

Middleman Minority Nation

Globalization and Social Democracy in Singapore

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Thesis for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (PhD)
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*For Fathin,
who I could not have done this without*

Abstract

The Singaporean state is a social democracy with middleman minority characteristics. This thesis argues that it is the fusion of these two – the culture of the middleman minority, and the statist corporatism of social democracy – that has allowed the Singaporean state to set up a form of social democracy that is capable of not just surviving but flourishing under conditions of globalized capitalism. The outcome of this fusion, I dub a “middleman minority state” (MM state), extending on the arguments made by Bonacich and Sowell, by which I mean a state that scales up the logic of the classic middleman minority to the level of a nation-state. The key difference between the MM state and traditional social democracy, I argue, is that the MM state does not depend on the ability of the state to exert political control over the market. Instead, as a small state operating within the global market, the MM state operates the same way as any middleman minority operates in a host society: by inserting itself into an economy over which it has no political control, and making money by entering into mutually beneficial and voluntary business deals with whoever is willing to trade.

Theoretically, my goal in making this argument is to debunk two dominant perspectives in the research areas of globalization, capitalism and the state. On the one hand, this is the Marxist perspective, which commonly states that globalization necessarily leads to the destruction of the social democratic state. On the other hand, this is the idea that Singapore is best understood as a neoliberal state, and more generally that “neoliberalism” should be understood in broad term as a movement which seeks to make the market into the dominant force in human society. Both of these perspectives, I argue, fail to offer a comprehensive and coherent account of the Singaporean state, as both fail to conceptualize Singapore as *a social democracy adapted to the conditions of globalized capitalism*. The Marxist perspective, I will show, does so by precluding this possibility a priori, by defining social democracy too narrowly, and incorrectly. The neoliberal perspective, conversely, does so by always-already including Singapore’s form of a globally viable social democracy under a too broad definition of the term “neoliberalism”.

Ultimately, my aim is to describe the MM state as a new form of social democracy that is set up to tackle the novel challenges of globalization. As such, my aim is to look at the relation between social democracy and globalization as an open question, rather than as a foregone conclusion, in our increasingly globalized world.

List of Abbreviations

CAN	Community Action Network
CCR	Criminal Court Resolution
CPF	Central Provident Fund
DLP	Dutch Labour Party
GCE	General Certificate of Education
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GIC	Government Investment Corporation
GLC	Government-Linked Corporation
GNP	Gross National Product
HDB	Housing and Development Board
IMF	International Monetary Fund
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISD	Internal Security Department
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer
MAS	Monetary Authority of Singapore
MM state	Middleman minority state
MNC	Multi-National Corporation
MOE	Ministry of Education
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NParks	National Parks
NTUC	National Trades Union Congress
NWC	National Wages Council

OB-markers	Out-of-Bounds-markers
PAP	People's Action Party
POFMA	Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act
SAP school	Special Assistance Plan school
SSGS	Special Singapore Government Securities
SMRT	Singapore Mass Rapid Transit
SG	Singapore
SGD	Singapore Dollar
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

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Introduction:

Globalization, Democracy and the Problem of the Nation-State

*“There was a time when people said that Singapore won’t
make it, but we did.”*

- “We Are Singapore”, National Day Parade Song, 1987

Introduction

I went to Singapore in pursuit of a big question: Does globalization promote democracy? The small Southeast Asian city-state, which sits at the tip of the Malay peninsula, is one of the places most frequently brought up as the perfect counter-example to that idea. As Catharin Dalpino (2001) writes in a widely cited online article, “The city-state of Singapore, rated as ‘most global’ on the A.T. Kearny/Foreign Policy magazine Globalization Index in terms of cross-border contact between people, has remained resolutely semi-authoritarian for the past 30 years and shows few signs of greater democratization”. Similarly, philosopher Slavoj Žižek has repeatedly made the provocative prediction that if there is one person to whom we will built monuments a century from now, “it will be Lee Kuan Yew”, as he “will be remembered not only as the first prime minister of Singapore, but also as the creator of authoritarian capitalism, an ideology set to shape the next century much as democracy shaped the last” (Žižek 2015). Singapore, from this perspective, is the unnerving anomaly: a place that on the

one hand confirms the prediction that globalization brings enormous economic benefits to those nations that open up to free trade and capitalism, but that on the other hand disconfirms the prediction that such economic developments will bring about democratization. As Singaporean sociologist Chua Beng Huat observes in a book about his home country, “An authoritarian state with popular support that works is a distressing idea in a world defined by liberal democracy” (Chua 2017: 1). Was liberal democracy not supposed to be the end of history? (Fukuyama 1992)

For an anthropologist looking for a case study, this is of course a very good thing: we love distressing ideas! They force us to question our assumptions. Having spent a bit more than six years studying Singapore – including fieldwork between June 2015 and February 2017, and extended periods of stay between 2017 and 2021 – I cannot say that I have found a final answer to the big question that I set out with. What I *have* discovered, however, is that there is something wrong with the way we usually think about the question itself. In this introduction, I will lay out what I think that problem is. In the scholarly literature, I will suggest, there are two main approaches to the question of globalization and democracy – one claiming a positive relation, the other a negative relation – neither of which are in my view very helpful when thinking about this relation as it plays out in Singapore. I will begin by laying out what these two approaches are, and I will then suggest how and why Singapore demands that we think differently about this issue. After that, I will lay out how I plan to approach this question by way of participant observation, historical analysis, and theoretical interventions.

