



**Collaborative Research Centre (SFB 640)**  
**Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin**  
<http://www.sfb-repraesentationen.de/english>

**MALAYSIA OUT OF THE BOX:  
Current research within & beyond  
the framework of the nation-state**

**A workshop  
of the Subproject on Malaysia (B3)**  
<http://www.sfb-repraesentationen.de/teilprojekte/b3/english>

**19 - 20 November 2009, Berlin**

Dieser Workshop ist als internes Treffen ausgelegt, dessen Ziel es ist einen langfristigen Dialog zu relevanten Themen zu Malaysia zu etablieren. In dieser ersten Zusammenkunft sollen die gegenwärtigen Diskurse erfasst und eingeordnet werden, um das Forschungsprofil des Teilprojektes B3 im Rahmen des gesamten SFB640 zu verbessern und zu konkretisieren. Unsere Absicht für die Zukunft ist es, die daraus erwachsenden Dialoge in weiteren Treffen für eine größere Öffentlichkeit zu öffnen.

### **A brief statement on the workshop**

This workshop is concerned with developing a discussion on the limits and potentials of current scholarship on Malaysia. An argument could be made that research on the country has been considerably focused on the following topics: party politics, race or ethnicity (especially 'race relations'), multiculturalism, the politics of Islam (especially its bureaucratisation), and authoritarianism. The overall focus has frequently been nation-bound. This is not an exhaustive list but a general indication of research foci. Other foci include Malaysia's experiments with wealth redistribution, poverty reduction, and economic development – areas largely beyond the scope of this workshop.

The premise of the workshop is that the research foci listed above do not only constitute particular tendencies, but may have come to constrain our thinking. We ask if these foci, in conjunction with a nation-centred focus, have cultivated insularity in Malaysian studies. The considerable attention paid to the governing interethnic coalition of parties, for instance, favours ethnicised perspectives on the country as the world of formal ethnic politicking is taken to represent Malaysian society as a whole. With the dominance of particular tropes sotospeak in research on Malaysia, other areas tend to be overshadowed, or regarded as forms of 'soft' analysis undeserving of serious attention. These other, and significant areas, include the following: cosmopolitan histories, transregional linkages, transnational comparison, gender, popular culture, and varieties of nongovernmental social and political activism. Again, this is a general indication rather than an exhaustive list.

The purpose of the workshop is to determine first of all if the above premise is valid, namely that thinking on Malaysia has come to be constrained. If so, participants are asked to expand on the causes of this state of affairs, and what may be done to think about the country out of the box. This is particularly important given the political and social challenges faced by many Malaysians at the present time.

March 2008 was a watershed in Malaysia's history because an opposition party political alliance practically ended the decades long rule of the longstanding interethnic ruling coalition. More than a year later there is an unprecedented level of political uncertainty and loss of faith in the system on the part of people across the political spectrum. Although many agree that the country is undergoing a crisis, some believe that the political leadership and society can sustain it, while others feel that the country could descend into damaging conflict along ethnic or religious lines. In the case of the latter, comparisons have been made, for instance, with the violent conflict in Sri Lanka.

The present climate in Malaysia bears on the workshop in so much as it challenges participants to consider, within the scope of academic thinking and production, how may the country best be represented. How, if at all, have academic representations contributed to the framing of Malaysian problems in particular ways? Have the traditions of scholarship developed within the country, and in various centres around the world, been adequate to the task of the serious challenges facing Malaysian society today?

## **FIRST DAY (19 NOVEMBER)**

### **3 - 4 pm: Session 1 / Introductions**

Opening remarks (Vincent Houben)

Introductions

Background and goals of the workshop (Sumit Mandal)

### **4 - 7 pm: Session 2 / Historical locations**

Discussion led by presentations by Tim Harper, Sunil Amrith, Sumit Mandal, and Vincent Houben

*End of the first day / Workshop dinner*

## **SECOND DAY (20 NOVEMBER)**

### **8.30 am - 11 pm: Session 3 / Contemporary politics / The nation-state & beyond**

Discussion led by presentations by Frederik Holst, Julian Lee and Carlo Bonura

### **11.00 - 12.00: Session 4 / Drawing up questions to guide the closing discussion**

Coordinated by Vincent Houben

*12.00 - 2.00: Lunch break*

### **2.00 - 4.30: Session 5 / Coming up with some conclusions in collaboration**

Coordinated by Sumit Mandal

## **PAPER PRESENTERS**

Sunil Amrith, Lecturer, History Department, Birkbeck College, University of London

Carlo Bonura, Research Officer, Department of Politics and International Relations,  
Oxford University

Tim Harper, Reader, History Department, Cambridge University

Frederik Holst, Lecturer, Institute of African and Asian Studies, Humboldt-  
Universität

Vincent Houben, Chair of Southeast Asian Studies, Humboldt-Universität

Julian Lee, Postdoctoral Fellow, Department of Anthropology and Conservation,  
University of Kent

Sumit Mandal, Researcher, Subproject on Malaysia (B3), Collaborative Research  
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## **OTHER PARTICIPANTS**

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