discussion should not be read as a rejection of the MSC project as a whole. Rather, I hope to demonstrate that the Malaysian government bears some responsibility for the MSC's difficulties (i.e., external factors are not only to blame). Moreover, the discussion reveals gaps between promises made by the government regarding the project's success and the on-the-ground reality of its impact on Malaysian society.

A. Political Patronage

In the shift towards greater privatization during the mid to late 1980s, politically expedient businessmen were placed in control of key sectors of the Malaysian economy. Today, the Malaysian government continues to be accused of exercising corporate favouritism towards its political supporters, a type of cronyism that has had a detrimental effect on investment in the MSC.

One of the most recent and visible examples of political patronage involves the MSC's failed Entertainment Village, also known as E-Village. Located in the heart of the MSC, E-Village was designed to help Malaysia compete against

Bollywood and Hong Kong's film industry, particularly in the areas of digital imaging and post-production work (Mohamed Personal interview). It was also charged with the task of promoting Malaysia as a filming site for Hollywood, and was expected to include landscaped grounds for movie shoots, Disneyland-like amusement theme parks, and shopping complexes. However, by mid-2001, the project had started to flounder, and by the end of the year had almost completely dissolved (the project is now a part of the MSC's "Creative Applications Development Center"). Critics have blamed the failure of E-Village in large part on the government's decision to give "well-connected, if inexperienced, local players... a franchise to build and operate a major project meant to boost the country to developed nation status" (Mellor).

However, the E-Village example is not an anomaly. As Malaysian political economist Jomo K.S. contends, despite the establishment of an Anti-Corruption Act (1997), only businesses and individuals supportive of the BN coalition are given government contracts, including work associated with the ongoing development of the MSC (Reyes). However, even the *perceived* potential for conflicts of interest and pork barrel politics resulting from political patronage can be detrimental to the MSC's overall image and therefore its success in attracting external investment. As one observer has noted, "[l]ike most developing countries, Malaysia has failed to realize that political patronage or political induced decisions do not necessarily translate into business-savvy decisions" (qtd. in Sitathan).¹²⁷

¹²⁷ As an article in Asiaweek magazine describes, Mahathir "is rightly credited with leading Malaysia along the road to economic prosperity. But his tenure is also littered with costly bailouts

B. Wanted: An English-Speaking, Highly-Skilled, ICT-Oriented Workforce

As described in Chapter 6, the Malaysian government is interested in 1) developing a workforce capable of playing an integral and highly-skilled role in the research and development of ICT products; and 2) using the expertise, technology, and financial investment of foreign companies to develop the MSC and its own domestic high-tech sector. However, critics have argued that Malaysia lacks the workforce necessary to support its desired influx of foreign companies or to be able to develop a viable domestic high-tech sector.

In 2001, the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) commissioned McKinsey & Co to conduct a confidential analysis of the MSC. According to the report, which was leaked to the Asian Wall Street Journal, Malaysia did not possess a workforce that was adequately skilled enough to support the growth of the project.¹²⁸ The findings of a survey of transnational corporations corroborate this report. Conducted by Malaysian educational studies scholar Molly Lee, the survey discovered that employers were concerned that Malaysian graduates entering into the workforce were “not well-versed in English; they do not know how to communicate effectively; they do not know how to think independently and take the initiative” (Lee and Wong). Recognizing that it needed to address this gap between labour supply and demand, the Malaysian government chose to heed advice provided by McKinsey and allow MSC status companies to “bring in unlimited numbers of foreign knowledge workers without the usual work permit and visa complications”

and questionable business decisions that Malaysian taxpayers have had to underwrite.” These include bailouts for Bank Bumiputra, the Bakun dam project, and Malaysian Airlines (Cordingley 24).

¹²⁸ In 2003, it was estimated that the MSC would require “7,000 knowledge workers a year for several years” in order to remain viable (Taylor 109).

as a means of solving the problem in the near term (Taylor 109). In order to deal with the situation in the longer term, the government introduced its Brain Gain program to keep Malaysian expertise from going abroad and to lure back “knowledge-workers” who had already left. For example, economically “useful” Malaysian nationals have been offered tax incentives, higher salaries for “value-added” skills, expeditious visa and passport applications, and access to better research facilities if they agree to work in Malaysia for a set number of years. In addition, the MDC has actively encouraged “investors to introduce more R&D units, design teams, and product-testing companies” to develop local high-end expertise (Jussawalla, “Role” 277).

1. *Incubating an ICT Workforce in Smart Schools.* The government has also dedicated a significant amount of time and money to promoting ICT literacy in its educational institutions as a means of producing an ICT-oriented workforce for Malaysia’s future. Also, as noted in Chapter 6, the government began encouraging English as the medium of study for mathematics and science, subjects it considers critical to a successful “knowledge-based” economy. The Ministry of Education argues that these kinds of changes are necessary if Malaysia is to remain competitive in the new information age:

A market-sensitive education system is evolving here in Malaysia.

Our schools and universities are taking up the challenge of globalisation by changing not only the content of curriculum and programmes but more importantly the delivery systems. IT-enhanced

teaching and learning are already making computers in schools, distance learning, video conferencing and internet link commonplace. We have to *race ahead* to achieve a significant transformation of our educational infrastructure in order to meet the next millennium as a technologically competent and scientifically adept society. (Message, emphasis added)

As discussed in Chapter 5, the MSC's Smart School Flagship Application is expected to play a key role in producing this kind of technologically adept society and workforce. The government defines a Smart School as "a learning institution that has been *systemically* reinvented in terms of teaching-learning and management practices to help children cope with the Information Age" (Malaysia Malaysian Smart). In the first stage of the program, ninety elementary and secondary schools throughout Malaysia were selected to become Smart Schools. These schools are now fully "wired" and ICTs have been built into the curriculum (Chan; Subramaniam). In addition, ICTs are increasingly being used in the schools' management functions (i.e., timetabling, payroll and finances, co-ordination of activities within and between school districts, etc.).

During field research, I interviewed several members of the Smart School development team (public servants for the Ministry of Education), as well as the secretary-general of the National Union of Teaching Profession, a teacher in a designated Smart School, and Foong Mae Chan, the Ministry of Education's Principal Assistant Director of the Communications and Training Sector. None of these individuals viewed the presence of ICTs in the school system as "progress" in

and of itself. Instead, they considered new forms of technology as tools to help enhance the educational process. For instance, Chan states that information technology should be viewed as simply “an enabler... Although it can replace the blackboard, it cannot drive the curriculum – IT just enhances it” (Malaysia Schools Get).

Moreover, the Smart School team did not develop this Flagship Application haphazardly. Rather, they researched similar programs in other countries¹²⁹ prior to embarking on their own piloting testing. In addition, they are very familiar with a wide range of academic research in this area and have been actively involved in domestic and international dialogues concerning issues related to ICTs and education. Although a comprehensive analysis of how well ICTs are actually integrated into the Malaysian school system is beyond the scope of this project, the public servants that I interviewed were clearly dedicated to this initiative. Nevertheless, there are a number of issues concerning the goals and implementation of the Smart School application that need to be addressed. To be clear, the following critique should *not* be read as a rejection of the Smart School initiative, but should instead be viewed as highlighting some specific problems in its operation.

First, although no public servant stated as much, the Smart School team appeared to be under significant pressure to produce tangible “results” of the project’s success – e.g., publishing improved testing scores for Smart School students to demonstrate the success of the program. Second, only a select number of schools in the country have been “wired” to become Smart Schools, while others

¹²⁹ Including Canada’s SchoolNet program. For additional information regarding the program, refer to its website (<www.schoolnet.ca>).

operate without adequate teaching staff, up-to-date textbooks, or even electricity. In the winter of 2000, A.T. Kearney and Foreign Policy published their annual globalization index to assess countries' "global links, from foreign direct investment to international travel, telephone traffic, and Internet servers" ("Measuring Globalization"). In their commentary, the authors chastised the Malaysian government for spending billions of Ringgits on constructing infrastructure for the MSC, while "70% of its primary schools lacked computer facilities and about 10% had no electricity and water supply. 'The result is an impressive infrastructure not sufficiently supported by human capital'" (Ritikos).

Third, projects designed to introduce ICTs into the school system are, for the most part, worthwhile endeavours. Connecting schools to the Internet, for example, has given students and teachers the opportunity to access information from a wide range of sources previously unavailable. Also, students are able to make use of different learning softwares made available (especially to designated "Smart Schools") and can gain valuable computing skills within a classroom situation. However, I would argue that these new technologies are also often accompanied by unreasonable expectations of their role in the learning process. For example, in a rather technologically determinist vein the Ministry of Education promises that the Smart School initiative will help transform the "school culture... from a memory-based one to an informed, thinking, creative and caring one, *through leading-age technology*" (Malaysia Malaysian Smart, emphasis added). Yet, it does not explain how exactly students are expected to become more creative or caring through their use of technology. Further, in describing the difference between "regular" and

“smart” schools, the Ministry contends that in the latter the “climate is conducive to learning, and encourages all students to practise self-paced, self-accessed, and self-directed learning with the teachers acting as guides by the side to encourage continuous interest in learning” (Malaysia Malaysian Smart). Again, the Ministry does not explain how new technology, combined with a decreased role for teachers, will produce a superior learning environment for students.

Similar expectations have accompanied the introduction of new ICTs into Malaysia’s post-secondary school system. As an example, the Dean of the School of Health Science at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) stated that, “[b]y putting lecture notes online and providing for online tutorials, we can carry on the teaching process even when there is a lack of teaching staff” (Devi). However, others would argue that education should be viewed as a process requiring “real” interaction between teacher and student, as well as between fellow students, within a classroom environment. Although technology can be used as a tool for enhancing this process, it cannot be a stand-in for it. As discussed below, if the government wants to produce graduates capable of entering into the workforce and, among other things, play an integral role in creating and developing, rather than only manufacturing technology, then it must be willing to foster creative and critical thinking instead of concentrating on the development of ICT skills.

2. *The Value of English.* As noted above, an English-speaking workforce is invaluable to Malaysia’s efforts to encourage foreign companies to relocate part, or all, of their operations to the MSC. As well, Malaysia is competing for the interest

of these companies against countries such as Singapore and India, which have their own Silicon Imitators / technopoles supported by English-speaking, ICT-oriented workforces. As a result, Mahathir has argued that Malaysians “must master the English language. In this regard, we have embarked on the teaching of science and mathematics in English. These are subjects of importance in this era of information technology. As our society progresses, our language will also be enriched. No one will be interested to learn the language of poor and backward people” (“Federal Budget 2004”). At the same time, both Mahathir and Badawi have stated their dedication to maintaining the national language of Bahasa Malaysia (or Malay), in addition to many of the country’s vernacular languages (including Mandarin and Tamil).¹³⁰

Although instruction at post-secondary public institutions is provided primarily in Bahasa Malaysia, in like manner to their junior counterparts, universities and colleges are beginning to incorporate more English into their curriculum. The Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), for example, now requires students to pass three courses in English prior to graduation. The university’s board chairman stated that the language requirement was introduced to ensure that its graduates could become successful “global players” (“Plans”). Moreover, as a

¹³⁰ However, this places a number of schools in a rather difficult position. In a Chinese vernacular school, for example, parents may want their children to be taught in Mandarin (or another language) in order to preserve their cultural heritage. At the same time, they also recognize that English is invaluable for the business world and that Bahasa Malaysia is necessary in order to live and work in Malaysian society. Currently, the country’s primary and secondary school system is divided into national schools in which the medium of study is Bahasa Malaysia, and a limited number of vernacular schools which provide instruction in other languages such as Mandarin or Tamil (while also providing courses in the study of Bahasa Malaysia and English). However, the country is in the process of reviewing its national educational system with the intention of creating one integrated system.

public institution, USM needs to be able to compete with private post-secondary institutions, which operate almost exclusively in English.

C. Living and Working Environment

In addition to accusations of political patronage and concerns regarding an inadequately skilled workforce, the government is also under pressure to create a living and working environment within the MSC capable of attracting international (and even domestic) companies. The government promised that Cyberjaya in particular would become a world-class urban development, capable of supporting MSC workers and their families (as described in Chapter 6). However, by 2002 the city did not have neighbourhoods, convenient public transportation, affordable housing, or even many shops or restaurants. Although plans are currently under development to address some of these concerns,¹³¹ this lack of “soft” infrastructure may act as a deterrent for companies thinking of (re)locating to the MSC. Consequently, even if the “hard” incentives to move to Cyberjaya may be strong (e.g., the Bill of Guarantees), it will be considerably more difficult to convince workers to relocate until the urban infrastructure is enhanced.

II. Challenges and Successes in Other Government-Led ICT-Oriented Programs and Policies

As discussed in Chapter 5, the MDC and National I.T. Council (NITC) have dedicated a significant amount of resources to developing the MSC’s Flagship

Applications. In addition to these initiatives, the government has introduced a variety of other programs designed to help bridge the digital divide and fulfil the objectives of the Vision 2020 strategy.¹³² As described in the following section, these projects are managed by an assortment of government ministries and organizations with varying degrees of success. Despite efforts on behalf of the NITC and MIMOS (the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems, the NITC's secretariat) to act as an umbrella organization for many of these projects¹³³, there tends to be a lack of co-ordination between the groups and their activities.

A. Government Programs and Policies Designed to Promote Widespread ICT Usage

The PC Ownership Campaign, administered by the Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia (MECM),¹³⁴ was charged with the task of increasing the penetration rate of personal computers in Malaysian households. Through the campaign, citizens could draw money tax-free from their Employee Provident Fund (EPF, the country's largest private pension plan) to purchase a computer at an affordable rate. They then had the choice of either retrieving their computer from a local post office (Pos Malaysia), or having it installed in their home by a postal worker. Unfortunately, the program was fraught with a number of

¹³¹ For example, as of 2002, the KLIA Transit, a high-speed commuter rail service, connects KLIA and Putrajaya.

¹³² Although there is a plethora of other initiatives designed to bridge the digital divide that are funded and administered by non-government organizations, businesses, educational institutions, etc., these were not included in the research process.

¹³³ For example, every year the NITC and MIMOS host an InfoSoc Malaysia event to bring together different groups, communities, departments, and ministries within Malaysian dedicated to bridging the digital divide.

¹³⁴ Established in November 1998 to succeed the Ministry of Energy, Telecommunications and Posts.

problems, including accusations of corruption within Pos Malaysia and the Provident Fund, as well as complaints that the computers were too expensive and postal workers were often unqualified to install or maintain them.¹³⁵

The post office is also the site for the MECM's Pusat Internet Desa (Internet Village) program (also known as Rural Internet Centres). Based in part on Canada's CAP program, this initiative was designed to provide free public Internet access to rural Malaysians. Although the program has received some positive reviews in the mainstream press, only a minimal amount of computer training is provided to the post office workers who are expected to maintain the equipment and to help other citizens in using it. In addition, the program does not have an evaluation mechanism to determine how and by whom these sites are being used.¹³⁶ Of note, in May 2001, I visited an Internet Desa site in the small town of Kepala Batas, Penang.¹³⁷ Although the site was centrally located and the Internet connection both fast and free, its one computer did not have printing capabilities or written instructions regarding its usage. Further, I was told that no one at the office knew how to use the computer except for the postmaster who was away for the afternoon.