To summarize my argument, I am going to propose that Singapore is best understood a social democracy adapted to conditions of globalized capitalism. In service of that argument, I am going to introduce a new concept – “middleman minority state” – to describe the kind of social democracy that Singapore, in my view, represents. To get there, however, we will first have to do quite a bit of theoretical groundwork. At the end of this introduction, I will present the research question that leads me to my conclusion, and inform the reader how I plan to go about answering it. But before that, we will review the literature as it relates to the big question: does globalization promote democracy?

Globalization promotes democracy – yes or no?

The first major approach to the question of globalization and democracy comes out of Marxism, and points to a fundamental contradiction between the two (see Patnaik 2016; Amin 1987). According to this perspective, globalization means that the economy has increasingly become organized at the global level, not only in the sense that there is now a global market in goods and services – which there has been for a much longer period of time – but that *the entire mode of production has been globalized*, such that there is now not just global trade between producing countries, but global supply-chains of producers located in many different countries. At the same time as this has happened, democratic politics has remained largely at the level of the nation-state, which is where citizens vote for government, labour organizes itself into unions, popular will is implemented as policy, etc. Because of this scalar mismatch between the political and the economic, nation-states are becoming increasingly powerless in economic matters, as capital no longer has to accept any government policy that does not suit its interests. And because democracy means little without the ability to exercise political power in economic matters, the argument goes, globalization undermines democracy.

One of the strongest proponents of this line of argument is Marxist economist Prabhat Patnaik, who summarizes it in the following way: “The globalisation of capital, especially that of finance capital, entails that in a world of nation-states, every such state must willy-nilly pursue such policies as are demanded by finance capital, for otherwise it faces the prospect of finance capital leaving its shores en masse and unleashing a financial crisis upon its economy” (Patnaik 2016: 72). The consequence of this, Patnaik argues, is that “[i]n matters directly affecting their material lives [...] the people are denied any electoral choice, even in polities characterised by formal electoral democracy” (ibid: 79). He calls this a “closure of politics”.

To Marxists pursuing this line of argument, much of the problem comes down to the issue of collective bargaining. Marx famously said that collective bargaining – or what he called “worker combination” – “always has a double aim, that of stopping competition among the workers, so that they can carry on general competition with the

capitalist” (Marx 1955: 117). Similarly, from this point of view, globalization also appears to have a double aim – or at least, a double outcome – but the direct opposite, namely to expose workers to global competition from one another, with the result that they are no longer able to compete with the capitalist nationally. To that end, Patnaik notes that “[g]lobalization, by exposing the workers in the advanced countries to competition from the workers from the ‘south’, undermines the trade unions in the former” (Patnaik 2016: 73), and thereby undermines the ability of labour to compete successfully with capital. Because of this, Patnaik suggests, the only viable option for nation-states wishing to take back political control over their economic destinies is to “delink the country from the vortex of globalization” (ibid: 79). This strategy, Patnaik says however, “entails high transitional costs for the economy,” which is why “hardly any political formation, and certainly no bourgeois political formation, dares to contemplate” it (ibid: 79; see also Mander & Goldsmith 1996).

This idea – that democracy requires delinking from globalization – has primarily been put forward from Marxist writers. Next to Patnaik, its most famous proponent is probably Samir Amin, who has defined the strategy of delinking in terms of a “refusal to submit national-development strategy to the imperatives of ‘globalization’”, and a converse affirmation of “a system of criteria for the rationality of economic choices based on a law of value, which has a national foundation and a popular content, independent of the criteria of economic rationality that emerges from the domination of the law of capitalist value that operates on a world scale” (Amin 1987: 435; see also Bello 2002). As early as 1933, however, John Maynard Keynes contemplated a similar idea, when he advocated for “a deliberate movement towards greater national self-sufficiency and economic isolation”, writing:

We each have our own fancy. [...] We wish – for the time at least and so long as the present transitional, experimental phase endures – to be our own masters, and to be as free as we can make ourselves from the interferences of the outside world. [...] It is my central contention there is no prospect for the next generation of a uniformity of economic system throughout the world, such as existed, broadly speaking, during the nineteenth century; that we all need to be as free as possible of interference from

economic changes elsewhere, *in order to make our own favorite experiments towards the ideal social republic of the future*; and that a deliberate movement towards greater national self-sufficiency and economic isolation will make our task easier, in so far as it can be accomplished without excessive economic cost. (Keynes 1933: 760)

In this, the Marxist and Keynesian critiques also share a certain affinity with recent right-wing critiques of globalization – such as Donald Trump’s “America First” policy – insofar as both view globalization as undermining the ability of nation-states to decide for themselves what economic policy to pursue, and that the only way to save democracy is therefore to return the nation-state to some form of economic self-sufficiency, or protectionism (see Bello 2002). The difference, of course, is what kind of “democracy” that such a policy of delinking is supposed to make possible: one that’s based on a renewed national conflict between capital and labour; or one that’s based on a national/fascist alliance between capital and labour, forged in opposition to the “anti-national” (and likely Jewish) threat of both socialism and the global financial elite. As Amin (1987: 444) writes, “The cultural nationalism addicted to the past is a symptom of crisis, not an answer to it. It shows the impotence of societies, in a deadlock, which have not yet found their ways, associating renovation efficiently with historical continuity”, whereas Amin’s own strategy of delinking, by contrast, is understood by him as a step in the direction of socialism, away from capitalism.

The second approach to democracy and globalization primarily comes out of mainstream political science, and makes the opposite case: that globalization *does* promote democracy. Generally speaking, this approach is not as systemic or structural as the Marxist one, but deals with the issue in what appears to be a more compartmentalized way, looking at different aspects of democracy (say, fair and free elections) and asking whether or not globalization promotes them or not. To that end, this approach typically relies on a rather formal definition of democracy – often called “procedural democracy” (see Saffon & Urbinati 2013) – according to which democracy is equated with certain institutions or even set of ideas, and not their ability to function given the globalization of capital.

