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# In the Company of Citizens: The Rhetorical Contours of Singapore's Neoliberalism

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## **In The Company of Citizens: The Rhetorical Contours of Singapore's Neoliberalism**

Abstract: This essay explores how the language and priorities of the corporate world seep into the halls of government, and the ensuing implications of such rhetoric. Situating my analysis in Singapore's National Day Rally addresses from 1960 to 2018, I uncover two rhetorical signatures unique to Singaporean neoliberalism: the location of national character in economic performance, and the act of packaging and selling the nation to its people. I conclude by examining the implications of a corporate constitution of the nation for evoking affective ties to the nation, and by considering the value of Singapore's case to broader critiques of neoliberalism. (100 words)

Keywords: neoliberalism, rhetoric, Singapore, customer, economic, patriotism.

Word count: 8,961.

The hysteria was palpable in the website *TechCrunch*'s proclamation that "America is gripped by a new red menace and this time, it's not the commies – it's a sea of red ink."<sup>1</sup> Frustrated by reports of "abysmal fiscal neglect" in the United States government, or as the site termed it, the "pseudo-company in which we all essentially own shares," the writers declared that "if politicians reported to voters the way management reports to shareholders, no one would finish out their terms."<sup>2</sup> The belief that business principles should shape government behavior persists worldwide. In 2015, *The New Yorker* reported that Argentina had appointed a cabinet filled with "veterans of the corporate world" who exuded a "managerial ethos."<sup>3</sup> Thailand's former Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra, saw himself as a "CEO premier," and "a man who could get things done, like a business manager."<sup>4</sup> And of course, in 2016, the United States elected as president a businessman who ran on the promise of securing the best deal for America. One of the fullest syntheses of business and government is in Singapore, where Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (henceforth LHL) told the nation in his 2011 National Day Rally address that Microsoft was "the kind of business which we want to be as Singapore."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, it has long been a creed among Singapore's incumbent party that the government should model itself after

the private sector. As the prime minister's exhortation for Singapore to *be* Microsoft suggests, Singapore's leaders take this reasoning so far that a successful company serves as the basis of the nation's identity.

This essay explores how the language and priorities of the corporate world seep into the halls of government, and the ensuing implications of such rhetoric. Through an analysis of Singapore's National Day Rally addresses from 1960 to 2018, I contend that by locating national worth in economic performance, and framing public policies as goods to be branded, marketed, and sold to citizens, the Singapore government constructs an image of the nation as a corporation with a product to sell and a brand to protect. At the heart of this essay is the argument that, as Dana Cloud writes, "words do things with us in systematic, power-laden, and economic ways."<sup>6</sup> Governments that employ the language of corporations become bound by an accompanying corporate logic that replaces sociopolitical warrants for nation-building with economic ones.

In examining the crossover from the language of business to the business of government, this essay engages with neoliberalism, the socio-political phenomenon which "puts the production and exchange of goods at the heart of the human experience."<sup>7</sup> For Wendy Brown, neoliberalism undertakes a "[transmogrification of] every human domain and endeavor...according to a specific image of the economic."<sup>8</sup> In neoliberalism, she argues, "both persons and states are construed on the model of the contemporary firm."<sup>9</sup> With this model comes a way of reasoning rooted in appeals to the economic bottom line and the transformation of individuals into customers and shareholders.

Because neoliberalism brings the principles, perceptions, and priorities of private entities to bear on public life in every possible sense, it emerges across a bewildering range of situations. Neoliberalism is present in Supreme Court decisions making the campaign donations of private

corporations legally indistinct from that of the voting public; in advertisements for investment services that depict financial prudence as a vital obligation of modern citizenship; in pastor-for-hire chaplaincy services enlisted by workplaces; and in faculty decisions to alter teaching styles to keep student-customers entertained.<sup>10</sup> No wonder scholars have observed that neoliberalism is so amorphous that it can seem to have no particular place, shape, or meaning.<sup>11</sup>

However, rather than attempt to capture the quintessential form of neoliberalism, Robert Asen suggests that it is more useful to acknowledge and understand multiple neoliberalisms.<sup>12</sup> By examining different sites of neoliberalism, we form a fuller sense of its varied dynamics, vital for the larger project of critiquing neoliberalism. This study responds to Asen's call to engage with different forms of neoliberalism by exploring the unique and powerful sense of it that has emerged in Singapore.

The choice of Singapore and the decision to examine the full set of its most prominent political address from inception until the present day offers an important contribution to critical engagements with neoliberalism. In particular, such an approach allows us to consider how neoliberalism functions as a long-cultivated nationwide program. Scholarship on neoliberalism often interrogates its emergence in particular contexts, such as in response to a crisis, in an organizational setting, or in a controversial policy. Another way to view neoliberalism is to see how it functions as a comprehensive rhetoric, one not arising out of a single moment or issue, but "boring in capillary fashion" across decades of official discourse and policies.<sup>13</sup> In Singapore's case, neoliberal logic is especially pervasive and deep-rooted because a single party, the People's Action Party (PAP), has governed Singapore since 1959.