In contrast to these two initiatives, there are a number of other programs administered and funded by the government which may be considered more successful in bridging Malaysia's digital divide. For example, the MECM has

¹³⁵ In 2002, the government decided to suspend the EPF withdrawal scheme for personal computers.

¹³⁶ For example, the login book at the Kepala Batas location was almost entirely filled with male names. Future research on this issue could include incorporate surveys and participant observation to determine who uses these kinds of sites, for what purpose(s), and how their usage effects their civic engagement, democratic participation, economic prosperity, etc.

¹³⁷ Located just outside the larger city of Butterworth on the mainland of peninsular Malaysia.

established the Universal Service Provision¹³⁸ to provide affordable telecommunication networks for “underserved areas or for underserved groups within the community” (Malaysia What We Do).¹³⁹ One of the provision’s most recent projects is an Internet connectivity program in the rural interior of Sabah and Sarawak. The MECM also administers a Universal Service Obligation, making it “compulsory for the telcos [telephone companies] to help provide fixed telephone services to ‘difficult’ areas on humanitarian grounds” (“Net access”).¹⁴⁰ The MECM’s most recent project – the Community Communications Development Program – is also dedicated to providing ICT access to rural regions of the country. In like manner to the Grameen phone system described in Chapter 6, the MECM covers the initial start-up costs of constructing centrally-located Internet sites (known as a kedai.com or communication shop) in rural Malaysian villages. In turn, these sites are operated by a local entrepreneur who earns revenue from fellow villagers’ use of the technology. The goal of the project is to have these sites become entirely self-sufficient within a few years of their establishment.

MIMOS has also administered and financially supported a number of programs designed to encourage widespread usage of ICTs and bridge Malaysia’s digital divide. Two of its more successful initiatives, which also focus on traditionally underserved areas of the country, include 1) the Demonstrator Application Programme and Grant Scheme (DAGS); and 2) the Mobile Internet Unit

¹³⁸ The USP is administered by the MECM’s Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, MCMC, which is described at a later point in this chapter.

¹³⁹ For an excellent overview of the USP, the ministry’s licensing process, and the telecommunications infrastructure of Malaysia, refer to the International Telecommunication Union’s Multimedia Malaysia: Internet Case Study, 2002 (ITU, Multimedia).

¹⁴⁰ Although Internet dial-up is fairly inexpensive in Malaysia, the cost of a fixed telephone land line remains relatively high. As of 2002, Malaysia had “the second lowest dial-up Internet prices in South East Asia, just above Singapore (ITU, Multimedia 21).

(Mobile). Through DAGS, MIMOS provides funds to a wide range of, primarily grass roots, organizations throughout Malaysia. Recipients have included rural communities interested in developing their own websites, an e-community of Malaysian orphanages called CyberCare, and the e-Pekak program designed to help purchase special computer equipment for the hearing impaired (John). As noted in Chapter 6, MIMOS has also been involved in supporting the E-Bario project to bring Internet connectivity and training to the remote highlands of Sarawak. With the help of a grant from the UNDP, MIMOS has also introduced the Mobile Internet Unit (MIU), a roaming bus driven by a “smart” driver and furnished with multiple computers and high-speed Internet.¹⁴¹ The project, which has garnered domestic and international praise, “travels around the non-main stream schools in the country to conduct basic ICT... literacy programs” (John; Mobile).¹⁴²

In addition to projects administered by the MECM and MIMOS, the Malaysian Ministry of Human Resources has also been involved in promoting access to, and usage of, ICTs in Malaysia. For example, the ministry established its Skills Development Fund to provide loans to students pursuing technical and vocational courses in public and private training institutions (Jaafar; Taylor 94). Also, through its “Universalisation of ICT Skills” program, it offers private companies tax incentives to send their employees to ICT training (Jaafar; “Programme for Workers”).

¹⁴¹ The MIU is based on a similar project developed in Mali, Africa called Mobile Video Units (Mobile).

B. Fault Lines

Although some of the NITC's rhetoric can be rather technologically determinist in nature,¹⁴³ it has also argued that ICT access must go beyond just the mere physical provision of new technology. According to one of the council's position papers, citizens must also have the "[f]inancial means to afford and use" technology, as well as the "[b]asic skills or capabilities to use and the actual usage of ICT products and services" (Malaysia InfoSoc). As Raslan Ahmad, a senior manager in the ICT policy development section of MIMOS explains,

There should also be a balanced emphasis on the development of local content, along with building the capacity and capability of communities and society through the utilization of technology and development of skills... the digital divide goes beyond the issue of providing equitable access to technology and closing the gap between the info-rich and the info-poor. It also involves providing literacy, skills, and localized content, developing self-managed communities, and empowering society by providing opportunities to use ICT. (qtd. in Taylor 112)

As the examples provided in the section above demonstrate, there are a number of programs operating within Malaysia that have tried to address the NITC's broader definition of access, as well as the issues outlined by Ahmad. Moreover, the

¹⁴² Non-main stream schools are described as institutions which "are deprived of access to information and opportunity to acquire ICT skills" (Mobile).

¹⁴³ For example, the goal of the council is "to utilise ICT to transform all of Malaysian society into an information society, then to a knowledge society and finally to a values-based knowledge society" (Malaysia About National).

ministries and agencies involved in many of these programs have dedicated a significant amount of time and resources to their development. The MECM even visited a number of other countries (Canada included) to collate “best practices” worthy of emulation in the Malaysian context.

Notwithstanding these efforts, many segments of the Malaysian population are still being “left behind” as the country races towards the new “information age.” In particular, there still exists a massive gap between rural and urban ICT access and usage. As one observer noted in 2002, “regarding Internet usage, Kuala Lumpur may soon be closer to convergence with Sydney or Milan than with rural Malaysia” (Campbell 119). As well, during field research I could not locate a government branch, or even an individual, responsible for addressing the needs of people with disabilities (although the DAGS scheme provides some funding for projects addressing special needs, e.g., e-Pekak, noted earlier).¹⁴⁴

Recognizing that gender is another serious fault line in Malaysia, a number of local academics (e.g., Noor Bathi Badarudin, Khoo Khay Jin, Cecilia Ng, Doris Padmini Selvaratnam, Farida Habib Shah, Halimah Badioe Zaman), as well as non-government organizations (e.g., UNDP, Women’s Aid Organisation of Malaysia), have conducted research on issues related to women, ICTs, and development. Some of their primary concerns include the ghettoization impact of teleworking¹⁴⁵, the technological marginalization of rural women, and low literacy rates (men – 91.7%;

¹⁴⁴ However, Mahathir promised in his 2004 Federal Budget Speech that “a Pioneer ICT Resource Centre will be established in Sungai Buloh (in the state of Selangor) to train the visually and hearing impaired in ICT skills.”

¹⁴⁵ As Malaysian academic Cecilia Ng writes, “critics, including trade unionists, argue that electronic homeworkers are actually faced with the double burden of work, and actually work longer hours than if they were to work at the office. Indeed, the empirical picture reveals that women are not necessarily obtaining better job opportunities, and at higher value, relative to men.” (14).

women – 84.0%¹⁴⁶) (UNDP Human Development Indicators). In terms of the government, the NITC recently introduced its Social Digital Inclusion program to bring together individuals and organizations working on these issues, and the Ministry of Women and Family Development and MECM have organized forums on issues pertaining to ICTs and gender. Nevertheless, critics contend that there has been minimal discussion in the government concerning more complex issues related to women and labour (e.g., in high-tech EPZs, teleworking, single mothers), literacy, political empowerment, etc.

Some critics have also argued that even though ICTs can be used in processes of development, the government must first ensure that the basic needs of all Malaysians have been met. For example, every school in Malaysia should have the electricity and a clean water supply before other tools of development are introduced. As one observer notes, for these critics, “it is more pressing to resolve basic rural needs before going for high-tech projects such as Smart Schools and mobile Internet units” (Netto “IT literacy”).

Also of concern, the government has placed little emphasis on how ICTs are actually used by Malaysians. In 2003, Mahathir stated that “more Malaysians, in particular the younger generation are surfing the internet to acquire knowledge and obtain current information” (“Federal Budget 2004”). However, there is little government discussion of what kind of information is being acquired, how this information affects citizen engagement, supports democratic practices, or improves the lives of average Malaysians. Therefore, even though the NITC has demonstrated a much broader understanding of ICT access and usage, the more prominent

¹⁴⁶ For Malaysians 15 years and older (UNDP Human Development Indicators).

government rhetoric (much of which was described in Chapters 5 and 6) is focused on the philosophy of: build it, and when they will come, the digital divide that threatens to deepen social and economic inequalities will disappear. However, as I argued in Chapter 6, this myth omits the already existing structural causes of inequality in its equation. In particular, neo-liberal economic policies and an undemocratic environment ensure that social, political, and economic divides cannot be bridged solely through the use of new ICTs.

Again, it is important to note that the government's technologically determinist rhetoric is not unique to Malaysia, nor is it exclusive to the developing world. For example, the CAP program in Canada is, as noted, expected to help bridge the domestic digital divide. As Canadian communication scholars Ellen Balka and Brian J. Peterson explain, the government considers the program to be an invaluable mechanism "for increasing the connectedness of Canadians, which in turn is seen as an important step in the maintenance of social cohesion and citizenship" (362). However, as Balka and Peterson also note, the project does not have a method of evaluation to ask questions such as: 1) Who visits these CAP sites?; 2) What do citizens do once they get there?; and 3) How does their usage affect their participation in Canadian society? These are the same kinds of questions that also need to be addressed in the Malaysian situation.

III. Gaps Between Promises and Reality: How Myths Remain Alive

As I have noted at numerous points throughout this dissertation, I do not consider myths to be either true or false, right or wrong. With this definition of myth in mind, how then am I to explain the above policy analysis? Why does it matter whether or not these policies and programs (including the MSC) work if it is my contention that myths about the MSC and Malaysia's modernity, progress, and development cannot be judged as true / right or false / wrong?

On one level, I consider this discussion useful for identifying gaps between 1) promises made by the Malaysian government concerning the transformative power of new technology; and 2) the actual, on-the-ground impact of the programs and policies the government has designed to facilitate this transformation. As I have argued in this and the previous chapter, the government has initiated a wide range of projects to promote ICT usage in Malaysia, and has dedicated an extraordinary amount of time, energy, and money into making the MSC a success.

Notwithstanding these efforts, some of the projects have suffered significant setbacks in their development (most notably the MSC) and have therefore not lived up to government promises. However, even if every single one of the initiatives described above were to operate as per expectations, they still could not match the government's rhetoric regarding the power of new technology to radically transform Malaysian society. This is because, as I argue in considerable detail below, ICTs must operate within a larger Malaysian infrastructure that is socially, politically, and economically undemocratic (e.g., the Internet can be used to build e-commerce, but

not to challenge the government's authority). As such, a policy analysis provides us with an opportunity "to understand the relationship of the myth to the actual social practices of the mythmaker and to what is mythologized" (Mosco, Digital 38).

At the same time, however, a critical analysis of these practices can only take us so far because, as Mosco notes, "the accuracy of a myth is not its major test" (Mosco, Digital 39). Rather, it is of more interest for us to understand how and why these myths have remained alive in the face of actions and events that call into question their viability. For, despite the setbacks and limitations described above, myths about the transformative power of ICTs in general, and the MSC in particular, continue to remain alive in Malaysia. But why is this the case? How has the government been able to attract support for its myths?

In this and the following chapter I will try to answer these questions by examining a variety of techniques the Malaysian government has used to ensure that myths which address the intersection of technology and progress remain operational in Malaysian society. I will begin by exploring the government's use of hegemonic / consensus-building techniques, followed by an examination of measures that are more coercive in nature. As discussed earlier, these two methods operate in a dialectical fashion, as success in gaining consent of the governed determines how much coercion, or threat thereof, is necessary in order for the government to remain in control. Consequently, even though critics of the Mahathir administration often focus on its use of repressive means of control, it is also important to recognize the efficacy of its more hegemonic techniques. This is because, as John Hilley notes, "[a]longside the more overt threat of coercive mechanisms in Malaysia, Mahathirism

and the Vision project have also been built around intellectual populism and the need to win in civil society... a more nuanced mix of state coercion *and* civil persuasion...” (Malaysia 118).

IV. Specific Hegemonic / Consensus-Building Methods Used to Keep Myths of Technology and Progress Alive

A. Neighbourly Competition: The Race Revisited

To ensure that Malaysians continue to strive for greater progress and development, the government has entered Malaysia into a race against neighbouring countries for FDI, technological advancements, economic autonomy, and ownership of *the* ICT hub of the region. To garner support for the micro-myth of the MSC, the government has, in similar fashion to the races discussed in Chapter 4, tapped into people’s fear of being “left behind.” According to government rhetoric, Malaysia must not only keep up with, but also surpass its neighbours in the race to take advantage of the new cyber frontier. If it fails to do so, it risks slipping back into the status of a developing country.

Some of Malaysia’s strongest competition for technological and economic development comes from Singapore, India, and China, three countries which each possess their own ICT-hub / Silicon Imitator. Although the following section focuses on these specific examples, there are a number of other countries in the region boasting similar ICT projects. They include, but are not limited to, Taiwan (e.g., HsinChu-Taipai), Indonesia (e.g., Nusantara 21), South Korea (e.g., Songdo Media Valley), Brunei (e.g., ShuTT2003), as well as Vietnam, and the Philippines.

1. *Singapore.* As Malaysia's neighbour to the south, Singapore has become an economic power-house in Asia, with a per capita income higher than that of its former colonizers (Europa 3528). As such, the material differences between Singapore and Malaysia are stark, particularly considering that only a generation ago the two countries were joined together in a Malayan union. Although the two neighbours share an amicable association, a variety of issues have strained their relationship (including the cost of Malaysian water shipped to Singapore and the lack of pension funds for Malaysian nationals working in Singapore). Malaysia is particularly concerned that despite its Brain Gain program, there has been a steady brain *drain* down to Singapore, especially by non-Bumiputras.¹⁴⁷ Singapore, on the other hand, as a predominantly Chinese city-state, "has always been nervous of its position, sandwiched between two Islamic Malay-speaking nations [Malaysia and Indonesia] with modern histories of anti-Chinese violence. It has therefore had every reason to be helpful to Kuala Lumpur" (Anderson). At the same time, however, Singapore actively competes with Malaysia for valuable FDI and the attention of high-tech transnational corporations. Recently, tensions have flared over the rivalry between the MSC and its Singaporean counterpart, Singapore ONE (One Network for Everyone).