To its advantage, this side has a lot *more* arguments than the Marxist side. Reading through this literature, one finds scholars making a variety of different arguments in support of the notion that globalization promotes democracy, all of which are based on empirical research, though not necessarily adding up to one coherent narrative – for instance, that “globalization makes democratization inevitable” as “democratic ideals sweep (or even trickle) across borders into authoritarian states” (Dalpino 2001: 45); that “the connection between globalization and democracy derives from their common values of openness and inclusion” (Teune 2002); that globalization “drives economic growth”, “helps the professional and middle class grow”, which makes democracy more likely as these classes are generally more inclined to demand it (*ibid*); and that democracy “empowers the voter, in exactly the same way as the market empowers the consumer, by making the expressed preferences of the individual, and the ability to satisfy them, the fundamental condition for political as much as economic success” (Beetham 1997: 85), so that democracy and capitalism tend towards each other; and so on.

The fact that such a broad variety of arguments exists in favour of a positive relation between globalization and democracy no doubt strengthens the case. Also, the fact that most if not all “actually existing” Marxist states have turned out to be everything but democratic – while many of the leading capitalist states have been able to uphold democracy, at least internally – seems to constitute a negative proof. The problem with these arguments, however, is that democracy is not just an “ideal” or a “value” that can easily travel or “trickle” across borders; nor is it something that takes place simply because enough middle-class people want it. Rather, democracy has a certain material basis, certain material conditions of possibility that need to be in place for it to work. The real issue, therefore, is whether or not globalization undermines those material conditions of possibility, regardless of whether globalization spreads democracy as a “value”. As Goodhart (2001: 536) puts it, summarizing the problem well: “If globalization decreases the capacities of states and limits their sovereignty and autonomy in ways that undercut the effectiveness of democratic institutions, the proliferation of formal democracy might mask a secular decline in its efficacy and value”. In this way, globalization might paradoxically both promote and undermine

democracy, depending on whether one understands democracy in terms of its formal institutions, or in terms of the ability of those formal institutions to actually give voice to the political will of the population.

As I will argue in this introduction, this problem ultimately appears to be one of sovereignty: if globalization undermines the sovereignty of nation-states, then it does not matter how much globalization also brings democratic institutions to all nations, as those institutions will no longer be able to realize the value of democracy within their constituencies.

“A small country with a large population, which has to live on exports”: the problem of democracy in Singapore

I started doing research about Singapore in early 2015, as part of a research group called “Egalitarianism: Forms, Processes, Comparison”, led by professor Bruce Kapferer at the University of Bergen. Initially, before going to Singapore for fieldwork, I decided to look into the history of how and why this place had become so incredibly successful economically. To give the reader a sense of just how successful Singapore’s economy is, here are some statistics taken from a paper published in the mid-eighties, at the highpoint of Singapore’s economic boom. The author makes the case that Singapore is “the world’s most successful economy”:

In the 1960s, GNP growth averaged 10% a year, accelerating to 14.3% a year in the 1970s. Real GDP domestic output and income discounted for inflation grew at an annual rate of 8.7% in the 1960s and 9.4% in the 1970s. The GNP growth rate in 1980 was 10.2%, and about the same rate was sustained in 1981. Annual inflation in the Consumer Price Index was 1.2% in the 1960s, 5.6% in the 1970s, and 8.5% in 1980.3 In other words, Singapore has for twenty years sustained an economic growth rate far above, and an inflation rate below, world averages, and has manage to achieve the often elusive ideal of rapid growth with relative price stability. (Lim 1983: 753)

In my own research, one of my primary goals was to understand the policy decisions that made all of this possible, in order to get a sense of the political economy of Singapore's economic miracle, beyond these somewhat lifeless numbers.

From the start, it is important for the reader to understand that Singapore's independence was not like that of most other post-colonies. When Singapore gained its independence in 1965, the country's first prime minister, Lee Kuan Yew, cried on TV – not out of happiness, but out of dread. Singapore had never asked to become an independent nation, and the reason why Lee cried was because he had just signed a document stating that Singapore would be separated from Malaysia, having merged with the neighbouring country less than two years earlier. “Every time when we look back on this moment when we sign this agreement which severs Singapore from Malaysia,” he said in a famous press conference, “it will be a moment of anguish. I mean, for me it is a moment of anguish because my whole life [...] I had believed in Malaysia, in merger, and the unity of these two territories”.¹

Colonial Singapore developed as a trading post within the British maritime empire, and was as such of great economic importance to the British in its function as an entrepôt – a place to store and re-export goods being shipped off to the West primarily from Malaysia, Indonesia, and China. At the time, however, it appeared to many to make little sense as an independent nation (see Lee 1978). In 1965, Singapore had a population of two million people (now it is five and a half), crowded on an island two-thirds the size of London, and mostly living in squatter settlements, or *kampongs*, on the fringes of the city centre (Loh 2013). The small island had almost no natural resources, nor anything in the way of an industry capable of employing its large and fast-growing population (Huff 1994). As Lee later remarked (2000: 1), Singapore “was not a natural country but man-made [...] We inherited the island without its hinterland, a heart without a body.” The merger plan was devised as a solution to this problem, by combining Singapore with the neighbouring Federation of Malaya, as well as the two regions Sabah and Sarawak, both located on the island Borneo. Merger was supposed to provide Singapore with precisely a “body” in the form of a common market with

¹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Idd8BK0MamA>

Malaysia, thereby solving – or so it was hoped – both of Singapore’s problems in one stroke: on the one hand, providing tariff-free imports of food, water and energy from the peninsula; and on the other hand, allowing tariff-free access to a big enough market to support a program of industrialization through import substitution. When in August 1965 merger with Malaysia broke down, Singapore was thus plunged into an uncertain future: how was the nation going to survive? “There are books to teach you how to build a house, how to repair engines, how to write a book”, Lee wrote in his memoirs. “But I have not seen a book on how to build a nation out of a disparate collection of immigrants from China, British India and the Dutch East Indies, or how to make a living for its people when its former economic role as an entrepôt of the region is becoming defunct” (Lee 2000: 1).