In examining Singapore, we allow ourselves a look at the end of the line, as it were. What if politicians really did report to voters the way management reports to shareholders? What if a

nation had long been led by CEO premiers? Singapore provides a glimpse into how these scenarios could play out. Singapore's politicians actually do dispense dividends and bonuses to citizen-shareholders in years of good economic growth. Its leaders really are CEOs: presidential candidates from the private sector must be chief executive officers who have managed a company with an average shareholder equity of S\$500 million, and cabinet ministers earn million-dollar salaries according to a formula that pegs their pay to the top bracket of earners in the private sector (with "a 40% discount for the ethos of public service").<sup>14</sup> The Singapore government's move to "pay itself its perceived market worth" signals its belief, argues Cherian George, that "like all organizations, governments get the executives they pay for."<sup>15</sup> This government speaks in a language of financial incentives and economic bottom lines, pays families an S\$8,000 Baby Bonus per newborn child to increase birth rates, and promotes philanthropy by arguing that if Singaporeans do not help the poor, "they will become disaffected and disenchanted, which will sour the social climate, and disrupt our economic progress."<sup>16</sup> Hence, this study of the contours of neoliberalism that have accreted across decades of Singaporean public address allows us to scrutinize a uniquely concentrated form of neoliberalism.

Through an examination of the National Day Rally addresses from the inaugural in 1960 to the most recent address in 2018, this essay illuminates the rhetorical strategies by which the Singapore government constructs a corporate persona for the nation. I begin by contextualizing the rally address to show how it constitutes a hybrid rhetorical genre that fuses economic progress and patriotism. Next, I uncover two signatures of Singaporean neoliberalism from the addresses: the location of national character in economic performance, and the act of packaging and selling the nation to the people. I conclude by considering the implications of this corporate

constitution of the nation and discussing what Singapore's case can bring to bear on the larger critical project of neoliberalism.

### **The National Day Rally Address: Fusing Progress and Patriotism**

On 3 June 1960, Lee Kuan Yew (henceforth Lee), the freshly-minted Prime Minister of Singapore, addressed the crowds gathered outside City Hall to mark Singapore's first National Day.<sup>17</sup> This celebration of the nation's independence was to be an occasion on which "the daily business of life is stopped and men forgather to review their common purposes, their common interests, and chart a common course for the future."<sup>18</sup> On this day, the most prominent political speech in Singapore, the National Day Rally address, was born.

The occasion for the address is National Day, an event that combines the celebration of Singapore's independence with a report of the nation's progress. As the oratorical component of a month-long nationwide celebration, the address shares the festivities' aims of creating a sense of "identification with the nation, pride and loyalty to the country, a sense of what it means to be 'Singaporean.'"<sup>19</sup> Additionally, the address functions as a State of the Union. Campbell and Jamieson point out that such addresses contain "public meditations on values," "assessments of information and issues," "policy recommendations," and some effort by the speaker to "create and celebrate a national identity."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, the National Day Rally addresses identify challenges facing Singapore and unveil the government's plans to address them.

These challenges and the country's future are discussed overwhelmingly in economic terms. Many of the addresses have led with economic issues and almost all dedicate significant time to questions of economic growth, living costs, unemployment, or the social impacts of growth and recession. For decades, a common approach was to attach lengthy appendices of

economic data to the addresses. The administration's emphasis on economic performance is so well-established that LHL opened his 2005 address by saying:

I will start with the economy because that's how we earn a living for ourselves. In fact, last year I wanted to start with the economy, but my ministers told me, everybody knows you make economic speeches, say something else. But I'm coming back to the economy this year because, in fact, that's the root of how we will solve all our other problems.<sup>21</sup>

On its own, there is nothing unusual, let alone neoliberal, about an address that prioritizes economic issues and registers pride in economic success. People want to know whether their government has made it possible to provide for their families, attain meaningful employment, and protect their life savings, and so, governments naturally must address these topics. Similarly, there is every reason for leaders to point to economic achievements as proof of the viability of their party's policies. Therefore, I do not claim that the mere presence of economic discourse in the rally bespeaks neoliberalism.

Rather, what makes this speech a site of neoliberalism is that its economics-inflected reports of national progress are part of an occasion that celebrates what it means to be Singaporean. Like a metaphor that brings one domain of experience to bear on another, the force of the rally address comes from its "co-presence" of economic performance and national identity, which combine to yield a meaning "which is not attainable without their interaction."<sup>22</sup> Hence, this address is more than a State of the Union; it is a State of the Union given on the Fourth of July, an accounting exercise folded into a birthday party.