In the early 1990s, Singapore began to promote itself as the "intelligent island," a "city-state built around an infrastructure of cutting-edge information technology" (McDaniel 98). At the centre of this island is the Singapore ONE

¹⁴⁷ The drain is, in large part, a direct result of the Malaysian government's Bumiputra quotas, combined with the higher salaries available in Singapore. A Malaysian university professor,

project, a high-tech hub that includes a technology corridor of ICT science parks, research institutes, as well as the National University of Singapore (NUS)¹⁴⁸ (Khondker 152). The overall goal of the project is to act as “a launchpad for next-generation interactive multimedia applications and services to the region,” an objective that bears a distinct resemblance to that of the MSC (Singapore Singapore ONE).

2. *India.* Despite recent tensions between India and Pakistan, which have caused some investors to shy away from the region, India’s ICT hubs (e.g., Bangalore and Hyderabad) have proven remarkably successful in attracting FDI (Jussawalla, “Role” 267-68; Naidu). Their success can, in large part, be attributed to the country’s large English-speaking, low-waged, ICT-oriented workforce (Naidu).¹⁴⁹ In addition, many Indian entrepreneurs, after first gaining practical ICT skills, management knowledge, and global experience while working in the original Silicon Valley, returned home to India and invested their know-how and money back into the local economy. As a result, by the year 2000, software had become the “country’s single largest export item” (Europa 1964).¹⁵⁰ India also has developed a strong “back office” / call centre economy, an area into which Malaysia has recently tried to expand. With a population of one billion people and a growing services sector, India may prove to be Malaysia’s biggest competition in the near future.

for example, receives a fraction of the salary that s/he could make at one of Singapore’s post-secondary institutions.

¹⁴⁸ Of interest, NUS recently embarked on a program of sending students to work in Silicon Valley for a semester of their studies, with the hope that they will return to Singapore armed with new skills and entrepreneurial expertise (Khondker 152-53).

¹⁴⁹ For a useful overview of India’s ICT hubs, refer to B.V. Naidu.

¹⁵⁰ However, the Indian economy suffered a setback by the collapse of the energy giant Enron, which had been the country’s largest foreign investor (Europa 1964).

3. *China.* With its potentially massive marketplace, low labour costs, a new government receptive to expanded capitalism, and its recent accession into the WTO, China has become an increasingly attractive locale for foreign investors. As a result, many other Asian countries (Malaysia, Singapore, and India included) are concerned that their FDI will continue to be lost to this growing giant to the north. Moreover, China is in the midst of developing its own ICT hubs to attract foreign companies and investors as “a consequence of the concessions... [it] made to become a member of the WTO” (Jussawalla, “Role” 264). Although other countries in the region may feel threatened by these changes, Chinese officials have tried to present their high-tech aspirations and “booming economy as a benefit to Asia, rather than a threat,” by deliberately avoiding “the sort of sweeping statements about cheap labour and unbeatable economies of scale it uses when urging foreign investors to come to China” (Vatikiotis and Murphy).

In sum, China and India are able to offer transnational companies extremely low wages, thereby undermining “Malaysia’s position in labour-intensive manufacturing industries,” and compelling it to “shift to a ‘higher technological niche’” (Bunnell “(Re)positioning” 113). As Mahathir lamented in October 2003, “foreign direct investment has been declining and has largely flowed to low-wage economies” (“Federal Budget 2004”). At the same time, however, Malaysia recognizes that it cannot compete with Singapore in many high-end technology markets. As a result, it finds itself caught in the middle – warding off competition

from “below” (e.g., China and India) as well as competition from “above” (e.g., Singapore).

In Chapter 4, I argued that one of the most successful methods of encouraging public support for a myth is to turn it into a race. By directing people’s attention towards winning, they focus less on whether or not they actually want to be part of the competition. In a similar fashion, by focusing citizens’ attention on the competition from above and below, the Malaysian government has been able to naturalize the parameters of discourse concerning the micro-myth of the MSC. It is *obvious* that Malaysia needs to construct and support the MSC in order to be able to compete in the new global economy. Therefore, the government can justify the expense of the MSC, as well as draw attention away from how the presence of foreign companies in the corridor benefits more a select group of political and economic elite, rather than the majority of Malaysian citizens. Instead, the mere existence of the project demonstrates that Malaysia will not be “left behind” in the race of the “information age.”

B. Domestic Harmony

During his tenure as Prime Minister, Mahathir continually warned his citizens that Malaysia could only reach its goal of becoming a fully developed nation if it maintained domestic harmony. “Peace and harmony” he argued, “form the bedrock on which all our development efforts are built. There could be no real progress if the country is torn apart by dissension and strife” (“Third Outline”).

Elsewhere, he has stated that “[i]f the country is disunited and weak it will not be able to face the challenges by such [a] concept as globalisation” (“Luncheon”).

Moreover, as noted in Chapters 5 and 6, Mahathir has argued the necessity of domestic harmony in order to stave off foreign (primarily Western) forces wanting to gain control of the country. However, Mahathir has tried to translate these fears of re-colonization into unquestioning support for his administration, its programs and policies (e.g., the MSC and other ICT-oriented initiatives). “If Malaysia is to continue to be peaceful and to grow rapidly, it is important that the protagonists of this unique system of racial cooperation [i.e., UMNO] should stay in power” (Mahathir “Third Outline”). Similarly, in 2003, he stated that Malaysia’s political stability is a direct result of the “strong solidarity of the Barisan Nasional Government, which upholds the principles of equitable collaboration” (“Federal Budget 2004”). Notably, his comments conveniently ignore his government’s use of coercive measures (discussed below) to ensure citizens’ compliance with the government’s authority.

Instead, any challenges to Malaysia’s (supposedly) democratically elected government (which the BN contends represents all major interest groups in the country) is viewed as a traitorous attempt to divide Malaysia and obstruct its social, political, and economic development. Similarly, demonstrations and protests, which are not officially sanctioned by the government, are labelled as deliberate attempts to incite civil disharmony and thus function as a threat to Malaysia’s progress and development. As Prime Minister Badawi explained (while still in the position of Deputy Prime Minister), “[w]hen there are not riots, no demonstrations, and it is

peaceful and safe, this looks good to businessmen and entrepreneurs and investors. It's good for all" ("DPM"). Of note, this quote reveals how "demonstrations" are rhetorically placed on the same level as "riots," thereby emphasizing the potential of violence in any counter-hegemonic activities.

To warn citizens of these dangers in civil unrest and the importance of remaining loyal to the government and its projects, including the MSC and other ICT-oriented initiatives, the government has used two forms of rhetorical devices. First, historical examples of domestic violence are used to remind people of the dangers of civil unrest. For instance, Mahathir has warned that "Malaysia is politically much more stable even than countries with more homogeneous populations. We are apt to take this for granted, but we must never forget that in the past racial clashes [e.g., the 1969 race riots] were not uncommon in Malaysia" (Way Forward 65). He has also used historical examples to justify the lack of democracy in Malaysia and the necessity of strict laws as a means of curbing racial tension and violence. As he declared in the aftermath of the 1969 riots, "there is not going to be a democracy in Malaysia; there never was and there never will be" (qtd. in Teik, "Nationalism" 58).¹⁵¹

Second, Mahathir has also used civil unrest in neighbouring countries, particularly Indonesia, as examples of how internal strife can have a negative impact on a country's plans for development ("PM: Use of Violence"). As a promotional article for the BN coalition claims, "[t]he fact that this nation has been living in peace and harmony for so many years is testimony to the ability of the Barisan

¹⁵¹ As discussed in Chapter 5, the riots also led to the introduction of the National Economic Policy (NEP), which created positive discrimination rights for Bumiputras in education, business, and

leadership in dealing with such a sensitive issue which has led to the downfall and ruin [of] many a country with similar racial and religious diversities” (Chin).

C. Manufacturing Legitimacy

As noted in the opening chapter of this dissertation, a theory of hegemony takes into consideration how views dissenting from the status quo are drawn back into the mainstream or, alternatively, are marginalized from it. To control the level of dissent within Malaysia, the government has declared that it wants citizens to participate in decision-making activities and to provide input into program and policy development. However, this involvement is only allowed to occur within “acceptable boundaries of ‘democratic participation’” as defined by the government (Hilley, Malaysia 128). In other words, as “part of a more subtle appeal to ‘insider reason’; a more refined process of co-optive persuasion”, citizens are encouraged to “internalise the *terms of debate*” (Hilley, Malaysia 129). This means that citizens are allowed to disagree and dissent in terms of how the country can best promote the MSC or build a high-tech sector to attain the development objectives set out by the government. Yet, the objectives themselves cannot be questioned. Consequently, attention is focused on how best to achieve predetermined goals, which allows the government to conceal any “contradictions and weaknesses of the development process itself” (Hilley, Malaysia 122).

the civil service. The quotas were expected to bridge the economic gap that separated the various races, thereby serving to ease racial tensions (Musa xxii).

In The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, Karl Marx stated that, “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past” (qtd. in Abrams 34). If we take Marx’s sentiment and apply it to the Malaysian situation, we find that although citizens possess some democratic freedoms, they are only allowed to exercise them up to the point that the political and economic status quo of the country is not disturbed.

For example, the MSC Bill of Guarantees promises that the government will not censor the Internet. However, on-line journalists critical of the government are not awarded press accreditation, which means that they are unable to attend official events, press conferences, or enter the parliamentary press gallery. Also, government officials have stated that any “misuse” of the Internet by its citizens would result in legal persecution. True to their word, in December 2002, police detained ten Malaysians under the Internal Security Act (discussed below) for allegedly spreading terror rumours on the Internet. Clearly, then, the government tries to use hegemonic methods as a means of absorbing any dissent back into the mainstream, thereby manufacturing its legitimacy through consensus-building mechanisms. However, failure to remain within the government’s parameters can result in its use of more coercive measures of control, many of which are discussed below.

D. (Re)defining “Success” and Inoculations

As noted earlier in this chapter, there are concerns that the MSC has not lived up to Mahathir and the government’s promises and expectations. However, since the MSC is supposed to play a central role in the myth of modernity, progress, and development, the government has used a variety of methods to ensure that citizens continue to believe in the project’s worth and its value to the country’s future prosperity. In addition to the hegemonic techniques described above, the government has also explained away any setbacks along the project’s trajectory by referring to them as either positive learning experiences (Barthes’ theory of inoculation, described in Chapter 3), or as events occurring outside of Malaysia’s control (e.g., the Asian financial crisis, a weakened American economy, SARS, the “war on terrorism,” the dot-com bubble burst, etc.). As a correlation, any setbacks that may have been caused by the Malaysian government, such as political patronage or an inadequate workforce, are left out of the discourse.

Also, when Malaysia placed 30th out of 72 nations on the UNDP’s Technology Achievement Index¹⁵² there was little in the government-controlled mainstream media¹⁵³ about the rankings, suggesting that they did not match the government’s domestic picture of a technologically advanced society. Also, as per Barthes’ inoculation analogy, the government has sometimes admitted to setbacks in its ICT-oriented projects, including the MSC. However, these setbacks are

¹⁵² The UNDP describes the index as a “new measure of countries’ ability to participate in the network age.” It includes statistics related to the country’s number of Internet hosts, patents granted to residents, high and medium technology exports, electricity consumption, phone penetration, and gross tertiary science enrolment ratio (UNDP *Technology*).

¹⁵³ The government’s control over domestic media is discussed in considerable detail in the second half of Chapter 7.

reconfigured as being healthy to the overall body politic / economic; i.e., government and industry have learned from their trials and errors and are now able to make their projects that much stronger. As such, the government's use of inoculations is one of its most effective hegemonic techniques for keeping myths alive.

In addition, the government has continually redefined what it constitutes as "success" for the project. For example, Mahathir remarked in his 2004 Federal Budget Speech that the MSC's strength lies in its ability to adapt to the ever-changing global economy and international business needs. This has allowed the government to bestow MSC status on less glamorous "back-office" companies including "call centers operated by Japan phone giant Nippon Telegraph & Telephone Corp. and the courier company DHL Worldwide Express" (Balfour). At the same time, attention has been directed towards new projects associated with the MSC. For instance, in 2003, Prime Minister Badawi announced the launch of the government's BioValley project, designed to "capitalize on Malaysia's natural resources to harness its rich biodiversity, crucial in the development of biotechnology with the hope of producing commercially lucrative products" (Heong). Of particular note, the project, which is expected to start operations in 2006, is being built on the land that had originally been set aside for Malaysia's E-Village. Therefore, by shifting attention away from a failed project and towards a potential new area of high-tech business, the government can again demonstrate the MSC's adaptability and continued relevance to the Malaysian economy.

However, as discussed in Chapter 4 (in the section regarding the Bio Race), there are serious implications associated with commercializing Malaysia's finite "life sciences" and biodiversity. Notwithstanding these concerns, Mahathir noted that Malaysia decided to become involved in this area of research, because "the global market for healthcare and life sciences products and services is expected to reach 4 trillion euros while pharmaceuticals 30 billion euros by 2006 ("Federal Budget 2004"). However, there appears to be little difference between Malaysia selling its biodiversity in order to attract foreign investment, and the practice of cash-cropping under a colonialist regime. Both scenarios encourage dependency of the periphery on the core, by depleting the former of its natural resources for the benefit of the latter.¹⁵⁴

V. Keeping Malaysia's Myth of Modernity, Progress, and Development Alive: A Summary of the Government's Consensus-Building Mechanisms

In this and the previous chapter, I have described how the Malaysian government has promoted its country as one that is modern, progressive, and well on its way to becoming fully developed. As such, the discussion has revolved around techniques that tend to be hegemonic in nature. However, in comparison to the government's more coercive measures, which are described below, it is considerably more difficult to establish the how these consensus-building mechanisms are constructed and put into practice. We can trace the instrumentality of the government's coercive techniques by looking at its use of repressive laws, as well as

¹⁵⁴ As noted in the concluding chapter, additional research should be dedicated to examining the short and long term effects of BioValley, especially in terms of the impact on the economic and

its political and economic control of domestic media and educational institutions. Yet, it is significantly more difficult to establish the institutional mechanisms the government has used to garner public support for its leadership, programs, and policies. As Philip F. Kelly writes, these techniques run the gamut from “the close regulation of trade union formation; a democratic system in which money politics and gerrymandered constituencies have ensured the entrenchment of the ruling coalition, the weakening of the judiciary’s role as an impartial arbiter”, etc. (“Developing” 64).