Luckily enough, a few years before Singapore got its independence, the UN had sent a group of economists to the country, tasked with the job of investigating the possibilities for economic development. The group was led by a Dutch economist, Albert Winsemius, who first came to Singapore in October 1960 (UNDP 2015). The outcome of their research was a report that laid the foundation for Singapore’s industrialization, and that became known as the “Winsemius Report” (officially titled *A proposed industrialization programme for the state of Singapore*), finished in 1961. What made the report so important to Singapore was primarily the fact that Winsemius did not believe that merger with Malaysia could work. As a result, the report worked on the assumption that Singapore would have to survive on its own, several years before this actually became a reality with independence in 1965. In terms of policy directions, this meant that the Winsemius report suggested that Singapore would have to develop on the basis of export-oriented industrialization through foreign direct investment, rather than industrialization through import substitution, meaning that Singapore would have to industrialize by inviting foreign companies to set up factories on the island, and produce for the global market, rather than by forming a common market with Malaysia.

As I first read the report – while I was in the middle of fieldwork – I came across a section that would deeply inform my understanding of Singapore, and in particular, the political economy of its remarkable development. It was written at the end of the

report, in a section where the authors lay out what they saw as the basic conditions of possibility for industrialization in Singapore. They wrote:

In a small country with a large population, which has to live on exports, it is in the long run not the government which can lay down working hours and conditions, not the trade unions and the employers who can fix wages and fringe benefits, *but it is the foreign customer*. [...] Capital can go to other countries, as it has already done. Enterprise can quiet down or escape, as it has done in recent years. Labour has no escape possibilities. It needs employment here and has no time to wait (Winsemius 1963: 200-201, emphasis mine).

When I first read this statement, my immediate reaction was that it proved the Marxists right: globalization *does* undermine democracy, and for precisely the reasons that the Marxists describe! For, in order for Singapore to survive, Singapore would have to pursue whatever policies that were demanded by “the foreign customer”, thereby transforming both the government, and labour, into the handmaidens of that foreign actor. As the report further went on to explain (ibid: 201), the foreign customer “is not interested in the number of days of paid sick leave which the Singapore legislation prescribes, and which Singapore employers often exceed. Nor would he be interested in a sheltered position for Singapore entrepreneurs [...]”, etc. Instead, the foreign consumer “is only interested in price and quality, only in what he gets for his money” (ibid: 201). Yet he gets to rule! Hence, to recall Patnaik’s phrase, “In matters directly affecting their material lives”, the citizens of Singapore had to be “denied any electoral choice” in order to achieve economic development.

Ideologically, the way that this denial of democracy came to be explained and justified in Singapore was primarily in terms of “national survival”, in what has become known as the “ideology of survival” (see Chua 1995; Lee 1978). In 1968, then minister of labour S. Rajaratnam explained the stakes of the game as he saw it, saying that “in an island like Singapore where we can grow no food or plant cotton and where one square mile has to keep alive and sustain 8,000 Singaporeans, a stagnant economy

means starvation”.² In his seminal work on the political economy of Singapore’s industrialization, Gary Rodan observes how during the early years of Singaporean independence, much energy was spent by the political leadership “to explain and justify the political existence of Singapore” after the country had lost the merger with Malaysia. He writes:

What emerged out of this was a coherent set of arguments which focused on the threat to, and requirements of, Singapore’s political and economic survival. This ‘ideology of survival’, as it has been referred to, insisted on the inseparability of economic and political survival and the necessary subservience of all other considerations. Above all else, survival demanded the internalisation of an entirely new set of social attitudes and beliefs which embodied self-sacrifice for the ‘national interest’. [...] To be successful in highly competitive world markets, workers would be required to accept both delayed gratification and the vagaries of global market forces (Rodan 1989: 88-89).

Similarly, Chua notes how Singapore’s condition of being “dependent on the regional and global markets for all its imports” has resulted in “a generalized anxiety about the long-term viability of the social, economic and political foundation of the island-nation”, which in turn “has been transformed into a set of ideological justifications for and instrumental practices of tight social and political control, *which taken together constitutes the authoritarianism of the regime*” (Chua 2017: 2). Among these controls is the Internal Security Act (ISA) (1960), a dreaded law that grants the government the power to detain anyone indefinitely without trial, “with a view to preventing that person from acting in any manner prejudicial to the security of Singapore or any part thereof or to the maintenance of public order or essential services therein”. Throughout history, this law that has been used repeatedly to detain the political opposition, typically on the charge that they are communist conspirators – though, as recent historical work has

² Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 483.

shown, more often than not on very shaky grounds (see Harper 2001; Barr 2010; Thum 2017).