The National Day celebrations marking political independence fuse with the rally addresses report-card measures of national progress, rendering the address a social act that pins the nation's exceptionalism on its attainment of economic success.<sup>23</sup> As LHL said in 2007 of the various projects planned for the years ahead, "no other country in the world can do this."<sup>24</sup> By welding national worth to economic progress, the address constitutes the nation as an entity

defined by its economic achievements and quantifiable metrics of success. In the following analysis, I uncover two rhetorical imprints of neoliberalism in the rally address. I begin with the way in which these speeches locate the nation's ethos in its economic performance.

### **Economic Performance as National Ethos**

A company that does not succeed financially is no company at all. While many possess goals beyond generating revenue, their survival depends on their ability to remain economically viable. So thoroughly has Singapore's government imbibed this principle that it looks to the economy not merely as an index of national success, but as the embodiment of national character. Singapore's economic performance has, from the earliest moments of its history, functioned as a proxy of the nation's strength amid adversity. When Lee declared in 1968 that Singapore's growth figures "sparkle and speak for themselves" and that the pursuit of prosperity had given Singapore "a glow of success" in 1970, he articulated enduring rally themes: the tendency to derive national value from economic worth, and to gauge the nation's success by its economic performance.<sup>25</sup>

Faced with frustrating trade negotiations with neighboring Malaysia in the early years of independence, Lee exclaimed in 1965 that:

If they think they can squat on a people that have got that capacity, they have made the gravest mistake of their lives... They want to slow down our pace so that their society, a medieval feudal society, can survive. Because if we surge forward at the rate we have been doing, in five to ten years there would have been an even greater disparity and contrast between an effective, open society and a closed, traditional society. Here, if you want to stand up or if you don't want to stand up, that is your business. But nobody crawls.<sup>26</sup>

Refusing to persist in a state of economic subjugation, he declared that "nobody crawls" in Singapore and that Malaysia could not "squat" on people who were "surg[ing] forward," lending a physical quality to the nation's economic performance, one twinned with the idea of refusing to



bow and scrape and bend at knee politically to Singapore's closest neighbor.<sup>27</sup> The economy, said Lee in 1965, required workers to have "red blood corpuscles;" without such robustness, Singapore would become "arthritic, seize up, collapse," warned Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong years later.<sup>28</sup> In this telling of events, the nation's economic performance is a physical endeavor, rendering Singapore's success a feat of actual strength. Conversely, economic failure is proof of both national humiliation and physical weakness, with Lee warning in 1984 that "in one five-year spending spree, Singapore can be rendered prostrate and bankrupt."<sup>29</sup> The association of financial status—bankruptcy—with a posture of supplication reveals how, for Singapore's government, economic performance has a visceral, even physical impact on the nation.

This physicality does not function alone. Instead, the flexing of economic muscle, so important to a country dwarfed in size by its neighbors, occurs alongside declarations of pride in the country's economic accomplishments. Singapore's trade, taxation, and production figures told "a story which we have very little to be ashamed of," declared Lee in 1966.<sup>30</sup> This was the story of a people who could "look the world in the eye" and proclaim that "this we have created."<sup>31</sup> "It is not worth, you know, trying to do Singapore in," he once boasted. "It is too troublesome."<sup>32</sup> After all, as he reminded audiences in 1980, Singaporeans were not just disciplined workers who knew how to take orders, they were brave people who "dared to achieve" and "dared to excel."<sup>33</sup> By framing economic achievement as an act of courage, the prime minister turned economic success into a moral virtue.

The association of economic success with physical strength and character traits such as bravery and dignity construct the economy as a source of personhood. Specifically, the rally addresses present the economy as the repository of Singaporeanness. In 1968, Lee declared that Singapore's economic success reflected the tenacity of the people and their government, whose

will to succeed was “matched ...by the growth rate.”<sup>34</sup> This conflation of the people's qualities with the state of their economy means that Singaporeans are urged to see in the economy an image of themselves as a people. Singapore's premiers have, for decades, urged their audiences to define themselves by their economic success and the qualities that make such success possible. Singaporeans’ ““one for all and all for one” spirit” in working together to surmount new challenges was crucial, said Goh in 1997: “It is how we made the grade before and how we will make the grade once more.”<sup>35</sup> To be Singaporean is to “make the grade.” It is to inhabit an identity defined by economic success, efficiency, and the ability to deliver measurable outcomes in a way that nobody else can. As LHL said, brimming with pride at the 2010 rally, Singapore's successful hosting of the Youth Olympic Games had shown the world “what Singapore is about – Aim high, prepare well, work together, and deliver results.”<sup>36</sup> Economic success, efficiency, and excellence measured by quantifiable indicators of progress constitute the nation's personality; this is what Singapore is about.