However, as I discussed in Chapter 6, it is also important to recognize the power of the government’s less visible consensus-building methods, those which motivate “citizens towards development goals... through a constant flow of optimistic information about national achievements and aspirations” (McDaniel 181). For example, the government has used a wide range of symbolic language to garner political support for its leadership, programs, and policies. In particular, the Mahathir administration heavily promoted its Vision 2020 strategy, promising that it would deliver “wealth creation, expanded opportunities and longer-term rewards” (Hilley 7). For instance, the Malaysian Minister of Human Resources promised in one of his public speeches that, “[w]e have national strategic plans that promise the delivery of a developed nation within 20 years, [and] a high technological society though the infrastructure of the Multimedia Super Corridor” (Onn). In a similar vein, Mahathir is quoted in a local newspaper as stating, “Malaysia would have been very backward without the Multimedia Super Corridor” (qtd. in Hong and Hor). As a further example, in a promotional pamphlet published by the MDC we find

cultural lives of rural Malaysians.

testimonies to how far Malaysia has progressed, combined with promises of a prosperous future:

About three decades ago, the word ‘Malaysia’ conjured up images of padi farmers bent over in their watery fields, tin dredges excavating in open mines, and a rubber tapper working in the early dawn amidst the cool greens of a rubber estate. No longer... Today, Malaysia and Malaysians have raced ahead into the 21st century, into the age of information technology and e-commerce. The future is brighter than ever. (Malaysia Your Profit)

In addition to its usage of public speeches, mainstream media, and promotional materials, the government has also (as discussed in Chapter 6) constructed a number of physical symbols (e.g., the Petronas towers) to substantiate and corroborate these kinds of claims about Malaysia’s modernity, progress, and ongoing development.

Moreover, as noted above, the government has used specific rhetorical devices to encourage support for its programs and policies. For example, it has applied the theme of a race to promote and justify the necessity of building the MSC. Since “[i]ssues of growth and state legitimacy in Malaysia are... commonly situated around the ‘dysfunctional’ politics of ethnicity,” the government has also called upon the need for “domestic harmony” as a means of maintaining the status quo (Hilley 21). As Transport Minister Ling Liong Sik commented, “all sensitive issues must not be discussed or ‘overplayed’ in the open to safeguard the country’s unity, peace and harmony” (qtd. in N. Fernandez).

Although these consensus-building mechanisms are often effective, the government also employs a wide range of coercive measures to guarantee compliance with its authority and to silence any form of dissent, including criticisms of myths related to technology and progress.

VI. Coercive Measures to Keep the Myth of Modernity, Progress, and Development Alive

The following quote from Mahathir demonstrates how the government is willing to use more forceful techniques to maintain the status quo:

[S]ome in Malaysia are not happy that the country is peaceful and the economy is doing well... They hanker after turmoil and violence, injury and death even... They are not prepared to wait for general elections but wish to grab power illegitimately... it is well-known that certain individuals wish to see the Malaysian Government fall through street violence. They had intimated this to their foreign sympathisers. But this Government will not hesitate to enforce Malaysian laws even if we will be condemned by the foreign media and certain foreign quarters... having foreign friends to back their illegal acts will not save them from the full force of Malaysian laws.

(“Third Outline”)

As this quote clearly indicates, Malaysia’s political and judicial system does not tolerate dissent or activities which operate outside the government’s “acceptable boundaries of ‘democratic participation’” (Hilley, Malaysia 128). In 1998 - 1999,

Mahathir demonstrated the full force of this system by arresting and imprisoning his former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim.

A. The Anwar Affair and On-Line Media

Prior to 1997, Mahathir openly suggested that Anwar Ibrahim would most likely replace him as the next Prime Minister of Malaysia. However, when Anwar began calling attention to cases of government political patronage, Mahathir's endorsement started to wane. Then, during the Asian financial crisis, Anwar chose *not* to criticize international traders and speculators (though he did note that the international currency system was in need of reform) (Sheridan 104-07).¹⁵⁵ As Anwar's approach to the crisis differed significantly from that of Mahathir's, it marked the beginning of a very public division between the two men. By mid-way through 1997, supporters of Mahathir were actively campaigning "to undermine Anwar through the circulation of a series of letters accusing him of sexual indiscretions" (Europa 2611). The following September (1998), Anwar was arrested under the Internal Security Act on charges of corruption and sodomy. In reaction to his arrest and subsequent imprisonment, which many believe was politically motivated and based on fallacious claims, demonstrations and protests against

¹⁵⁵ It is important to note that although Anwar's plight has been embraced by a wide range of academics, human rights activists, members of opposition parties, critics of Mahathir, etc., for most of his time in office, Anwar had openly supported the Prime Minister. "For years Anwar's refrain had been: 'There is no policy difference between myself and Mahathir'; 'I support the PM'; 'He is like a father.' Now the 'true picture' had been revealed, was it not pertinent to ask why Anwar had, effectively, misled the Malaysian public?" (Hilley 108).

Mahathir's regime erupted throughout Malaysia.¹⁵⁶ These activities, which became associated with the Reformasi (reform) movement¹⁵⁷ that Anwar had started while in office¹⁵⁸, quickly gained support from international human rights agencies and governments (even causing UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan to urge "the Malaysian Government to ensure humane treatment for Anwar") (Europa 2611).¹⁵⁹ In addition, members of the MSC's International Advisory Panel, most notably Kenichi Ohmae and Alvin Toffler, quit the panel in protest of Anwar's treatment.

At home, Mahathir and the government responded to the Reformasi movement by expelling approximately "four hundred known Anwar sympathisers" from UMNO and severely restricting civil assemblies and the activities of opposition parties (Hilley, Malaysia 110). The government also intensified its use of the Internal Security Act, Official Secrets Act, Defamation Act, and Printing Presses and Publications Act (all of which are discussed below). Despite the government's clamp down, there was a real sense that democracy in Malaysia was starting to shift in the aftermath of the Anwar affair. Increasingly, citizens were questioning the actions of their government and Prime Minister, some believing that "Mahathir had transgressed Malay cultural sensitivities by seeking to shame and humiliate Anwar" (Hilley, Malaysia 110). In addition, readership of electronic newspapers jumped dramatically after Anwar's imprisonment, indicating that citizens wanted

¹⁵⁶ See Sabri Zain's Face Off: A Malaysian Reformasi Diary (1998-99) for a comprehensive, albeit rather facetious, account of the events surrounding Anwar's detention and the subsequent civil unrest in Kuala Lumpur.

¹⁵⁷ Of note, ethnicity is "not the sole decisive factor in determining the participation or level of involvement of citizens in the *Reformasi*" movement (Heryanto and Mandal 9). In fact, during field research, I met Malay, Chinese, and Indian supporters of the movement.

¹⁵⁸ The word Reformasi was originally used in Indonesia by citizens demanding a change in the Suharto government. The term was then introduced into Malaysia in mid-1998 "when political turmoil was near it speak in Indonesia – in reference to calls for greater transparency in government" and structural change (Heryanto and Mandal 7).

information and opinions from news sources not directly linked to the government (Anuar 163-64; Hilley, Malaysia 170-72; Gan Personal interview; McDaniel 13-17). As Dinesh Nair, a self-proclaimed hacker and Malaysian ICT-consultant explains, “the Anwar event was a catalyst for a revolution of unofficial and grassroots political view-points. What it did do was to cement the Web as a medium of information and idea exchange outside of previously accepted mediums... For the first time, Malaysians are beginning to see two sides of the story” (qtd. in Lim 11). Some of the more popular on-line news sources now include Aliran.com, thefreemedia.com, the Sangkancil mailing list, Mahazalim.net, and Malaysiakini.com.

Launched in 1999 with the help of a US \$100,000 (\$134,000 CDN) grant from the South East Asian Press Alliance, Malaysiakini has become one of the country’s most popular websites, receiving a reported 100,000 hits a day (Gan Personal interview). According to the paper’s editor, Steven Gan, Malaysiakini discusses the social, political, and economic issues that other Malaysian media do not, or cannot, publish (Personal interview).¹⁶⁰ The paper also provides a media outlet for opposition parties that would otherwise receive little air time or press coverage from the mainstream media. Not surprisingly, then, the paper has been involved in numerous confrontations with government authorities over material printed on its website. These incidents led Gan to remark in 2001 that, “I think the government can shut us down anytime... They can come into our office and take all our computers. We are prepared for that eventuality” (Interview PBS). Therefore, as

¹⁵⁹ Annan’s comments were most likely made in reference to widespread reports that Anwar was beaten while in police custody, an accusation that the Malaysian government continues to deny.

¹⁶⁰ This is not to suggest that Malaysiakini is without its own biases. In fact, some may view the paper’s reporting as overly critical of government programs and policies. Nevertheless, in 2000

a precaution, the paper's computer server is located in the United States to keep it at arm's length from the local authorities.

However, on January 20th 2003, the police did in fact raid the paper's office (located in a neighbourhood of Kuala Lumpur) and confiscated all of its computers. The reason for the raid: "a complaint issued by the youth wing of Malaysia's ruling party, Umno, over a letter carried by Malaysiakini which criticised the government's preferential treatment of ethnic Malays" ("Malaysian Police"). Although the computers were eventually returned, the paper reported a significant drop in readership immediately following the incident, which Gan attributes to citizens fearing that local authorities continue to monitor the website. The raid also raises some serious concerns about the government's promise not to censor the Internet. Moreover, it illustrates that when dissenting points of view can be neither marginalized, nor absorbed through hegemonic measures, then the government is willing to take more coercive measures to maintain control. However, the strongest weapon in the government's coercive arsenal is the Internal Security Act, the act under which Anwar continues to be detained.

B. Internal Security Act (ISA)

As argued in Chapter 2, when North American citizens challenge myths sanctioned by their governments, they are often subject to the "criminalization of dissent." Protesters and demonstrators, for example, are often characterized as

Steven Gan received a prestigious International Press Freedom Award, and in 2001 the paper won the Free Media Pioneer Award, which is granted by the International Press Institute (McDaniel 174).

outside the norm, irrational, and even unpatriotic. The mainstream media can play a central role in this process of marginalization by, for instance, only reporting the more sensationalist aspects of civil movements (e.g., the violent acts of a handful of protesters at an otherwise peaceful demonstration) (Giuffo). However, similar acts of dissent against government-sanctioned myths in Malaysia can carry far greater consequences. Of greatest concern is the Malaysian government's use of the Internal Security Act (ISA).

Created in 1960 by the former Deputy Prime Minister and Home Minister, Tun Razak, the ISA was designed to quell violent communist uprisings in the post-independence era. The act has an extremely broad mandate: "To provide for the internal security of Malaysia, preventive detention, the prevention of subversion, the suppression of organized violence against persons and property in specified areas of Malaysia, and for matters incidental thereto" (Faruqui and Ramanathan 208). The act also prohibits the printing or selling of a document or publication that "(a) contains any incitement to violence; (b) counsels disobedience to the law or to any unlawful order; (c) is calculated or likely to lead to a breach of the peace, or to promote feelings of hostility between different races or classes of the population; or (d) is prejudicial to the national interest, public order, or security of Malaysia" (Faruqui and Ramanathan 216).

Although Tun Razak "gave the assurance that the ISA would be used with the utmost care so as to avoid... abuse... more than 20,000 people had been detained during the period 1960 to 1990 under the ISA for diverse reasons which have nothing to do with communist subversion" (Thomas). Consequently, human rights

organizations are concerned that 1) the act's mandate is too broad and open to multiple and subjective interpretations; and 2) it gives sweeping unchecked powers to the Executive, the Minister of Home Affairs, as well as to the Malaysian police. As Khoo Boo Teik argues, these powers have been used to target "a widening range of non-communist opponents of the state, including peasant, labour and student leaders, academicians and educationists, social activists, and dissident Islamic groupings, as well as suspected criminals whom the state could not successfully prosecute for want of sufficient evidence ("Nationalism" 59). As a case in point, in October 1987, 107 Malaysians, including "opposition leaders, intellectuals, activists from social movements, religious leaders, and Chinese education movement leaders," were detained without trial under the ISA for a variety of actions that the Minister of Home Affairs considered "prejudicial to national security" (Suaram). When Malaysia's best-selling English newspaper, The Star, published headshots of those arrested, its actions were also deemed "prejudicial to national interest," causing the paper to lose its printing license for a period of five months. Referred to as Operasi Lallang, the arrests (and suppression of the media) demonstrated to Malaysians the lengths the government was willing to go to control dissent (Heryanto and Mandal 6-7).

Critics of the ISA are particularly troubled by the act's renewable two-year detainment periods. According to Section 8(7) of the act, a person can be arrested and detained for up to sixty days, after which time the Minister of Home Affairs can order further detainment for up to two years. However, the minister can then renew this two-year sentence indefinitely without specific cause or justification (Faruqui

and Ramanathan 211). When questioned about the ISA in a CNN interview, Mahathir justified its strict measures by stating that, “[w]e arrest people [under the ISA] because we want to know what they were doing, and we have to rehabilitate them. And these people, when they were arrested, not only confessed, they actually boasted about their plans to overthrow the government by force of arms” (Mahathir, CNN interview).¹⁶¹

Mahathir has responded to other foreign, particularly Western, accusations concerning the ISA and allegations of human rights abuses by 1) denying them; 2) justifying the need for strict laws as a means of maintaining civil order (especially with the threat of re-colonization looming); 3) referencing the purported differences between “Western” and “Asian” values / conceptions of “democracy”;¹⁶² and 4) going on the offensive, accusing Western countries of committing their own human rights abuses. For example, in a speech given at the 2003 Summit Meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Mahathir remarked that,

[T]he poor are always being told that they lack transparency and good governance, they don't respect human rights, they don't uphold freedom of speech, freedom of the press and so on and so forth, when in fact it is the rich who lack transparency, who do not respect human rights, who curb our rights to speak the truth about what they are

¹⁶¹ Of note, in addition to its use of laws such as the ISA, the Malaysian government has not signed or ratified any of the following international human rights conventions and treaties: International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination, International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNDP, *Human Development Report* 332).

¹⁶² Also, in retaliation to foreign criticisms of his long-standing stint as Prime Minister and the tendency of “developing” countries to have one single party dominating the political landscape, Mahathir has stated that he sees “little virtue in the Western-style ‘two-party system’” (Teik, “Nationalism” 65).

doing, who use their media to hide their misdeeds and spread lies.