“Eliminate the communists”: Winsemius’ political advice

During the first and most consequential usage of the ISA – a 1963 covert security operation codenamed “Operation Coldstore” – Winsemius himself played a significant role. Having been asked by Lee Kuan Yew what the main takeaways from his economic report were, Winsemius offered the young prime minister two simple but controversial advices: “Eliminate the communists”, and “Keep the statue of Raffles” (Tan 1982: 16). The latter advice referred to the colonial founder of Singapore, Stamford Raffles, whose statue stands on the bank of the Singapore river where he is said to have first set foot on the island in 1819. According to Winsemius, keeping the statue would serve as “a presentation to the outside world that you accept the heritage of the British.” “You will be the only former colony where the statue of an imperialist is still standing”, Winsemius said. “Let him stand” (ibid: 16). The former advice, “Eliminate the communists”, referred to the large and fairly diverse group of politicians, labour unionists, students and journalists who had played a major role in the anti-colonial movement, including getting the Lee’s party, People’s Action Party (PAP), into power. Winsemius told Lee:

As an economist, I am not interested in what you do with them. You can throw them in jail, throw them out of the country, you can even kill them. It doesn’t interest me as an economist, but I have to tell you that if you don’t eliminate them in the government, in the unions, in the streets, forget about economic development. (ibid: 17)

It would take almost two years until Lee heeded Winsemius advice. Operation Coldstore was carried out in the morning on 2 February, 1963, and in total 113 people were picked up by the Internal Security Department (ISD) and detained indefinitely, without trial. Many of them were kept for more than a decade; the longest serving prisoner, Chia

Thye Poh, spent 32 years in jail. By the time of Operation Coldstore, the majority of those arrested had broken out of PAP to form an oppositional party, called Barisan Sosialis (see Chua 2017). From the start, the coalition between the left-wingers and the moderate PAP leadership had been “one of political expediency”, as “the British educated ‘social democrats’ needed the ability of the radical left to mobilize the masses, while the latter needed the protective legitimacy of the English-speaking, British-educated professionals” (ibid: 6). Hence, the eventual break was to be expected, as each group needed the other to grab power, but had fundamentally different goals for what to do with that power.

To this day, Barisan Sosialis remains the only oppositional party in Singapore to ever pose a serious challenge to PAP’s parliamentary dominance. Those arrested during Operation Coldstore have always denied the charge of being communists – which at the time meant working under orders from either Beijing or Moscow – and no credible evidence to the contrary has ever been presented to the public (see Thum 2013).³ As historian Geoff Wade writes, “By essentially eliminating credible political opposition through indefinite detention without trial, Operation Coldstore essentially created the conditions where a single political force could dominate every aspect of the Singapore polity”, a situation that has more or less remained the same to this day. “It is thus”, Wade writes,

to Operation Coldstore we must look today when trying to understand many aspects of modern Singapore, and particularly how Singapore has become an essentially one-party state, where a single political force controls and dominates every aspect of social existence – from the political to the economic, from defence to internal security, and from education to social policies, and has done so since 1963. (Wade 2013: 46)

³ In the view of many historians, therefore, “Operation Coldstore” did not bring about an end to communism in Singapore, but an end to political pluralism and liberal democracy (Chua 2017; Barr & Trocki 2008).

Winsemius was not the only one person who suggested that the “communists” should be “eliminated”, nor was he in all likelihood the most important person to do so. Around the same time as Winsemius made his remarks, the UK High Commissioner to Singapore, Lord Selkirk – who had close contact with Lee during most of his rise to power – observed that Lee is “faced with a fundamental contradiction”: he “came to power on a platform of socialism and anti-colonialism”, as “[n]o other platform could offer any prospect of success with the Singapore electorate”; at the same time, “Singapore can only survive by international trade coupled with friendly and co-operative relations with all trading countries”. The big question, Selkirk thought, was: “Will the half-educated supporters of the PAP see this contradiction in time?” (Selkirk 1960-05-20)

The reason why Winsemius is particularly interesting, I think, is because he came to this conclusion purely on the basis of economic reasoning. When he suggested to Lee that the communists must be “eliminated”, he did so “as an economist” – and not just any economist, but as the UN economist advisor to the Singapore government. To that end, when Winsemius was asked in a 1982 oral history interview about the main disagreement between himself and the “communists”, he replied that “[t]he main thing was of course: in which way to reach full employment. And the difference of opinion was: what is the best way?”. He then went on to describe a debate between himself and the leading figure of the radical left, Lim Chin Siong, who when Operation Coldstore was planned was at the top of the list of those to be arrested. Winsemius fleshed out their difference of opinion:

In my opinion, which I always brought forward, we needed initiative from our own entrepreneurs and from others, which we would only get if we had a cooperation between employers and employees in well-organized form. Lim [...] thought that was futile – that cooperation would and should never come about. Because the men most interested in employment was not, in principle, the employer. As an entrepreneur, he was interested in profits. And the employee, the worker, was really the only man interested in employment. Therefore a cooperation, even if cooperation existed here and there in the world, should never come about. It should be, I called it at that time the

dictatorship of the worker, which he refused to accept. It's only dictatorship. But that discussion, we spent hours on it, that discussion never came to an end. We never came to a common ground even. But intellectually, it was very interesting. From let's say a policy point of view, it was useless. (Tan 1982: 72-73)

Here, it is important to notice that Winsemius did not really disagree with Lim in principle, as he also believed that “the men most interested in employment was not, in principle, the employer”. Or how else is one to interpret the Winsemius Report's statement that labour “needs employment here and has no time to wait”, while capital “can go to other countries, as it has already done”? The clear implication of this statement, it seems, is that capital is interested in employment only to the extent that it can profit from it, whereas labour must be interested in employment more immediately as a matter of survival – exactly Lim's point! The reason why Winsemius nevertheless argued for “close cooperation between capital and labour” was because he believed that “if this cooperation does not come about, labour will suffer for it”. Hence, the reason why labour had to cooperate with capital, in Winsemius' view, was not because the two shared the same interests, but *precisely because they did not* – and because capital was in a position to punish labour if going against the interests of capital.