In grounding identity in economic performance, the government adopts the priorities of a business. Here, in the remaking of a country in the image of its economy, we can discern the hand of neoliberalism and the appeal of successful companies as inspirational models for the governments of nations such as Singapore. Measuring 719 square kilometers and with a population of 5.6 million in 2017, Singapore lags physically behind most countries.<sup>37</sup> For example, next door neighbor Malaysia has 450 times the land mass and six times the population.<sup>38</sup> Malaysia and Indonesia often cast themselves as the *abang* (big brother) to Singapore's *adik* (younger sibling) and in 1998, a newspaper quoted Indonesian President Habibie describing Singapore as little more than a “red dot” beside the green swathe of Indonesia on the map of Southeast Asia.<sup>39</sup>

Singapore's leaders see the nation's economic achievements as a way for Singapore to "punch above its weight" and become more than a dot.<sup>40</sup> By constructing the nation as an entity defined by its wealth and growth rate, Singapore's government alters the basis of comparison between Singapore and its rivals. With a workforce of 2.2 million, Singapore is a small country, but a large company.<sup>41</sup> Singapore cannot be Malaysia, but it *can* be Microsoft. Hence, the government uses companies as models that represent, as LHL said in 2011, "the kind of business which we want to be as Singapore."<sup>42</sup> Although Singapore cannot compete as a land mass, military force, or national population, its economic footprint offers a sizeable advantage. In 2015, LHL contrasted Singapore's population of 5 million to China's 1.3 billion before telling his audience that despite this considerable size difference, Singapore is China's largest foreign investor. "It means," he said, "that we are not small doing business with China."<sup>43</sup>

Thus, neoliberalism functions as a source of transcendentalism for the PAP. It enables the party to argue that fusing national identity to economic achievement makes Singapore larger, stronger, and more important than it could ever have been otherwise. Importantly, the government locates Singapore's exceptionalism in its economic success because such success has been attained in the face of ostensibly hopeless physical limitations, rendering success a powerful source of inspiration. Over the years, this government has presided over the rhetorical transmogrification of Singapore from a nation into an economic symbol. As LHL commented in 2009, "in international markets, Singapore is not just the name of a country, but also an icon of quality."<sup>44</sup> "Our Singapore brand," he said two years later, "is respected all over the world."<sup>45</sup>

### **Selling Singapore to Singaporeans**

Although Singapore's government certainly positions the nation as a brand for other countries to see, the rally addresses reveal a more important dynamic: the packaging of the

nation for consumption by its own citizens; the act of selling Singapore to Singaporeans. This packaging proceeds on several fronts. First, the government's assiduous performances of technical expertise, coupled with a predilection for wrapping its policies in alliterative brand-speak, constitute Singapore as a pre-determined product of the PAP. Second, the visual spectacle of the address casts the address as a product launch with the government the people's salesperson. Together, this packaging of the nation serves a neoliberal function by privatizing the citizen, who is constructed as a customer expected to consume policies rather than question them.

### *Claiming Exclusive Expertise*

The PAP has spent decades cultivating its image as experts at running Singapore. To that end, the rally speeches are replete with performances of the government's expertise and assurances that policies reflect careful planning, unusual foresight, and specialized technical knowledge by those best suited to the job.

As the nation's policy gurus, Singapore's prime ministers pack their speeches with examples; data; observations on global, regional, and domestic trends; and fine-grained policy details. Often delivered alongside visual aids, the speeches read like lectures as they survey the intricacies of global politics, cite books by title, author, press, and publication date, and feature charts, appendices, and excerpts from business reports. For instance, in 1986, Lee took audiences chart by chart through data comparing Singapore's productivity to other Asian countries in order to situate Singapore's economic position in the region.<sup>46</sup> In 1997, Goh described the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis by plodding nation by nation through a survey of regional currencies.<sup>47</sup> The Thai Baht, he reported, had depreciated by 14%, the Filipino peso by 11%, the Indonesian Rupiah by 10% and the Malaysian Ringgit by 9%. At 5%, Singapore's fall was the

least severe due, of course, to “our sound monetary and fiscal policies.”<sup>48</sup> “Looking back,” said Goh, Singapore had fared the best because the government had, as usual, gotten a lot of things right: “we did right to take measures in May last year to cool the private property market before the speculation got out of hand. And we did right not to succumb to pressure [from the people] and overbuild [public housing] just to satisfy the long queue.”<sup>49</sup> A decade later, the PAP remained ever-prescient, reminding audiences that it “foresaw [the] spike in inflation [in 2007]” and “started planning what we could do.”<sup>50</sup> The message of the PAP’s brand—efficiency, expertise, and foresight—is that the experts have thought of everything and can always be counted on to deliver a perfect product; no re-evaluation is necessary.