(“Inaugural”)

Echoing Mahathir’s sentiments, but directing his recrimination specifically at the United States, the Malaysian Minister for Youth and Sports asked, “[g]iven the fact that the US has its own share of significant human rights abuses, may I ask on what basis does the world’s only superpower believe it has the moral authority to judge other countries like Malaysia?” (qtd. in Begum). Furthermore, Mahathir has often,

exposed contradictions in the West's policies on human rights in Asia, especially concerning China and Bosnia: ‘on the one hand, non-Western governments are threatened because of some minor breach of human rights; on the other hand, when Western interests are not at stake, they are prepared to allow the most brutal violation of human rights to take place before their very eyes.’ (qtd. in Verma)

It is important to note, however, that Mahathir and other government officials have clarified on a number of occasions that their criticism is directed towards the foreign policies and media institutions of the Western world, not necessarily the citizens living therein. For example, in regards to the recent “war on terrorism,” Mahathir remarked that many citizens in the Western world “are also sick of war. They have come out in their millions to protest the warlike policies of their leaders... we have allies in the North” (“Inaugural”).

C. Controlling Public Discourse and Silencing Dissent: The Malaysian Media

In addition to using the threat of the Internal Security Act to prevent and silence dissent, the Malaysian government also uses the mass media and educational institutions to control public discourse. By using the threat of coercive reprisal against members of these two institutions, the government can, in large part, control how they define the myth of modernity, progress, and development and ensure that government programs and policies (e.g., the MSC) are promoted as being invaluable to Malaysia's ongoing development. Moreover, any setbacks in the implementation of its programs or policies are expected to be absent from public discourse. With the constant threat of coercive castigation, members of media and educational institutions therefore often prefer to remain silent about a project like the MSC rather than comment on any of its shortcomings.

Alternative (primarily on-line) media, on the other hand, have openly criticized the MSC, referring to it as Mahathir's "white elephant" and a high-end real estate venture only of benefit to the political and economic elite. As mentioned in Chapter 6, these critics are not necessarily against the idea of building a Silicon Imitator. They have, however, taken issue with the lack of public consultation concerning the project, the government's top-down control over its development, and the expense of its (ongoing) construction. Recognizing that it cannot always absorb these criticisms, the government has instead tried to marginalize them, often through the use of more coercive measures, including the threat of legal action, use of the ISA, or, as in the case of Malaysiakini, confiscating their property.

Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that “Everyone has the right to the freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (“Article 19”). In accordance with the declaration, Prime Minister Mahathir has stated that it is “morally wrong for governments to control the media” (F. Fernandez). This democratic sentiment is enshrined in Article 10 (1) of Malaysia’s Federal Constitution: “a. Every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression; b. All citizens have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms; c. All citizens have the right to form associations” (B. Singh).

At the same time, however, the government believes that the media require constant monitoring for fear that they might instigate or exacerbate internal conflicts and threaten Malaysia’s plans for development. As Prime Minister Badawi explains, strict laws are necessary to ensure that the media do not become “irresponsible” and “undermine public order, internal security and national prosperity” (“Printing Act”). Instead of playing an adversarial, watchdog role, the media are expected to encourage greater development by educating Malaysians, fostering domestic harmony and nationalism, and promoting the benefits of using new ICTs. In other words, the media are supposed to be “committed to ‘national development’” and “give their undivided support to the government by publishing ‘positive news’ about the government and its development policies and projects. In other words, ‘bad news’ and criticisms of the government are inimical to national development and, in

some cases, harmful to ‘national interests’ (Anuar 148-49). As discussed in Chapter 6, Amartya Sen argues that this “media as development” hypothesis is common throughout the developing world, as elites chose to place economic development before political freedoms, despite the fact that these represent false alternatives.

To ensure that the media do, in fact, practice responsible development journalism, the government has employed three methods of controlling their actions. These methods include 1) laws that directly impact the media’s freedom of speech and expression; 2) threats of legal action (e.g., defamation suits); and 3) direct and indirect control or ownership of the media. As such, this next section begins with an overview of the laws most relevant to Malaysian media, including the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Broadcasting Act, Sedition Act, Defamation Act, Official Secrets Act, and the Communications and Multimedia Act (as well as the including the Internal Security Act, discussed above).

1. *The Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) / Broadcasting Act.*

Established in 1984 and amended in 1987, the PPPA requires all publishers in Malaysia to obtain an annual operating license from the government. However, the Minister for Home Affairs has the authority to revoke these licenses if, as Part V, Section 7 (1) of the act states, an individual or organization publishes something that “is in any manner prejudicial to or likely to be prejudicial to public order, morality, security, the relationship with any foreign country or government, or which is likely to alarm public opinion... prejudicial to or is likely to be prejudicial to public interest or national interest” (Faruqui and Ramanathan 285). Moreover, this decision

“shall be final and shall not be called in question by any court on any ground whatsoever”, which means that an individual or organization charged under this act does not have a method of recourse to challenge the charges (Part V, section 13A (1)) (Faruqui and Ramanathan 289). Free press advocates argue that the reasons for license revocations are extremely vague and subjective (e.g., “prejudicial to public is, once again, open to multiple interpretations). Also, Section 8A (2) of the act prohibits the publication of “false news.” Yet, there is no clear definition of what the government considers to be the difference between “true” and “false” information.

In like manner to the PPPA, the 1988 Broadcasting Act requires radio and television stations to also annually renew their licenses, and makes them subject to many of the same stipulations as their printing counterparts. Of particular concern, the act states that, “It shall be the duty of the licensee to ensure that the broadcasting matter by him *complies with the direction given, from time to time, by the minister [of information]*” (Nain 129). Together, these two acts have helped fuel an environment of self-censorship in Malaysia, as journalists, activists, academics, and media institutions are cognizant of the fact that at any time they may be fined, lose their business / livelihood, or even be imprisoned, if they publish news or information the government deems to be prejudicial or “false.”

2. *Sedition Act.* Originally established by the British and later amended by an Emergency Ordinance following the race riots of 1969, Malaysia’s Sedition Act finds it illegal to promote “feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or

classes of the population of Malaysia” (Section 3 (1) e). It also considers any violation of Article 10 (4) of the Federal Constitution an act of sedition. This Article prohibits, among other things, “the questioning of a number of matters which are deemed to be ‘sensitive’ in the Malaysia body politic. These matters are right to citizenship, status of the Malay language, position and privileges of the Malays” (Faruqui and Ramanathan 3). However, each case of seditious tendency is assessed on an individual basis, and is done so without a consistent definition of what the government considers to be “sensitive.” As a case in point, in January 2000, the editor and printer of the PAS newspaper Harakah were charged with sedition “in connection with an article concerning the trial of Anwar that reportedly included a quote accusing the authorities of conspiring against him” (Europa 2613). Critics perceived the government’s actions as an attempt “to curb the influence of the PAS following the party’s strong performance in the general election” (Europa 2613). Two months later, the government restricted the publication frequency of the paper to only twice a month, instead of twice weekly, and ordered that sales of the newspaper could only be made to PAS members.

3. *Defamation Act.* Although Malaysia’s Defamation Act is similar in nature to those of many other countries, since the mid-1990s, Malaysia has seen a significant increase in the number of defamation suits involving extraordinary sums of money. Many of these suits have been brought against journalists, editors, and owners of local media institutions. One of the best-known suits to date was filed by businessman Vincent Tan against freelance journalist M.G.G. Pillai. Tan accused

Pillai of making libellous remarks about his character in the Malaysian Industry magazine. The suit, worth a staggering 7 million Ringgit (approximately \$2.5 million CDN), has played an important role in the media's discernible shift towards greater self-censorship (and, as of April 2004, remains unsettled).

4. *Official Secrets Act (OSA)*. Established in 1972, this act essentially prohibits the release or publications of all “official secrets” (e.g. information of national security) “without prior authorizations from the government” (Faruqui and Ramanathan 46). However, it is illegal for a journalist to publish secretive material even if someone in the government provided him or her with the information. Moreover, it is not always clear what the government deems to be “secretive.” When combined with a 1986 amendment to the act that threatens a one to five year jail term for “any one found guilty of violating the law,” this lack of clear demarcations has caused journalists to err on the side of caution in their reporting (Safar, Sarji, and Gunaratne 326).

5. *The Communications and Multimedia Act (CMA)*. Established in 1998, this act falls under the purview of MECM and is meant to fill in any policy gaps that may have occurred with the rise of multimedia and new forms of ICTs. The act regulates traditional broadcasting and telecommunication services, as well as computer networks, and all of the content carried over these systems. To help administer the act, the MECM created the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). The commission is the sole regulatory authority for the

country's converging communications and multimedia industries and is responsible for the system of Universal Service Provision, mentioned earlier in this chapter (Lim and Osman; 1999 Annual).¹⁶³

6. *Self-censorship and Ownership Patterns.* The government has justified its use of the media laws described above by arguing the necessity of political stability for economic growth and overall development. As Mahathir contends, if “we give unlimited press freedom, there will be these so-called liberals who think they can tell lies, fabricate stories, do what they like and go unpunished” (qtd. in Loong). The power of these laws lies specifically in their ability to encourage self-censorship as journalists, editors, and media owners, “[f]eeling that potential controversies are not worth the risk... tend to avoid troublesome topics, even when the resulting coverage is likely to be within bounds of acceptability” (McDaniel 175; Gomez and Jomo; Gomez “Politics”).

In addition, most of the media in Malaysia are either directly or indirectly owned by the government or by close government supporters (Anuar; Keong; Nain; Saravanamuttu; Shameen). In particular, members of the BN coalition own majority stakes in most of the mainstream newspapers (e.g., New Straits Times, Utusan Malaysia, and Berita Harian). The best-selling English newspaper, The Star, for example, is part of an investment holding company of the Malaysian Chinese Association party (MCA), while the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) controls most of the country's major Tamil-language dailies (Anuar 148). Radio and television are

¹⁶³ “On 1 November 2001, the MCMC “also took over regulation of the Postal Industry and was appointed the Certifying Agency pursuant to the Digital Signature Act (1997)” (Malaysia About

subject to the same controls as Malaysia's "two main national channels (TV 1 and 2) and two main private channels (TV3 and NTV7)" have direct connections back to the BN coalition (Saravanamuttu). As McDaniel notes, "[i]t is important not to make too much of the diversification that media privatization produced. Although TV3 [for example] had private ownership, the station's franchise was awarded to business interests having close ties to UMNO" (38).

When combined with laws that produce an environment of self-censorship via the threat of coercive reprisals, the government's direct and indirect ownership of media institutions reveals a serious lack of independent, free press in Malaysia. In fact, in 2002, Malaysia ranked 110th out of 139 countries in the "Reporters Without Borders" Press Freedom Index.¹⁶⁴ The result is that the mainstream media tend to provide mostly complimentary and uncritical coverage of the government, its policies and programs. Therefore, the government can ensure that its version of the myth of modernity, progress, and development (e.g., the central role that the MSC plays in producing economic and social development for all Malaysians) remains a part of mainstream public discourse, while alternative versions are left out.

In addition to controlling domestic media sources, foreign media are subject to the Control of Imported Publications Act, which bans or censors "any imported publication deemed prejudicial to public order, national interest, morality, or security" (Nain 126). As a result, magazines such as Asiaweek and Far Eastern Economic Review "are constantly monitored, with the occasional edition being banned or castigated" (Nain 126).

Us).

¹⁶⁴ The nation with the freest press is ranked number one.

7. *Absolute Control of the Media?* Notwithstanding the laws described above and the government's political and economic power over the media, it is important to recognize that its control is not absolute. First, as mentioned, there are a number of critical on-line newspapers which, despite run-ins with the police and threats or coercive reprisals, still manage to challenge the government's media monopoly. Second, in interviewing journalists and editors from mainstream media institutions, it became very clear that although these individuals were aware of the government's constraints, they wanted to push the boundaries of "acceptable" reporting without jeopardizing themselves or their employers. Therefore, media personnel in Malaysia should not be viewed as a homogeneous, passive group unwittingly toeing the party line. John Hilley concurs: "Media production in Malaysia is of a more subtle nature than that generally allowed for... this is not to negate the particular institutional controls within the Malaysian media, but to acknowledge the hegemonic interactions and conflicts" operating with the system (Malaysia 168).

Third, it is also important to recognize that Malaysian audiences do not passively accept all of the messages produced by the domestic mainstream media. As the rise in on-line readership following the Anwar affair clearly demonstrates, Malaysian audience members are more active in their consumption of media products than they are often given credit for. This, again, does not negate the fact that strict media laws play a central role in maintaining the political and economic status quo. But, it would, as Zaharom Nain remarks, "be rather premature to assert that media audiences are simply duped into accepting at face value what is produced

by the controlled media” (132). However, a distinction must also be made between an active audience member and a powerful one. As David Morley argues, there is a difference between “having power over a text and having power over the agenda within which the text is constructed and presented” (qtd. in Nain 134). In the Malaysian situation, the government is clearly the one to set the agenda. In addition, as the following section on Malaysia’s educational system demonstrates, the general environment in the country discourages critical analysis of media products. As Nain notes, all of Malaysia’s primary institutions “preach... conformity, where alternative explanations are constantly being curbed, and where the dominant religious / value system is profoundly conservative” (135).¹⁶⁵

D. Controlling Public Discourse and Silencing Dissent: Educational Institutions

In like manner to members of the media community, staff and students of educational institutions are also under a significant amount of pressure to support the government, its programs and policies. The Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA, Act 30, 1971), for example, prohibits students at any publicly funded educational institution from joining a protest or demonstration, or from signing any type of petition. Students are also forbidden to,

in any manner associate with, any society, political party, trade union
or any other organisation, body or group of persons whatsoever,
whether or not it is established under any law, whether it is in the

¹⁶⁵ Unfortunately, there has been very little research conducted on media audiences in Malaysia to date. The research that is available tends to operate within the effects model paradigm,

University or outside the University, and whether it is in Malaysia *or outside Malaysia*, except as may be provided by or under the Constitution, or except as may be approved in advance in writing by the Vice-Chancellor. (Universities 9, emphasis added)¹⁶⁶

In defence of this law, Mahathir has explained that students “do not need a university education to hold demonstrations and protests. If they want to take part in such activities, they should give up their places at the university to others who are really interested in pursuing their education” (Abdullah and Bangkuai). In 1979, the UUCA was amended to bar academic staff from holding an political or from “making press statements without the permission of the university vice-chancellor. They are also not allowed to publicly question university policy or speak on political platforms” (Netto “Academics”). As the Deputy Director General of the Education Ministry explained in defence of the act, “teachers are paid to teach and not to get involved in activities such as inciting the pupils against the Government. If they still want to join politics, then they must get our permission first... How can they do a good job if they are involved? The quality of education will be at stake if teachers choose to be involved” (“Malaysia: Human”).

In 1997, the government used the UUCA amendment to silence an academic who had spoken to the press regarding the health implications of a large-scale haze infiltrating Malaysia from forests burning out of control in the Indonesian states of Kalimantan and Sumatra (to the east and west of Malaysia, respectively). The haze had seriously damaged Malaysia’s tourism business and strained relations with

rather than within the broad field of reception studies (Nain 132-33).

Indonesia. The academic's health warnings were seen to only exacerbate the situation and, as a result, the government introduced "a general gag order forbidding academics from speaking to the press" (Netto "Academics").