This reasoning, Winsemius passed on to the first generation of leaders in Singapore, who in turn had to convince the electorate that the interests of labour were to welcome capital with open arms, and to organize industrial relations with capital on the basis of cooperation rather than class struggle, even though the interests of capital and labour were in immediate terms directly opposed to one another. As then minister of labour, S. Rajaratnam, put this point in 1968, when introducing two new laws – the Employment Act and the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act (discussed at length in chapter three) – that together lay the institutional foundation for PAP's politics of labour peace:

[I]f, as politicians, we had wanted to ensure the popularity of our party and thus assure ourselves of a longer political life, it would have been in our interests to have presented

a Bill the opposite of what is now under consideration. In many newly independent countries, politicians out to be popular with the people, and particularly with the workers because they happen to be in the majority, have invariably persecuted and impoverished the capitalists in the belief that as the rich become poorer, the poor would become richer. We have studied these examples with great interest and in every case the result has been contrary to what was expected: the capitalists certainly have grown poorer but the poor have grown poorer still.⁴

The rest, as they say, is history: Singapore embarked on its program of economic development, based on “close cooperation between capital and labour”, which in one generation took the country from a poor regional trading hub to one of the richest countries in the world – or, as the title of Lee Kuan Yew’s memoir put it, “From third world to first” (Lee 2000).

Embedded and disembedded economies

Placing the debate between Lim and Winsemius – and by extension, the debate between the British educated PAP moderates, and the radical trade unionists – in the context of economic anthropology, one way to understand their opposition is in terms of the contrast between “embedded” and “disembedded” economics (see Polanyi 1968; Granovetter 1985; Hann & Hart 2009).

In an embedded economy, there is no such thing as “the economy” in the sense of an autonomous sphere of production and exchange in which abstract economic agents (*homo economicus*) can be assumed to act on the basis of purely rational calculation, and in which all human action can be reduced to mathematical formulas, or a small set of principles (say, supply and demand). Instead, all economic activity exists here as a subset of the broader project of producing and reproducing society, understood as an integrated whole. In an embedded economy, therefore, producers and consumers are never just producers and consumers – they are mothers, father, uncles, aunts, men and

⁴ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 472.

women; and insofar as they perform what might be described as economic roles (such as hunting, building, feeding, healing, planting, gathering, etc.), those economic roles are always part of the broader societal roles that their social identities imply. In such economies, it makes no sense to say that the values of “society” must be subordinated to the values of “the economy”, as all economic activity is firmly embedded in society and social relations (see Polanyi 1968).

In a disembedded economy, by contrast, the economy is understood as precisely such an autonomous arena of human action, in which the value of everything can be expressed as a fraction of everything else – such that the yearly value of caretaker, say, can be said to be equal to the value of a sportscar. In an embedded economy, calculations of that sort would make no sense whatsoever, as the value of things are here understood in terms of their concrete use-value. In a disembedded economy, by contrast, the value of such things are primarily measured in terms of their exchange-value, which means that anything that maximizes “value” in the singular – i.e. economic growth – can be prioritized over anything that does not. Consequently, in such an economy, it becomes possible to subordinate the values of “society” to the values of “the economy”, as the economy is not understood as a means to generate particular societal values (say, democracy and freedom), but simply as a mechanism for maximizing “value” in the abstract – which can be done equally well by maximizing sportscars as by maximizing caretaking! (ibid.)

Of course, as Gudeman (2009) has pointed out, these two forms of economy are never strictly separated in the real world, but better understood as principles of economic action, which in practice always co-exist. “I hold that all economies are both embedded and disembedded”, Gudeman writes, as all economies contain “two value realms, mutuality and market, or community and impersonal trade” (ibid: 18). The difference between different economic systems, therefore, is not whether they “are” embedded or disembedded, but rather which of these two value realms dominates over the other; and the difference between different economic *ideologies*, in turn, is which of these value realms that any particular thinker believes *should* (or should not) dominate over the other.

In one of the last speeches that he gave before being arrested, Lim gave a very strong expression to the embedded view of economics, as he said:

In my opinion, it is not right to split freedom and democracy from improving life quality or to consider both as two opposite things. Why can't the people in the colony live a happy life? It is because they do not have democracy and freedom [...] To the people in the colony, the political rights such as independence, liberation, democracy and freedom *provide the country with the political condition to improve the life of the people and to develop the economy of the country*. Without this condition, there will be no fundamental improvement of life and development of national economy. Hasn't this been proven by history? [...] It is impossible and incorrect to separate politics from economy. It is also impossible and incorrect to deny politics with economy.⁵

Winsemius, on his part, came to the exact opposite conclusion, as he believed that “the political condition to improve the life of the people and to develop the economy of the country” was to eliminate people like Lim. According to Winsemius, economic development should not be judged by the political values that it supports or makes possible – “independence, liberation, democracy and freedom” – but on the contrary, should be used as the very yardstick against which to measure the (pragmatic) value of these political goals. Does democracy promote economic development? Then it should be promoted; otherwise not. Because Lim's politics would make economic development impossible, he and those like him had to be removed.

With Lim gone, this latter view also became the philosophy of state. As economist John Kenneth Galbraith wrote about Singapore's style of government, its “contribution [to society] is to make pragmatic use of all ideas and refuse to be captive of anyone. [...] The test is whether it works or helps people to work” (Galbraith 1977: 300). Similarly, Winsemius suggested that if Singapore was ever going to be a socialist country – which was what the electorate had voted for when first getting PAP into power – it would have to be “realistic socialism”. He said:

⁵ Translated from Hokkien and given to me by historian PJ Thum.