Such demonstrations of expertise leave little space for others to have a say. Indeed, the rules on political expression in Singapore are designed to fortify the government's dominance in public matters by being clear about what citizens can say, but nebulous about what they cannot. Speech that reinforces the government's administration is welcome and its criteria made explicit. As LHL explained in 2011, citizens are encouraged to offer comments that “help to strengthen the constructive climate of opinion so that your government can do right for you and do right for Singapore.”<sup>51</sup> In contrast, the criteria that deem specific subjects unacceptable are decided by opaque out-of-bounds markers. These unwritten markers represent “boundaries of political acceptability that do not appear in formal regulations but loom large in the calculations of anyone engaged in sustained public communication in Singapore.”<sup>52</sup> The government’s decision to keep these markers fluid means that navigating a safe terrain for public debate is often an exercise in guessing at the unseen limits on such debate. Therefore, just as with the design of public policy, Singapore’s government limits the role of citizens by presenting itself as the only entity possessing the skills needed to navigate public issues successfully.

Compounding this colonization of public space is the PAP's penchant for wrapping policies, speech titles, and public campaigns in alliterative constructions. On its own, alliteration is innocuous enough, appearing in familiar brand names such as KitKat and PayPal, as well as product lines such as Banana Republic's "Desk to Dinner" line of day-to-night clothes. Alliteration's parallelism is both visually and linguistically compelling, presenting one letter –the K in "Kit"- and then offering audiences a mirror image with the K in Kat. The repetition of letters and sounds in alliteration, combined with the rhythm of one sound following another in lockstep, creates the impression of an internal drum beat: left-right, left-right, Kit-Kat, Best-Buy, Pay-Pal. Alliteration renders names and ideas neat packages where everything fits together so naturally that it would be unthinkable to construct it any other way. Of course we want work wardrobes to go from Desk to Dinner; the first D evokes, even demands, a second D. This register of call and response creates a Burkean psychology of form that whets the audience's palate with one letter and "satisfies" their appetite with a matching letter.<sup>53</sup>

However, alliteration is more than a trick of selling and branding; it is also a language that brooks no opposition. The repeated pattern of alliterating words suggests an inherently sound *and impenetrable* logic. Alliteration suggests that alternative iterations are not possible because they would break the coherent formation of neat parallel sounds and matching letters. When applied to a nation wrapping itself in the linguistic garb of a brand, alliterative policies and public exercises come across as finished products for purchase rather than genuine opportunities for public deliberation.

Singaporean official discourse is saturated with alliteration. The 2012 National Day Rally was titled "A Home with Hope and Heart," with each section of the speech devoted to detailing the government's efforts to transform Singapore into these three "h"s.<sup>54</sup> Such slogan-esque

language gives the impression that the government is trying to sell its audience, who already live in Singapore, on the idea of Singapore as a good place to live (Visit Sunny Singapore! It is a Home with Hope and Heart). There is also the odd whiff of the idea that intangible values such as “hope” and “heart” can be planned for, and that, like a product in need of revamping, the nation can be transformed into a place where aspiration and kindness are now, finally, possible. A rally address is all that is required to pitch the new idea. Such language reveals a government that sees its role as presenting customers with a polished product rather than inviting citizens to critique the proposed ‘product’ or to think and work together in the creation of a nation they all wish to inhabit.

Responding to the changed political climate following the 2011 general election in which the PAP lost parliamentary seats for the very first time, the government launched a public consultation exercise to discuss how the party could “reaffirm..., recalibrate,.. and refresh” its relationship with the public, invoking the mantra-like language of a corporate retreat rather than an exercise in meaningful public engagement.<sup>55</sup> In 2015, the prime minister recounted how Singapore’s Minister of Manpower enlightened delegates at an International Labor Organization (ILO) event by explaining how to approach the labor issues their countries faced:

He started by acknowledging we all face the same 3 “D” challenges... Jobs Deficit, Skills Deficit, Quality Deficit, so three D’s. So everybody nodded, say yes. Then he said, we all want the same three F’s opportunities – future. Jobs of the future, skills of the future, career of the future, everybody smiled. Then he concluded that the solution was to strengthen the three P’s – Partnership between the partners. Partners: Government, unions and employers. And he shared about Singapore’s unique tripartite approach...<sup>56</sup>

The alliteration that saturates this government’s discourse gives the impression of leaders who have already worked out all the answers. After all, why would anyone need to question a policy created by a government with such a complete view of every situation that they are able to

conceptualize it from on high from start to end, and then categorize it into tripartite labels with neat matching letters - the rhetorical equivalent of tying up a parcel with a bow?