In May 2002, additional measures were introduced into post-secondary institutions to ensure that the government's authority, and its programs and policies, would not be challenged within the educational system. Staff and students were required to sign a Pledge of Loyalty, declaring their allegiance to king, country, and government (Europa 2614; Omar). In signing the pledge, these individuals also promised to be loyal to "circulars and circular letters, regulations and orders issued by the Government from time to time [e.g., refraining from talking to the press] throughout the period of [their] service to the Government" (Omar). USM has defended its use of the pledge by arguing that it helps "curb" students from becoming involved "in anti-establishment activities" ("23,000").

The restraints that have been placed on academic freedom of speech, expression, and assembly described above, combined with the corporatization and privatization of curriculum and research described earlier in this chapter, have produced two serious outcomes. First, the government has the agenda-setting power to circulate *and maintain* its version of the myth of modernity, progress, and development. More importantly, it can ensure that alternative versions of the myth are left out of educational discourse.

Second, these restraints have placed critical thinking in a perilous situation. For decades, the Malaysian government has tried to "tame its universities and has

¹⁶⁶ According to Amnesty International, the Malaysian government has "called for the monitoring of activities of Malaysian students abroad, creating a climate of fear extending beyond the

stressed political peace and quiet over academic freedom of excellence” (Silverman 24). In so doing, it has suppressed dissent and diversity, and in their place bred docility and self-censorship (S. Ismail; Omar). As a result, students’ ability and latitude to critically assess and challenge myths associated with, for example, the MSC, ICT-related programs and policies, and Malaysia’s development objectives in general, are significantly diminished. As Zaharom Nain and Mustafa K. Anuar contend, “stimulating creativity, critical thinking and a well-rounded character... very much depend upon the social, political, economic and cultural environment in which students live. In other words, a liberal environment, where freedom to think and express oneself is cherished, is certainly more crucial to the success of the endeavor than is information technology itself.” Moreover, in an environment of self-censorship academic staff are also restricted from critically examining if, and how, the government’s programs and policies actually translate into economic and social development for the majority of Malaysian society.

Concerns have also been raised that a deferential and restrictive educational system is unable to produce the kind of critical thinking workforce necessary to support the MSC or, for that matter, a high-tech sector capable of competing on an international scale. As one observer argues, “as long as this issue of qualitative education reforms and greater political and academic freedom is not addressed, Malaysia will remain stuck in the middle of a transition from a developing nation (with a low-end assembly-based economy) to a more research-based developed nation (with a higher value-added economy)” (Netto “Malaysia in Transition”).

boundaries of the country” (“Malaysia: Students”).

Despite the government's control of educational institutions, as well as the private sector's influence on research projects and curriculum, there remains a considerable cadre of Malaysian academics who produce critical research regarding government activities (including methods used to control public discourse about the myth of modernity, progress, and development). These academics include, but certainly are not limited to, Syed Hussein Alatas, Mustafa K. Anuar, Noor Bathi Badarudin, Edmund Terence Gomez, Saliha Hassan, Chan Chee Khoo, Jomo K.S., Molly Lee, Francis Loh, Maznah Mohamad, Anne Munro-Kua, M. Bakri Musa, Chandra Muzaffar, Zahrom Nain, Cecilia Ng, Farish Noor, Subramanian Pillay, and Johan Saravanamuttu. Nevertheless, these academics must live and work in an environment in which their actions are monitored by the government. For example, according to the human rights organization Suaram (Suara Rakyat Malaysia), in 2001, the Penang State government identified forty-four academic staff members at USM who had allegedly incited hatred of the government. The majority of these individuals are thought to still be under federal surveillance (Netto Personal interview). In addition, the government has tried to marginalize them through other mechanisms – some academics have lost their jobs, others have been passed over for promotions, or turned down for academic grants.

VII. Returning to Mahathirism

With his emphasis on the *longue durée*, Fernand Braudel argued that in order to understand contemporary social, political, and economic phenomena, we must be

willing to take a journey back in time, recognizing and appreciating slow-moving, less event-oriented, and “obvious” histories. Although I have tried to steer clear of the ahistoricism that, in Chapter 3, I criticized other scholars for adopting, the historical context provided in Chapter 5 tends towards the obvious events in Malaysia’s recent history. Nevertheless, this historical context is useful for understanding why the Malaysian government chose to construct the MSC, and the role that it, and ICTs in general, have played in the development and maintenance of Malaysia’s myth of modernity, progress, and development.

Braudel, and his colleagues from the Annales School, also argued against the use of political history; one that is segmented and defined according to the activities of (in)famous leaders.¹⁶⁷ I have, quite clearly, departed from this perspective and instead chosen to focus quite extensively on the words and actions of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. For, I believe that Mahathir has played a central role in developing the myth of modernity, progress, and development, in shaping Malaysia’s social, political, economic, *and physical* landscape, and in, of course, building the MSC.

In writing about Mahathirism, I have tried to paint the man and his politics in an honest light. I believe that Mahathir sincerely wants Malaysia to be a prosperous, multicultural, stable country. However, “his out-of-date tactics are working against his vision. He broadens ethnic divides by raising the bogey of ambitious Chinese seeking to challenge the Malay birthright. And he alienates the Malay masses by dividing up the nation’s wealth among his businessmen friends” (Cordingley 25). In

addition, he has used coercive measures to ensure that Malaysians live, work, and play according to his rules, and that perspectives which run counter to his own are excluded from mainstream public discourse. As a critic of Mahathir's government contends, "Malaysia wants progress... innovation, world-class technology, and modern approaches to business. It also wants an end to dissent on how it achieves this progress. The government quickly moves to quench the wick of any new candle that throws light on the new clothes they are selling to the world" (Rashid). In retaliation, domestic and international human rights organizations have accused Mahathir of repressing basic civic freedoms of speech, press, expression, and assembly. As Malaysian academic Saliha Hassan contends, the government's coercive measures "regulate, monitor, depoliticize and if necessary, eliminate critics of government, especially since their opposition is regarded as a disruption of established political and development agendas" (201).

At the same time, however, Mahathir substantially improved Malaysia's overall standard of living during his tenure in office. Under his leadership, the country shifted from a predominantly agricultural economy based on tin, rubber, and palm oil products, to one based on manufacturing and new technology / electronics exports. Yet, in spite of Mahathir's symbolic language of economic autonomy, Malaysia's export-oriented economy is heavily reliant on foreign direct investment (especially from the West), as well as the presence of transnational companies in its EPZs (particularly in Penang and the MSC). As a result, Mahathir maintained

¹⁶⁷ However, Braudel also maintained that "history is the total of all possible histories – an assemblage of professions and points of view, from yesterday, today, and tomorrow" (34), which would thus seem to provide room for the inclusion of a political history.

relatively friendly relations with Western-based companies (e.g. through the MSC's Bill of Guarantees), if not always their governments (Teik Paradoxes).

Mahathir also recognized that in order to be a player in the global economy he needed to (for the most part) play by the rules of international financial institutions, even if their policies have not always been in Malaysia's best interest. At the same time, however, he has also been willing to raise the ire of these same institutions; e.g., his post-crisis currency controls and public condemnation of Western financial speculators. He has also blasted the economic, political, and social policies of Western governments and international organizations (which he contends are Western-led), openly accusing them of trying to maintain the underdevelopment of the developing world.¹⁶⁸ For example, just days before his retirement, Mahathir remarked that, in like manner to the "World Bank and the IMF (International Monetary Fund), the WTO is now being made into yet another instrument to enrich the rich and impoverish the poor" (qtd. in "Mahathir Attacks"). This kind of public remonstrance has earned Mahathir the reputation of a fearless proponent on behalf of the developing world. However, as I argued in Chapter 6, at the same time that Mahathir was condemning the neo-liberal economic practices of Western countries, he quite willingly initiated similar policies in his own country. As a result, even though the Malaysian economy improved substantially under his leadership, the gap between the affluent and the masses in the country did not diminish.

¹⁶⁸ However, many countries throughout the world thought that Mahathir crossed the line when, in a speech given to international Muslim leaders in October 2003, he "called on Muslims to use brains as well as brawn to fight Jews who, he said, 'rule the world by proxy'" ("Malaysia Defends").

Although I have dedicated a significant amount of attention to Mahathir's words and actions, I have not tried to provide an in-depth analysis of Mahathir as an individual, or of Mahathirism as a political entity. Numerous other authors, including Edmund Terence Gomez and Jomo K.S., John Hilley, R.S. Milne and Diane Mauzy, Khoo Boo Teik, offer a more comprehensive look into the man and his politics. Of particular note, Ian Stewart's The Mahathir Legacy: A Nation Divided, a Region at Risk offers an insightful look into the history of Mahathir's tenure as Prime Minister, particularly the shifting relationship between Mahathir and Anwar. Also, Bridget Welsh's edited book, Reflections: The Mahathir Years includes an impressive collection of articles that covers a wide range of issues related to Mahathirism. Nevertheless, these last three chapters on Malaysia and its myth of modernity, progress, and development offer some insight into the contradictions and complexities inherent within Mahathirism. As Malaysian academic Khoo Boo Teik remarks, over the course of more than two decades in power, Mahathir employed a combination of "nationalism, capitalism, Islam, populism and authoritarianism" in order to maintain control and remain in power. "In each of these there were contradictions. Among them were many tensions. But over the years, the co-existence of these components of Mahathirism gained Mahathir an effective appeal" ("De-Mahathirising").

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: COMPARING MYTHS OF TECHNOLOGY AND PROGRESS

The aim of this dissertation has been to explore how technological progress is expected to beget progress writ large. I have referred to this myth as the “myth of progress” in a Western context, and the “myth of modernity, progress, and development” in the developing, or newly industrializing country of Malaysia. In this concluding chapter, I will explain my reasons for making this distinction through a comparison of 1) the content of each of these myths; and 2) methods used to keep them alive in their respective locales. In the second half of the chapter, I will discuss how my research, particularly in regards to Malaysian myths of technology and progress, contributes to the field of communication. In addition, I will comment on a number of specific issues raised in the dissertation that may provide the basis for additional research in the future. First, however, I will provide a brief overview of the dissertation, beginning with Chapter 2, “Myth and its Makers.”

I. Overview of the Dissertation

This second chapter of the dissertation opened with a discussion of the etymological roots of “myth,” followed by an overview of a variety of theoretical approaches to the study of myth. Within this discussion, I argued that myths should not be viewed as untrue or irrational stories belonging to people of the past or of

another culture. Rather, I maintained that myths should be considered as either alive, meaning they have relevance to a given society, culture, or group, or are dead, and therefore no longer in circulation. Consequently, I explored a number of consensus-building techniques used by the elite to ensure the longevity of myths that are in its best interest. Particular attention was paid to how myths are made to appear as rational, unmotivated “truths” while, at the same time, are used to tap into people’s emotions and desires.

In Chapter 3, I turned to discuss a Western “myth of progress.” Arguing that historical precedents provide insight into contemporary phenomena, this third chapter of the dissertation opened with a description of how Enlightenment philosophers believed that improvements in science and technology would beget progress writ large. However, this modernist belief in the progressive powers of technology extended well beyond their time, as social evolutionists and subsequent modernization theorists argued that technological achievements offered physical proof that certain cultures (i.e., those found in the West) were further along a trajectory of socio-cultural development than others. Although in present day we may not share the same optimism for humanity’s future as the Enlightenment philosophers, or hold the same unquestioning belief in the progressive power of new technology, I argued that the myth of progress has not disappeared. Rather, in an era of hyper-capitalism, citizens-cum-consumers are, more than ever, encouraged to acquire the latest, fastest, and most expensive technology as a benchmark of personal / micro and societal / macro progress.

In Chapter 4 of the dissertation, I examined how myth-makers capitalize on the emotional draw of a race to garner support for micro-myths that support the myth of progress described in Chapter 3. Drawing upon various examples from Western history, I discussed how citizens are encouraged to race towards developing, acquiring, and using technology, rather than questioning the personal and societal value of doing so. Therefore, by tapping into human emotions concerning winning and losing, the elite have rationalized and naturalized myths regarding technology and progress. This discussion provided a basis for understanding how the Malaysian government has used a similar race theme to promote its micro-myth of the MSC. Together, Chapters 2, 3, and 4, offered some theoretical and practical context for 1) understanding how macro and micro-myths operate within Malaysia; and 2) performing a comparison between a Western myth of progress and a Malaysian myth of modernity, progress, and development.

Chapter 5 of the dissertation opened with an overview of Malaysia's social, political, and economic landscape to provide some context for understanding Malaysia's myth of modernity, progress, and development. In discussing this macro-myth, I explored a number of consensus-building / hegemonic techniques that the government has used to keep it (and the micro-myths that support it) alive. In particular, I examined the symbolic language of the government's Vision 2020 strategy and National Vision Policy, as well as its use of various physical structures, which I described as being concentrated primarily in the greater Kuala Lumpur region (e.g., the Petronas towers, KLIA, various edifices of Cyberjaya and

Putrajaya). I argued that while in office, Mahathir displayed considerable political savvy in his use of hegemonic methods to gain public support for these myths.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I examined some of the government's more coercive measures of promoting and controlling public discourse concerning its macro and micro-myths. In particular, I critiqued its use of the Internal Security Act, as well as its methods of stymieing dissent by controlling domestic media and educational institutions. I described how the government has justified its use of these strict measures by arguing the critical role they play in maintaining political stability as a precursor to economic development.

II. Myths in Action: The West vs. Malaysia

In this next section, I will compare and contrast the Western myth of progress with the Malaysian myth of modernity, progress, and development. In so doing, I intend to highlight key similarities and differences between these two myths in terms of 1) their content; and 2) methods used to keep them, and their supporting micro-myths, alive. My primary purpose for engaging in this comparison is to offer some insight into how each myth operates, as well as to demonstrate that neither these myths, nor the cultures that support them, are distinct from one another.

A. Content: Similarities and Differences

Clearly, the Western myth of progress and the Malaysian myth of modernity, progress, and development share a common premise – that new technology will beget progress writ large. Since, in each case, technology (broadly defined) is expected to produce a myriad of social, political, and economic benefits for all of society, both myths tend to be rather technologically determinist in nature.

Although there are some obvious similarities between the two myths, there is also a critical distinction that needs to be made between them. In the Western scenario, new and “improved” technologies can be used to demonstrate that society is successfully continuing along its trajectory of progress. However, there is little need to prove that Canada or the United States, for example, are “modern” or “developed” societies. Rather, their modernity and developed nation status are already assumed.