[W]hat we need is an economic policy on a capitalistic basis – let’s earn it first. Once we have earned it, we have the second step of our social policy. There we can distribute what we have earned. If we began to distribute with what we have not earned, let’s forget it. So we have indeed a socialist country. It does not look very socialist, but in its policy, it’s very realistically socialist.

In this, Winsemius gave a clear expression to the disembodied view of the economy, as he described the economy as the universal framework within which any form of society – be it socialist or capitalist – had to realize itself. Most importantly, he provided an early example of what Bloch and Parry would later describe as “a remarkable conceptual revolution [...] in capitalist ideology”, according to which “the values of the short-term order” – meaning the disembodied economy/market – “have become elaborated into a theory of long-term reproduction” (Bloch & Parry 1989: 29). According to Winsemius, socialism was not to be understood as an altogether different system of social organization, through which a different economic logic could be brought into being. Instead, *the economy is what it is* – a force of nature that imposes constraints from without – and if society wants to survive, it simply has to adapt to the dictates of the economy.

Sovereignty and democracy

Another, closely related way of looking at this “conflict of visions” (Sowell 1987) is in terms of sovereignty, or more correctly, *popular* sovereignty. This concept lay at the core of Lim’s political thinking, as his main reason for opposing colonialism was that it denied the people⁶ in the colony the right to rule over themselves, and to decide their

⁶ Throughout this thesis, I try to avoid using the term “the people”, preferring instead the more neutral term “the citizens”. Whenever I nevertheless use the term “the people”, I use it either in scare quotes – to signal that this is in reference to someone else’s usage of the term - or to capture the broader meaning that the term “the people” carries, such as when I speak about “the social contract” as being forged between “the people” (however defined) and “the state”, or when I refer to “the people in the colony”. To use the term “the citizens” in these contexts would be to miss something crucial, as citizenship is in many ways the result of the social contract forged between “the people” and “the

own fate (see Thum 2017). Conversely, popular sovereignty was probably the singular most important thing to be denied by the economic pragmatism of Winsemius – and by extension, by the first generation of Singaporean leaders who developed the country according to his economic plan – as he saw the ability of the people to decide their own fate as being radically limited by the demands of the “foreign costumer”.

When the notion of sovereignty migrated from the realm of heaven and God – where it had originally been located by medieval thinkers like Bodin, who understood the power of kings to be divinely ordained (Bodin 1992) – to the realm of democracy and “the people”, it nevertheless retained much of its God-like features (see Elshtain 2008). Most important among these, I submit, was the idea that the sovereign brings the world into being through the act of speaking the truth. In the case of God, this idea is epitomized by the Christian notion that the “word” (logos) brings the world into being; as one read in John 1:1: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God” – and by speaking the true word, God brought the world in being, created order out of chaos, and created man in his image (see Peterson 1999: 100ff). Similarly, what makes the people sovereign is the fact that they are able to create society in their own image by speaking the truth. Usually, the way this is framed – most famously by Rousseau (1764) – is in terms of the “general will”, which is the truth about the people, from the point of view of the people, representing their smallest common self-understanding. By giving expression to the general will, the people are according to Rousseau able to bring about the sort of society that they want to live in, and importantly, to formulate the kind of policies that will aid them in achieving that goal. Conversely, if society *cannot* be organized in accordance with the general will of the people, this can only mean that the people are not sovereign. The idea of popular sovereignty, it seems to me, stands or falls on this point.

state”, and as citizenship is denied “the people in the colony”. More often, however, the concept of “the people” is very unprecise, and furthermore carries many connotations that I wish to avoid (such as that of being an organic unity). Hence, whenever the term “the citizens” does the same work as the term “the people”, I prefer the former. (A third, inconsequential usage of the term “the people” is the descriptive usage, such as “the people who live in HDBs”, or “the people who made these decisions”, where “the people” is synonymous to the “the individuals”.)

Looking at this from Winsemius' point of view, it is clear what the problem with popular sovereignty is in a place like Singapore. Given Singapore's reliance on imports for almost all of its basic needs, the "truth" that founds Singapore as a society is from Winsemius' point of view not the general will of the people, but rather the perception of everyone else – whether Singapore is the kind of society where they would like to invest their money, buy their products from, and so on. What founds society from this point of view, we might therefore say, is not the general will of the people, but *the general will of the market* – personified by Winsemius as "the foreign customer", who is "only [interested] in what he gets for his money".

From this perspective, Singapore appears in many ways to be more like a corporation than a sovereign nation-state, and is indeed often referred to as such by politicians – as "Singapore Inc." In 2003, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong gave a clear expression to this idea, during an address at the Annual Dinner of the Economics Society of Singapore, where he noted that while companies "find it difficult to successfully ride even one wave of changes", countries like Singapore "have to be ready to transform themselves repeatedly", adding that: "If a company fails to remake itself it goes under. The creative destruction of the market economy then recycles the freed-up resources to other more productive purposes. But if a country fails to remake itself, the consequences for its people are dire" (Lee 2004). To many politicians in Singapore, this is the main reason why Singapore cannot afford to have anything like political pluralism. As one of them, PAP member of parliament Ong Ye Kung, said in a recent and highly publicized statement: "A one-party system may give Singapore its best shot at success, because it is a small country that needs to stay nimble [...] For a multi-party system to form [...] there must first be at least two sufficiently different paths for Singapore to take", which, according to this politician, there aren't (Yong 2017). Instead, according to this view, the only meaningful way forward for Singapore is to pursue the kind of policies that maximizes its success as a corporation.