The sheen of finished-ness is crucial here because its completeness telegraphs certainty. Johanna Hartelius points out that the “illusion of certainty” is indelibly linked to assertions of expertise.<sup>57</sup> By claiming to encapsulate a series of desirable traits (in this case, expertise) into a product (such as a public policy) and then marketing that product through linguistic constructions that preclude alternative configurations, the government adopts a language of branding designed as a shortcut to unthinking consumption. In this vein, Jamie Warner argues that the creation of brands by politicians does similar work as commercial brands, namely, by creating “automatic, unreflective trust in the branded product, whether that product is a Popsicle, a Palm Pilot, or a political party.”<sup>58</sup> Who would question a government with such command of a situation that they can discern the underlying three Ds, Fs, and Ps? No wonder, as the PM reported, the ILO conference attendees ended by issuing “three cheers” for Singapore.<sup>59</sup>

Alliterative brand-speak is not an automatic bellwether of neoliberalism, neither is its use unique to the PAP. However, when viewed alongside the party’s arduous expressions of expertise, the PAP’s branding rhetoric achieves neoliberal ends by monopolizing the public sphere and “[reducing] civic participation to ‘buy-in.’”<sup>60</sup> In the face of overwhelming technical knowledge and policy packages presented as a *fait accompli*, the Singaporean public is relegated to a private role by being encouraged to either purchase policies or refrain from critiquing them. To George, this system of government engenders a “suggestion scheme” mode of citizenship in which citizens are customers who can offer feedback, but are not meant to alter policy “products” fundamentally. “The public,” proclaims George, “has been privatized.”<sup>61</sup> As Bradford Vivian contends, neoliberalism robs citizenship of its political dimension by “excusing citizens



to the preoccupations of private life” and counting as “irreverent” any participation in public affairs or social justice.<sup>62</sup> If citizens must participate in the public sphere, let it be to support rather than question the status quo. Let it be to reaffirm what is already there; to recalibrate an essentially working system; and to refresh the existing social contract rather than rewrite it.

The government’s assertion of expertise, aided by alliteration, creates an image of Singapore as a business led by uniquely qualified experts who give policies the polish of a finished product. These rhetorical features work in tandem with other facets of the address that interpellate the citizen into the role of customer to the government's service provider. Key among these is the address’s visual form, which both constructs and reinforces the government’s persona as a salesperson pitching products to the consumer-citizen.

#### *The National Day Rally as Product Launch*

The address’s visual presentation, particularly under the current administration, mirrors a form more often seen in product launches than policy addresses. When Singapore’s prime minister makes a major policy statement, he typically does so in Parliament House, the legislative seat of the country. Here, members of parliament flank a rectangular table bearing four wooden lecterns. The Speaker of the House presides in a dais at one end of the room. With its monochromatic table, floors, and walls, the venue is somber and functional. Seldom filled to capacity and largely bereft of adornment, Parliament House is a sober, stately, and serious space meant for conducting the business of government.

Delivered in the auditoriums of cultural centers and higher education institutions, the rally speech marks a striking visual departure from parliamentary addresses. Here, the prime minister enters to applause in a venue packed to the gills. Greeting spectators with a wave reminiscent of Steve Jobs at an Apple launch, he strides across a brightly lit stage to his lectern,

where he holds forth for the better part of an hour and a half. Behind him are the symbols of his office –the stars and crescent of the national flag, high-rise buildings, and photographs of happy citizens- rendered in an elaborate backdrop of lights, abstract shapes, and images that change each year. As the prime minister takes audiences through a report of the nation’s performance, he is accompanied by slides projected onto a large screen. Clicker in hand, he presents graphs of rising commodity prices and falling birth rates, screens training videos showing Singaporeans how to be better customers and service providers, and scrolls through websites to illustrate the spread of digital media in Singapore.<sup>63</sup>

This “multimedia media super show,” as LHL called the address in 2005, reaches its zenith when unveiling upcoming projects and policy changes.<sup>64</sup> It is here that the prime minister of Singapore morphs into the Vice-President of Sales and Marketing. Beaming with pride, he displays artists’ renderings of planned construction projects and images of newly upgraded public housing, which, he promises, offer citizens a “first-class living environment.”<sup>65</sup>As proof, he presents professionally shot photographs of happy couples enjoying “million dollar views” from the balconies of their renovated homes.<sup>66</sup> In 2013, he cast himself as a jovial “housing agent” as he walked audiences through several new housing options. One was a project called Fernvale Riverwalk, which was, LHL enthused, "a marvelous place, waterfront living...with spaces for relaxation and bonding”<sup>67</sup> (One can only surmise that it was also a home with hope and heart).

Like a good salesperson, the prime minister frames the benefits of his product not only by describing the product, but by associating it with features of a desired consumer lifestyle: million-dollar views, waterfront living, a first-class environment. There is even an Oprah-esque sense of “everybody gets a car!” in the budget redistributions announced in years of economic

growth. Officially titled “growth dividends,” these payouts invariably come across as giveaways to eager audiences.<sup>68</sup> This impression is reinforced by the habit the prime ministers have of calling such payments “goodies” and “*hongbaos*,” the latter referring to red packets of money gifted to children by their elders during Chinese New Year celebrations.<sup>69</sup> As audiences, it is difficult to shake the impression that the prime minister is acting as a salesman, and that the next year will bring a new set of goods and products. The citizen’s job is to watch, listen, and buy (or buy into) the policy packages presented onstage.