In a developing or newly industrializing country like Malaysia, however, the situation is a slightly different. Here, the government has actively employed various types of technology to demonstrate that the country has modernized in spite of its colonial legacy and history as a primarily agricultural economy. As discussed in Chapter 6, the Malaysian government has built a wide range of physical modernist icons to prove to itself and to the world that its country has the technological capabilities and economic prosperity that are characteristic of a developed nation. In other words, in Canada and the United States citizens are told that new ICTs represent another *step* along their path of progress, whereas Malaysians are told that

ICTs are *the* key to the country becoming a fully “developed” nation by helping them “leapfrog” over stages of development.

Moreover, although the symbolic language used by the Malaysian government suggests that being modern is wrapped up in the development, acquisition, and usage of the newest, fastest, and most efficient technology, some of the technologies promoted as “modern” in the Malaysian context are part of the “mundane infrastructure of daily life” in the West (to be noticed only if they fail to function “normally”) (Misa, “Compelling” 12). In other words, technologies that may fade into the background in the West are often at the heart of myths used to demonstrate Malaysia’s modernity and ongoing development. As an example, historian Thomas J. Misa argues that although airports use highly complex and sophisticated technology in their daily operations, the airports themselves are not usually considered symbols of “progress” in Western society (“Compelling”). In comparison, the Malaysian government has actively promoted the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) as 1) a physical icon of modernity; and 2) one of the key instruments through which Malaysia will achieve its goals of Vision 2020.

Here, then, is another key difference between the two myths. Although there are a multitude of micro-myths in the West promising that the acquisition of new technologies will beget personal and societal progress, and the positioning of current mainstream rhetoric localizes us in the midst of a technological revolution, the myth of progress has lost much of its overt, publicly demonstrative force since the Enlightenment. By comparison, for Malaysia the transformative power of new technology, particularly ICTs, is front and centre in the government’s discourse of

anticolonial nationalism, and is made central to the country's social, political, and economic future. In other words, in North America, the myth of progress is an inherent assumption, while the Malaysian myth of modernity, progress, and development is very much an acquired or extrinsic presumption. As French intellectual Régis Debray makes clear, "[t]he myth of progress continues to operate, in a latent or residual way in the North, in a driving and propulsive manner in the South" (10).

B. Promoting Myths and Keeping Them Alive: Similarities and Differences

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that within any cultural context technology can be used to further social, political, and economic development for individuals, groups, and communities. However, I have also expressed concerns regarding a determinist perspective that considers advancements in new forms of information and communication technologies as guaranteeing progress and development for all of society. Therefore, I have critiqued promises made by the Malaysian government regarding the power of new technology to beget progress writ large for all Malaysian citizens. At the same time, I have also argued that there is considerable merit in the MSC project and in the programs and policies implemented by the government to encourage widespread usage of ICTs. In fact, I would argue that Malaysia's decision to build the MSC was rather a judicious one, particularly if one takes into consideration the country's colonial history and the competitive pressures it faces in trying to procure valuable foreign direct investment.

As such, my discussion of the micro-myth of the MSC and of the macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development was not intended to be prescriptive. My objective was not to debate whether or not Malaysia should develop the MSC, promote ICTs, or view technological advancements as tools to be used for greater social, political, and economic development. Instead, my goals were to examine the macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development, as well as the micro-myth of the MSC that supports it, and to explore how these myths are communicated and kept alive in Malaysian society. As such, I did not view these myths as being either right or wrong, true or false.

Nevertheless, I highlighted the gap between 1) the government's promises concerning the power of new technology to produce progress writ large for all Malaysians; and 2) the on-the-ground impact of its ICT-oriented policies and programs. I argued that because new forms of ICTs have been introduced and integrated into an environment which is socially, politically, and economically undemocratic, potential benefits accruing from the technology's application are restricted for many segments of the Malaysian population. New forms of technology cannot, for example, produce a socially and politically engaged and egalitarian society if the larger political infrastructure in the country is fundamentally undemocratic, as demonstrated by the government's willingness to use coercive measures to ensure compliance with its authority.

However, despite these limitations, and in the face of setbacks in some of the government's ICT projects (including the MSC), myths concerning the power of new technology to substantially and positively change people's lives remain very

much alive within the Malaysian context. Consequently, I dedicated a significant amount of time to examining methods the government has employed to encourage support for these and other officially sanctioned myths. I began by discussing a wide range of consensus-building techniques used to promote, naturalize, and keep myths alive. I argued that, in like manner to the West, setbacks in technological projects are explained away by being characterized as positive learning experiences, or as caused by events outside of the elite's or technology's control. Alternatively, in both locales, setbacks are kept out of public discourse by 1) being excluded from mainstream media; and / or 2) the deliberate marginalization of any form of challenge to status quo myths. As well, in both the West and Malaysia, the elite have used the theme of a race to promote the longevity of the myths that are in their best interest. By tapping into human emotions concerning winning and losing, citizens are encouraged to support the myth or risk being "left behind" to face the ancillary repercussions.

The obvious difference between the two scenarios pivots on the Malaysian government's use of more coercive measures to ensure that certain versions of its myth are kept alive. At the same time, alternative perspectives regarding what might constitute progress and development for Malaysia (e.g., greater democratic freedoms, less government control over media and educational institutions, etc.) are silenced by being forcefully removed from most mainstream discourse. In particular, the government's use of the Internal Security Act (ISA) has raised concerns, both domestically and internationally, about Malaysia's lack of human rights and basic freedoms. Although there is, as I have noted, political resistance to

the BN / UMNO government in the form of opposition parties (Malay and non-Malay), critical academics, alternative media, and non-government organizations, it is clear that the political and economic elite are firmly in control of the country.

However, this does not mean that Malaysian government's consensus-building techniques are ineffectual. Rather, as I argued in Chapter 6 and 7, the Mahathir administration demonstrated considerable political savvy in its use of hegemonic methods to win public support for its programs and policies. As a corollary, even though methods used to encourage support for myths in the West are based primarily on consensus-building rather than coercive techniques, they too should not be viewed as ineffective. A North American reader, for example, may gain a false sense of security in reading about the Malaysian situation, perhaps believing that only the myths of "other" people are imposed from above with less than a desirable amount of room for citizens to negotiate their meaning. Yet, as I argued in Chapter 3, myths in North America are also constructed, promoted, and kept alive by elite groups, even though the centre of control is not always as easily identifiable as it is in the Malaysian situation (i.e., power in Malaysia is largely vested in the office of the Prime Minister and the economic elite are expected to operate according to its rules). In fact, since the locus of power is less discernible in North America than it is in Malaysia, myths here may appear to be less motivated and thus passed off as authorless "truths." For instance, in Chapter 7, I described how the Malaysian government exercises tight control over its domestic media. I would argue that this control is not only overt, but also quite evident to most Malaysians. By comparison, the political and economic restraints imposed on the

media in North America tend to be considerably less obvious. Therefore, depending on the audience, “news” in the latter scenario may be viewed as more objective and less motivated by vested interests.

However, it is also worth noting that although dissent from the North American mainstream is usually met with non-coercive forms of marginalization, police incidents at the 1997 APEC meeting in Vancouver (“Peppergate”) or the 2001 Summit of the Americas in Quebec City demonstrate that political forces are also willing, if necessary, to use some coercion to maintain control. As well, in the aftermath of September 11th, the governments of Canada and the United States have implemented a variety of new laws (e.g., the Anti-Terrorism Act and Patriot Act, respectively), which many have argued interfere with the right of citizens to dissent from the mainstream. Yet, it should be made clear that these events and new forms of legislature cannot be compared to the significantly more coercive measures used in Malaysia, particularly via the Internal Security Act, to control dissent.

C. The Benefits of Comparing Myths

With a degree of relative objectivity that an outsider can afford, a North American reader can study how the “driving” myth of modernity, progress, and development is constructed, disseminated, and kept alive in Malaysia. At the same time, by studying Malaysian myths a North American reader can also gain insight into how a more “latent” myth of progress operates at “home.” This is because, as anthropologist Douglas Raybeck observes, “[p]eople unfamiliar with other patterns of belief and behavior can never realize the particular nature of their own patterns

and customs, nor can they surmount them” (1). In other words, even though we may be unable to step outside of our culture to objectively view our own myths, by comparing them to the myths of other people, we can gain some insight into how they operate. This then allows us to denaturalize our myths and, in so doing, place ourselves in a better position to question their validity.

It is important to recognize, however, that this comparative process is fraught with complications. For, in order to understand the situation in Malaysia, a researcher such as myself needs to be able to obtain insider knowledge. At the same time, “rational interpretation requires the researcher to draw on outsider knowledge” (Livingstone 491). As a result, I must be able to “simultaneously make the familiar strange (through becoming an outsider) and make the strange familiar (through becoming an insider)” (Livingstone 491). Therefore, as I noted in the methodology section of Chapter 5, there are always limitations placed on one’s ability to understand the myths of an “other.” Nevertheless, I would argue that this kind of international comparative research is increasingly valuable in a globalized world. For this project, it has provided valuable insight into how cross border political and economic relationships effect domestic myths about technology and progress.

D. Intertwined Myths

In this dissertation, I have focused quite heavily on the role played by the Malaysian government, especially former Prime Minister Mahathir, in constructing and keeping alive macro and micro-myths that are in its best interest. However, I

have also discussed, albeit rather briefly, some pressures that foreign interest groups have placed on Malaysia to accept these same myths. In particular, I looked at demands made by international financial organizations, as well as by Western governments and transnational corporations, for Malaysia to operate according to specific rules of neo-liberal economics. For instance, to be a member of the global economy, Malaysia must liberalize and deregulate many of its key sectors and is under pressure to take part in a new international division of labour that is primarily of benefit to the developed world.

Therefore, Malaysia's economic dependence on the West (particularly the United States) suggests that its macro-myth of modernity, progress, and development and micro-myth of the MSC are far more complex than they might at first appear. As I argued in Chapters 6 and 7, the Malaysian government constructed the MSC project in the image of the American Silicon Valley, and it developed an ICT-oriented workforce and high-tech EPZs to attract primarily Western-based transnational corporations. Moreover, many of the physical symbols that the government has built to illustrate Malaysia's modernity, technological capabilities, and economic autonomy, draw heavily on a "modernist" imagery of growth as a sign of 'approval' from the West" (Hilley, Malaysia 3).

Consequently, despite the Malaysian government's rhetoric of economic and political autonomy, its myths regarding technology and progress are in fact influenced by the West, as well as by other regions of the world – e.g., Malaysia's Look East campaign was designed to procure economic insight from the Japanese business model. In other words, even though there are culturally-bound aspects to

Malaysia's myths, as well as to the methods it uses to communicate and keep them alive (which thus contradicts Lévi-Strauss's argument of universal myths and mythemes), they are not completely self-contained.

Moreover, Malaysia's history of colonial occupation helped create the foundation for a larger epistemological infrastructure that promotes Western worldviews. When combined with the current economic and political pressures Malaysia faces from the West, as well as the influx of foreign media, entertainment, and advertising, it is clear that although certain elements of its myths about technology and progress may be unique unto Malaysia, they have also been influenced by Western forces.

It is also important to reiterate that although the West has influenced Malaysian myths of technology and progress, Malaysia should not be viewed as a monolithic entity. Rather, as I argued in Chapter 6 (drawing on the work of Johan Galtung and Arjun Appadurai), the local elite and foreign forces have worked together to encourage myths that in their mutual best interest, even if they may not always be in the best interest of the majority of their citizens (e.g., neo-liberal economic policies that tend to benefit a select number of Malaysian companies and transnational corporations at the expense of smaller domestic enterprises). However, I have also noted that the control of the local elite in Malaysia is not absolute, as demonstrated by numerous examples of domestic dissent from the political status quo. As such, I have tried to pay attention to the role of myth-makers, as well as myth-receivers, recognizing that the latter possesses some powers of negotiation in the face of the government's coercive and consensus-building activities.

III. Contributions to the Field of Communication

A. Revealing Races

Although there is, without doubt, a significant amount of literature dedicated to studying each of the races outlined in Chapter 4, this project contributes a new understanding of these seemingly disparate events by comparing how each competition has played a central role in keeping alive a larger myth of technology and progress. Together, the Land, Space, Cyber, and Bio races help to establish a historical pattern of the efficacy of this consensus-building technique. These races also provide some comparative context for understanding how the Malaysian government has used a similar race theme to keep alive its own myths. In particular, I argued that in both the Western and Malaysian situations citizens are encouraged to focus their attention on developing and acquiring the technology necessary to win their respective races, rather than on whether or not they wish to be a part of the competition, or if victory is indeed plausible. As such, myth-makers / political and economic elite in both locales are able to establish specific terms of debate – e.g., it is *obvious* that we need to engage in a race to become the most connected country in the world, to compete for patents in genetic engineering, to build the MSC etc., because if “we” fail to be at the front of the pack, we will be “left behind” to face the ancillary repercussions. In other words, the role of citizens is relegated to finding

ways of achieving the goals set out before them, rather than questioning the goals themselves.

For example, as I argued in Chapters 4, 6, and 7, Malaysian citizens are expected to help their country win the ICT hub / Silicon Imitator race, rather than critically assessing the MSC project itself or the benefits accruing from it. Since all of Malaysia's primary competitors have constructed their own ICT hub, a connection between socio-economic development and the construction of the MSC has been presumed. As a result, the government can turn people's attention towards improving the project without providing a clear plan for how it will benefit the majority of the country (particularly for Malaysians living outside of the greater Kuala Lumpur area or the prosperous island of Penang, which houses a significant percentage of the country's transnational companies in its high-tech EPZ).

In addition to the fear of being left behind, many Malaysians continue to place faith in the micro-myth of the MSC (despite setbacks in the project's success) because it offers them the promise of transcendence from their banal, everyday lives. According to the myth, the MSC provides the means through which Malaysians can escape their status as a "developing" nation, and can instead "leapfrog" into an entirely new high-tech era in which the social, political, and economic landscape of their country will be positively changed.

B. The Value of Studying Myths in Malaysia

The ten months of fieldwork conducted in Malaysia offers a unique contribution to the field of communication. First, the original / first-hand research provides additional insight into a very small body of academic work concerned with how the Malaysian government has communicated myths through consensus-building measures. As noted, critical scholars have, quite understandably, tended to focus more on the coercive methods used by the government to garner support for its macro and micro-myths. At the same time, however, it is important to recognize the efficacy of its more covert, hegemonic techniques (e.g., emphasizing Asian values, the need for internal harmony, the rescription of national identity, etc.).

Second, although a number of Malaysian and international academics have studied the MSC, there has been considerably less attention given to its Flagship Applications and other government directed / supported ICT-oriented programs and policies. Consequently, the primary research conducted for this dissertation has helped to build a map of various government projects and initiatives in this area. This map provides an opportunity to, for future research, gauge how the government's promises concerning the power of ICTs to beget progress writ large for all Malaysians has translated into on-the-ground changes in people's lives.

Third, as noted in the introductory chapter, over the last decade international communication has become an increasingly important area of interdisciplinary study. This dissertation serves to demonstrate the value of this kind of research, not only in

terms of understanding how myths of technology and progress operate in other countries, but also in providing insight into how similar myths function at “home.”

C. Communicating Myths

Since the focus of this dissertation has been on exploring how myths of progress and technology are constructed, disseminated, and kept alive in society (whether in the West or in Malaysia), it is, at its core, about communication. As I argued in Chapter 2, myths are essentially dialogic stories used to help us make sense of our world and our place in it. As such, they are central to both interpersonal and intrapersonal communication. I also argued that by exploring how and why myths are communicated, we can (hopefully) unveil the role played by elites in promoting certain versions of macro and micro-myths, as well as gain insight into how ideology is (re)produced in society. Moreover, since the methods used to keep myths alive include the technological tools of mass communication, mainstream media, and cultural industries, myths are inherently supported by communications.

IV. Future Research Directions

Although the scope of material covered in this dissertation offers a theoretical and practical discussion of issues related to myths about technology and progress, it is by no means a comprehensive story. Rather, there are a number of

issues that I have not discussed, or have only addressed at a cursory level. These issues, three of which are described below, may form the basis for future research.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I examined measures used by the Malaysian government to convince citizens that ICTs in general, and the MSC in particular, are *the* engines of social, political, and economic development. However, from my research I cannot conclude that Malaysians on the whole believe that the technological advancements afforded by the government's programs and policies will beget progress writ large for the majority of the population. Also, even though there seemed to be widespread, albeit relatively quiet, concern about the viability of the high-tech hub, I cannot conclude that Malaysians completely support the development of the MSC. In large part, this is because most of my research time was spent with critical academics, members of non-government organizations, and public servants, which do not, I would argue, represent the "average" Malaysian. Moreover, as discussed in Chapter 7, although Malaysians live and work in an environment that tends to encourage deference and conformity (and in which the government tightly controls its media and educational institutions), I cannot assume that Malaysian audiences passively accept all of the messages / versions of macro and micro-myths that they receive.

The Malaysian Ministry of Science, Technology and the Environment has conducted national surveys (under the auspices of its Malaysian Science and Technology and Information Centre) concerning Malaysians' perceptions of science and technology, as well as the importance of new forms of ICTs to the country's

overall future health. According to its latest survey (Malaysia Perceived), the majority of Malaysian respondents “agreed S&T [science and technology] is important for the development of the country” (Malaysia Perceived). The survey also included other non-descript and leading questions, including 1) “Without S&T human [sic] cannot progress”; 2) “S&T is very important for societal progress”; and 3) “Civilisations had [sic] been created without the help of S&T” (Malaysia Perceived). Conclusions drawn from the survey suggest that Malaysians are, for the most part, in support of government programs designed to develop Malaysia’s technological capabilities and believe that new forms of ICTs are central to Malaysia’s plans for future social and economic development. However, I do not know of any external, more critical, research that has been conducted on this issue, save for the preliminary work of Josh Lepawsky, a PhD candidate in geography at the University of Kentucky.¹⁶⁹ Additional future research could then be dedicated to exploring how different segments of Malaysian society actually view the concept of progress and if / how they see the MSC and other ICT-oriented projects actually benefiting the majority of Malaysians.

Also, it is quite apparent that the media in Malaysia have become increasingly quiet about the MSC. Even the government has backed away from overtly extolling the project’s virtues, despite Mahathir’s declaration that the MSC has succeeded “beyond expectations,” and promises from various government ministers that the MSC is on track and on time. Future research could thus be dedicated to tracking the “success” of the MSC as it moves ever closer to the Vision

¹⁶⁹ Lepawsky has conducted surveys and interviews concerning Malaysian perceptions of ICTs in general, and the MSC in particular, but is only the preliminary stages of writing about his

2020 end date. As well, additional research could be dedicated to studying the benefits accruing from the MSC (as well as ICTs in general) in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak. Although there has been some research conducted on specific ICT-oriented projects in these states (especially by academics at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, UNIMAS), there is little academic writing on ICTs being used as tools of development in the “other half” of Malaysia.

As well, there are a number of other topics related to the discussion on Malaysia that I did not focus on in this dissertation. They include 1) issues concerning labour in the MSC or other EPZs in Malaysia; 2) other projects designed to encourage ICT usage that are not directed or supported by the government; 3) the impact of a lack of venture capital for domestic high-tech companies.

Also, as noted in Chapter 7, I intend to engage in future research concerning Prime Minister Badawi’s new BioValley project. In particular, I am interested in examining the potential short and long-term impact of selling Malaysia’s biodiversity on the culture and economy of rural East Malaysia.

V. The Last Word(s)

As an oft-isolated scholar working in an electronic era, I seem to have developed a strangely intimate relationship with my computer, often “connecting” to the outside world through electronic mail rather than through face-to-face conversations. In doing so, I am often amused by the end-quotes that accompany the emails of friends and colleagues. One such email included a well-known quote from

research findings.

Erich Fromm: “Radical doubt is a process, a process of liberation from idolatrous thinking; a widening of awareness, of imaginative, creative vision of our possibilities and options.” I printed Fromm’s words and pasted them to the side of my filing cabinet almost a year ago. Since then, they have stared out from their magnetic perch, reminding me of the value of radical doubt. To critically question how we want to “progress” as individuals and societies, we must start by looking at the myths about progress that are already in place. If we approach them with radical doubt, unveil how they are distributed and promoted, then we are better able to denaturalize them. We thus place ourselves in a better position to, if we want, rewrite the myth of progress. This is not to suggest that we can live without a myth of progress or that we necessarily need a “better” one. Rather, I believe that we do in fact need common stories of where we are headed as individuals, communities, and societies as a whole. We also need myths concerning the role that technology is expected to play in our lives. However, from a political economy perspective, I am concerned that the elite have the power to promote certain tellings of these myths to the exclusion of all other versions.

For example, while in office, former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher repeatedly used the term “there is no alternative” to refer to the inevitability of her neo-liberal, pro-market policies. Its acronym, TINA, is now often used to describe a perspective that is unwilling to listen to or accept alternative positions. We can see this TINA rationale at work in the case of the MSC in Malaysia. According to the Malaysian government, there is no alternative to this high-tech hub

if the country wants to be able to compete on an international level and achieve the objectives of its Vision 2020 strategy. However, there are *always* alternatives.

As such, we would do well to take the advice of Wendy Doniger and view myths as being pre-political (rather than as post-political à la Roland Barthes). By critically analyzing a myth, we gain greater insight into why and by whom it has been constructed. We can therefore question the myth's validity and open up space to tell a different version of the story if we so choose. For instance, Malaysians can take the micro-myth of the MSC and compare it to the on-the-ground impact of the project for the average citizen. In so doing, they can use the myth to determine whether or not the project has thus far delivered on the government's promises. Myths can also be used to gain a greater understanding and insight into political and economic relationships. By examining the micro-myth of the MSC, for instance, we can see what is important to the Malaysian government and the path it has taken to stimulate development. Moreover, by studying what measures the government has used to disseminate and keep the myth alive, we gain a better understanding of how politics operate within the country (e.g., myths provide us with insight into the government's use of both consensus-building and coercive techniques). In sum, then, myths should be viewed "as containing the potential to energize change" (Mosco, Digital 30).

Appendix 1

List of Interviewees

1. Abdullah, Othman Yeop. Executive Chairman,
Multimedia Development Corporation.
2. Ahmad, Wan Rahim. Corporate and User Services Division,
Department of Statistics, Malaysia.
3. Anuar, Mustafa K. Associate Professor,
School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia.
4. Asmawi, Arnifa. Graduate student,
Faculty of Management, Multimedia University.
5. Azmi, Dzofrain. Educational Technology Division,
Ministry of Education, Malaysia.
6. Bala, Poline. Lecturer,
Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (and eBario
Research Project team leader).
7. Banerjee, Indrajit. Associate Professor,
Nanyang Technical University, Singapore.
8. Bararudin, Noor Bathi. Lecturer,
Department of Media Studies, University of Malaya.
9. Chan, Cecilia S.K.
Women's Institute of Management, Malaysia.
10. Chan, Foong Mae. Educational Technology Division,
Ministry of Education, Malaysia.
11. City Command Centre (CCC) – Central Monitoring Hub of Cyberjaya,
Anonymous interviewee.
12. Cybatron Wireless Applications Ltd. (MSC status company, now defunct),
Ben Chung, Vice President Applications Development.
13. Fadzil, Ghazali Mohamed. Knowledge Management Division,
Multimedia Development Corporation.

14. Flare Studios (MSC status company),
Miza Mohamad, Chief Executive Officer.
15. GameBrains (MSC status company),
Jean Tan, Chief Financial Officer.
16. Gan, Steven.
Editor-in-Chief, Malaysiakini.
17. Gateway
Anonymous representative of the One Home, One Computer / Odasaja program.
18. Hamzah, Azizah. Senior Principal Assistant Secretary,
Communications & Multimedia Division,
Ministry of Energy, Communications & Multimedia, Malaysia.
19. Hashim, Rubaiah. Principal Assistant Secretary.
Communications & Multimedia Division,
Ministry of Energy, Communications & Multimedia, Malaysia.
20. Hazis, Mohd Faisal Syam Abdol. Lecturer,
Faculty of Social Sciences, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak.
21. Ibrahim, Azman. Senior Executive,
Knowledge Management & IT Department,
Multimedia Development Corporation.
22. Ismail, Rodhiah. Media Relations,
Multimedia Development Corporation.
23. Ismail, Ariffin Bin Wan. Smart Card Unit Project Director,
Multipurpose Card / MyKad, National Registration Department, Malaysia.
24. Jaafar, En Badrul Hisham.
Malaysian Technology Development Corporation, Malaysia.
25. Jaafar, Mohammad.
Ministry of Human Resources, Malaysia.
26. John, K.J. Vice President, Information Technology Policy Development,
Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems.
27. Lee, Wee Your. Journalist,
TV3 (private television station).

28. Lim, Eng Kooi. Industry Policy and Regulation Division,
Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Malaysia.
29. Loh Kok Wah, Francis. Professor,
Politics Department, Universiti Sains Malaysia.
30. Low, Bernice. Founder,
Quack Concepts (New Media Content Services).
31. McCollom, Joanie. Doctoral candidate,
Anthropology Department, Stanford University.
32. Maarof, Anuar. Deputy Director General (ICT),
Malaysian Administrative Modernisation and Management Planning Unit.
33. Ministry of Education, Malaysia.
Anonymous interviewee.
34. Ministry of Information, Malaysia.
Press Accreditation Card.
Anonymous interviewee.
35. Ministry of Health, Malaysia.
Anonymous interviewee.
36. Ministry of Science, Technology and Environment.
Anonymous interviewee.
37. Mohamed, Ismal. Creative Multimedia Unit,
Multimedia Development Corporation.
38. Mohan, Avvari. Lecturer,
Faculty of Management, Multimedia University.
39. Multimedia University (Cyberjaya campus).
Two anonymous faculty members.
40. Nain, Zaharom. Associate Professor,
School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia.
41. Nair, Dinesh.
IT Consultant / Computer Security Specialist.
42. Netto, Anil.
Aliran Executive Committee.

43. New Straits Times (Private English Newspaper).
Anonymous interviewee.
44. Ng, Wan Peng. Senior Manager Flagship Coordination Unit,
Multimedia Development Corporation.
45. Nojey, John. Commercial Officer,
Canadian High Commission, Kuala Lumpur.
46. NTT Communications / Arcnet (MSC status company).
Corporate Strategy Division,
Low Keng Fei, Strategy Planning Officer.
47. Nun, Mohamed Arif. Chief Executive Officer (formerly Senior Vice President
Operations),
Multimedia Development Corporation.
48. Osman, Mohd Azahar. Industry Policy and Regulation Division,
Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, Malaysia.
49. Pham, Tam. Programme Officer,
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Malaysia.
50. Rahman, Fahmy Z. Office of the Science Advisor,
Malaysian Industry Government Group for High Technology.
51. Ramanathan, Sankaran. Senior Programme Specialist & Head,
Special Projects Asian Media Information and Communication Centre,
Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.
52. Salleh, Resat. Director,
Information Department, Georgetown, Penang,
53. Saman, Mansor A. Associate Professor,
School of Communication, Universiti Sains Malaysia.
54. Shah, Farida Habib. Professor,
Centre for Biosciences and Biotechnology, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia
(and Chair of Organizing Committee for the International Forum on Women
and ICT).
55. Siang, Lim Kit.
National Chairman of the Democratic Action Party (DAP).
56. Singh, Bhag.

Lawyer, Kuala Lumpur.

57. Somchit, Boonler. Executive Director,
Penang Skills Development Centre.
58. Subramanian, Siva. Secretary General,
National Union of the Teaching Profession Malaysia (NUTP).
59. Tan, Nellie.
Women's Institute of Management.
60. Tee, Khaw Lake. Professor,
Faculty of Law, University of Malaya.
Formerly Vice President (Legal Advisor) for the Multimedia Development
Corporation (MDC), Senior Manager of the Legal Unit.
61. The Star (Private English Newspaper).
Two anonymous interviewees.
62. Valida, Abelardo C. (Larry). Institutes of Higher Learning,
Multimedia Development Corporation.
63. Wai, Wong Chun. Deputy Group Chief Editor,
The Star (Private English Newspaper).
64. Zaman, Halimah Badioze. Professor,
Faculty of Information Science and Technology, Universiti Kebangsaan
Malaysia.

Additional Anonymous Interviewees:

1. Elementary teacher in a designated "Smart School."
2. Two journalists of an English Malaysian Newspaper.

Conferences Attended (during field research):

1. Workshop on Media and Transition in ASEAN.
20-21 Nov. 2000, Singapore.
2. Education Fair.
23-25 Feb. 2001, Komtar, Penang.

3. MSC Expo.
9-10 Sept. 2000, Kuala Lumpur.
4. Regional Seminar in Media Ethics.
11-13 Sept. 2000, Kuala Lumpur.
5. Technology Policies: Concepts and Socio-Economic Impacts.
2 Oct. 2000, Cyberjaya.
Faculty of Management, Multimedia University.

Additional Resources (used during field research):

6. Aliran (Aliran Kesedaran Negara).
Resource Centre, Penang.
7. Asian Media Information & Communication Centre (AMIC).
School of Communication Studies, Nanyang Technological University,
Singapore.
8. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS).
National University of Singapore (NUS).
9. Ministry of Energy, Communications & Multimedia (MECM).
Resource Centre, Kuala Lumpur.
10. Ministry of International Trade and Industry (MITI).
Resource Centre, Kuala Lumpur.
11. Telekomuzum, Muzium Telekomunikasi Negara.
Kuala Lumpur.

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