And what a stage it is. With its bright colors, videos, photographs, and props, with a speaker who reads out emails from citizens in one year and uses his phone to record a live streaming video of the audience in another, the rally address means business.<sup>70</sup> The rally’s show-and-tell features evoke the earnestness of a TED Talk spliced with the high-tech graphics and product promotion of an Apple keynote address. Jill McMillan and George Cheney argue that the metaphor of students as consumers turns education from a learning process into a marketable product, compelling professors to resort to an “entertainment model” of teaching to best sell their services to student-consumers.<sup>71</sup> The example of Singapore’s rally address suggests that a similar dynamic proliferates in a neoliberal government selling the nation to its citizen-customers.

Yet, this dynamic is also specific to Singapore because the consumerist register of Singapore’s neoliberalism centers the state, rather than the market, as the arena of consumption. In Singaporean neoliberalism, publics are encouraged to purchase policies, not commodities. Additionally, one of the most unique features of the rally speeches is their portrayal of the Singapore government as the exemplary neoliberal citizen. Where neoliberal discourses typically eschew government, seeing it as the problem rather than the solution, the PAP performs an idealized form of neoliberal citizenship in which the government is a model economic actor:

efficient, successful, rational, motivated by the prospect of economic gain, and weighing decisions carefully by considering their long-term economic implications.

By adopting the textual and visual vocabulary of the private sector, the Singapore government has created a neoliberal culture of governance that reorganizes social, civic, and political relationships along the lines of market production and consumption. In this culture, the government's performances of expertise coupled with its enchantment with alliterative language liken public policies to packaged products open to consumption but closed to debate. The packaging of public policies as consumer goods is on full display in the visual features and physical delivery of the rally address, in which the prime minister inhabits the role of a salesperson showcasing innovative new products. Through this address, the government conflates the nation's identity with that of a commercial enterprise, casting citizens as consumers of the Singapore product and the government as the ideal neoliberal citizen.

### **The Limits of Singapore Unlimited**

How does a neoliberal government address its citizens? What images of the nation does it offer and what roles does it ascribe to citizens of this nation? Seeking to address these questions, this examination of Singapore's National Day Rally addresses from 1960 to 2018 has uncovered two rhetorical signatures of Singaporean neoliberalism. First, by locating national character in the performance of the economy, the government derives what it means to be Singapore—and Singaporean—from the state of the economy. Consequently, economic success and efficiency become more than aspirations; they become constitutive markers of the nation's identity and proof of its exceptionalism. Second, in asserting expertise at running Singapore and framing the National Day Rally as a product launch, the PAP constructs the nation as a product of the government with the public as the nation's customers, eager to unwrap the next policy. By urging

Singaporeans to ground their relationship to the nation in values and practices of economic competitiveness, efficiency, and consumption, the government's neoliberal rhetoric constructs an image of the nation as a corporation peopled by brave workers, satisfied shareholders, and eager customers. Such language allows the government to expand Singapore's sphere of influence and draw on economic success to evoke national pride while reminding everyone that this success is rooted in the government's exclusive expertise.

Such rhetoric comes at a cost, particularly when used to evoke affective ties to the nation. The image of nation-as-corporation, so valuable for enhancing Singapore's regional and global standing, acts invariably as a Burkean "terministic screen" limiting the government's view of an issue, and its corresponding repertoire of policy ideas, to economic ones.<sup>72</sup> This restrictive lens is especially evident in the PAP's efforts to cultivate a sense of loyalty to Singapore. Central to such efforts is the belief that financial ties can serve as emotional bonds. When Singapore's economy performs well, the government issues dividends, such as the S\$300 "SG Bonus" it dispensed in 2018, to "reflect the government's commitment to share the fruits of Singapore's development with Singaporeans."<sup>73</sup> These growth dividends construct Singaporean identity as a kind of financial patronage with citizens as the nation's shareholders. This view of the relationship between people and their government argues that the government's ability to issue financial bonuses is proof that the people have made the right investment by betting on the PAP, and, by extension, Singapore.

The people's most important investment is in the walls of their homes. Eighty percent of Singaporeans own and live in government-subsidized public housing.<sup>74</sup> The government reminds Singaporeans that when the economy does well, the value of their homes increases, giving each homeowner a stake in Singapore's growth and connecting them to the nation in ways that rival

cities like Hong Kong cannot achieve.<sup>75</sup> “Through this [system of] home ownership,” said LHL in 2007, “you have participated in the growth of Singapore, bought shares in Singapore and backed this Singapore Inc. and made it succeed.”<sup>76</sup> Such is the work of what Abbott terms <investment> citizenship, which “structures the citizen’s relationship to both the investment itself and society by producing a constant, vested interest in both.”<sup>77</sup> If the investment falters, the relationship breaks.

Consequently, the prospect of financial gain has become the primary way to generate affective ties to Singapore, creating a pecuniary patriotism that fades when the money runs out. The government’s focus on economic success and incentives has created a situation in which its people mirror the image of nation-as-corporation by constructing their relationship to the nation along similar lines. If a better job opportunity with higher earning potential presents itself, people leave because their primary attachment to the nation was always construed in economic terms. And they have left in droves: in 2008, *The Straits Times* found that 150,000 Singaporeans were living and working overseas, four times the rate in 1990.<sup>78</sup> Additionally, 53 per cent of Singaporean teenagers wanted to leave permanently, compared to 28 per cent in Malaysia and 39 per cent in India.<sup>79</sup> The newspaper reported that “the state’s hard-nosed marketing of its economic prospects has also garnered mixed results” in its attempts to bring Singaporeans home, citing an interview with one such Singaporean who was put off by how government officials would “always try to push the economic side.”<sup>80</sup>

In pushing the economic side, the government pushes people away. As the writer Catherine Lim once observed, “it is no secret that while the PAP Government has inspired in the people much respect for its efficiency and much gratitude for the good life as a result of this efficiency, there is very little in the way of affectionate regard.”<sup>81</sup> After all, it is difficult to

inspire the emotions associated with patriotic belonging by telling people that, just like their new washing machines, their nation is efficient and worth the financial investment. Indeed, the PAP would be frustrated to encounter Catherine Chaput's work on Trumponomics and learn that an economic brand that simply asserts success can be more powerful at inspiring loyalty from a populace than a record of actual success based on sound policy making.<sup>82</sup> Efficiency and economic success reflect strong administrative frameworks, not sources of emotional attachment; the PAP's appeals to these qualities as national traits ultimately reflect its fashioning of the nation in its own image. Such appeals crowd out the space available to citizens to see themselves in the national product being sold to them and to form a strong affective relationship to it. As a means of motivating patriotism and loyalty, neoliberalism is an inadequate blueprint.

What does this glimpse into Singapore's neoliberalism indicate about the broader concept of neoliberalism? This examination of Singapore's National Day Rally addresses suggests that the neoliberalism's philosophical base does not reside exclusively in Western notions of liberalism. One of the standard claims of neoliberalism is that it stems from liberal notions of political freedom and individual agency, and that a free market is constitutive of a free society, unencumbered by the clunky, inefficient, and meddling state. This claim draws upon histories of liberal democracy, particularly in the United States, to present a vision of the citizen engaged in a perpetual project of self-development enabled by free market competition and liberalism's promise of the ability to author oneself free from state involvement.<sup>83</sup> However, the example of Singapore, where a highly interventionist and authoritarian government espouses no such commitment to liberalism and prides itself on its superlative efficiency, makes it clear that it is entirely possible to arrive at and sustain neoliberalism independent of a foundation in liberalism.

Singapore's neoliberalism, which mirrors elements of neoliberalism elsewhere, while still idiosyncratic, is what biologists call a case of convergent evolution: the independent development of similar traits in species with different lineages. In this case, Singaporean neoliberalism evolved out of a mix of local, regional, and global factors. For example, Singapore's small, domestic market meant the government assumed many roles of the private sector in the early years of independence. Here we can spy some of the seeds of how Singapore's leaders came to speak in the voice of the private sector. Realizing that the early economy was too underdeveloped to rely on the nascent private sector to fund large projects, the government formed a bank to provide development finance to businesses. Ngiam Tong Dow, one of the nation's longest-serving civil servants, reflects with pride on the pioneering "entrepreneurs" of the civil service, noting that the government-created bank "has grown to become a universal bank, able to compete with the best in the world.... Whoever said that civil servants cannot run banks? In the beginning, many of us had to take on a role as state entrepreneurs."<sup>84</sup> This sliver of history illustrates that the privatization of the public sector in Singapore has always been less about rolling back the state than transforming it into the private sector.

Singapore's home-grown neoliberalism suggests a need to expand our existing narratives about the philosophical and historical geneses of neoliberalism. We should examine other sites of neoliberal rhetoric beyond the United States so that we may keep discovering what Christa Olson calls "the productive possibility of carrying old concepts into new contexts."<sup>85</sup> As I think about the act of bringing ideas from one context to bear on another, I am prompted to reflect on the metaphorical work of neoliberalism. By such work, I do not refer to neoliberalism's proliferation through metaphors such as the nation-as-corporation or CEO-as-premier. Rather, neoliberalism *is* a metaphor in its application of an economic vehicle to the tenor of our political and social



worlds. Metaphors gain power through re-use; the more we repeat them in the same contexts, the more they become conventionalized and chameleoned—so much a part of the fabric that we do not see them anymore. Thus, we must keep standing in different places and changing our vantage points of neoliberalism to prevent it from slipping into the background.

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