Making a similar observation, but from a critical point of view, anthropologist Bruce Kapferer (2010) has suggested that globalization has brought about a corporatization of the state, which in turn has brought about an inversion of the "the

great transformation” that Polanyi famously described. According to Kapferer, where Polanyi identified a process through which “the invention of the economy and the market started out as a relatively autonomous phenomenon that was disembedded from society and, most importantly, controlled by the political”, globalization has brought about “a process in which there is a radical rearrangement of the very nature of the social and of society”. Through this process, Kapferer suggests, “The political and the social – society itself – are not founded in the economic” “[I]nstead”, he argues, “they are, in themselves, shapes of the economic and of the market or the various guises of the economic” (ibid: 126-127).

Differently put, with the advent of globalization, society is no longer the whole that the economy (as a part) is either embedded in or disembedded from. Instead, the economy has itself become the whole that each society is either embedded in or disembedded from, and where the role of the state is to control and organize society in such a way as to respond to the dictates of the market. As Kapferer writes, “What had been isolated and conceptualized as distinct and given heightened autonomy” – meaning the market and the economy – “has in fact been reconceived as the essence of the social” (ibid: 127). According to this view, globalization does not so much undermine the state as such; rather, it brings about a reversal of the situation that the traditional nation-state was set up to deal with, in which the state would both “encompass” and “stand above” the economy (cf. Gupta & Ferguson 2002). In this new situation, Kapferer argues, the market stands above and encompasses the state, and sets the terms for what the state can and cannot do, rather than the other way around – a process of creative destruction that the corporate state is “both the condition and effect of” (ibid: 125).

Seen from the perspective of Singapore, the flip-side of this argument appears to be that the only way for a people to ever be truly sovereign is to be *fully self-sufficient* – meaning not dependent on trade to satisfy their wants, needs and desires as a society. As long as they are dependent on trade, however, the general will of the people will simply have to contend with the general will of the market, rendering the people as a consequence less-than-sovereign, all the way down to the point where they are

sovereign *only in name*. To that end, a joke was circling on the internet forum *Reddit* in 2017, in which a user described how Singapore got to be so economically successful. In a discussion thread about what would constitute a good “TL;DR” history of Singapore – meaning “too long, didn’t read”, and is internet-slang for a very short summary – the most “up-voted” comment read:

Used to be Britain's bitch then Japan's bitch for a while then back to Britain's bitch then this one guy said 'let's be Malaysia's bitch' and Malaysia said 'yes, wait no'. 'Damn, I guess we'll trade with everyone and be everyone's bitch' he said, carrying the entire island country from a third world to a first world country.⁷

This, in turn, seems to point to a rather ominous aspect of the concept of popular sovereignty, which is that since no nation is ever fully self-sufficient – but all more or less trade dependent – the only way for any population to ever claim “true” sovereignty is for them to conquer all their trading partners, meaning, to colonize the world.

If nothing else, this would seem to explain what is sometimes called “the paradox of sovereignty”. As William Connolly defines it, this paradox consists in the fact that “the rule of law in a state is enabled by a practice of sovereignty that rises above the law” (Connolly 2007: 24). In the literature, this paradox has lead thinkers like Carl Schmitt and Giorgio Agamben to argue that the sovereign is “he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 1922: 5), and that “the hidden paradigm” of sovereignty is ultimately the Nazi concentration camp, as this is the legal “zone of exception” *par excellence* (Agamben 1998: 123). Now, if we imagine that the abstract concept of sovereignty co-evolved with the real-world project of colonialism, then perhaps the reason why we tend to think about sovereignty in this way – as “paradoxical”, defined by its exception, and so on – may be precisely because the only truly sovereign nations to have ever existed were ones that relied on maintaining *massive zones of exception within them*, from which they could collect all the raw material needed to reproduce the

⁷ Available online: https://www.reddit.com/r/singapore/comments/6ch683/tldr_of_singapores_history/

fantasy of self-sufficiency that “true” sovereignty requires. In a thought-provoking article, Megan Wachspres makes exactly this point, as she writes that

sovereignty, both as a legal concept and as a particular set of claims and practices, has historically been deployed as a way of *including that which cannot be considered the same*. The most paradoxical qualities of sovereignty – its ‘Janus-faced character’ and its capacity to make law while standing outside of it – have been the means by which the colonial tension between ‘otherness’ and legal homogeneity have been mediated, however uneasily [...] (Wachspres 2009: 317)

A similar idea, too, lies at the centre of Prabhat and Utsa Patnaik’s theory of imperialism (Patnaik & Patnaik 2016), in which they argue that imperialism developed primarily in response to the fact that “a large range of products of the tropical landmass, which are not producible at all in cold temperate regions where the metropolitan core of the capitalist world is located, are essential nonetheless for this metropolitan core” (ibid: 11). Because of this basic material difference between the tropics and the temperate regions, they argue, the so-called “comparative cost advantage” – according to which a global division of labour and global trade benefits all, as it allows each country to specialize in producing only such commodities that they can produce cheaper relative to other countries – is essentially bogus, as it ignores “the fact that all countries could not produce all goods” (ibid: 11). Worse yet, the Patnaik’s write, while the temperate regions “could never produce a large range of crops, which tropical or subtropical countries could”, the tropical regions could on their part produce “during their winter months, even the same crops that temperate regions did in summer” (ibid: 11-12). Hence, the Patnaik’s argue, the temperate regions simply need the tropical regions far more than vice versa.

According to the Patnaik’s, this is why some countries in the temperate regions chose to colonize the tropical regions: because fair trade would not have been very beneficial to the former, given their much greater need for trade compared to the tropical regions. Hence, by extending the sovereignty of Empire over the tropics, the colonial

centre was able to enact a form of national self-sufficiency that would have been impossible otherwise, had the centre been forced to trade with the tropical regions *as sovereign nation states*. Specifically, the Patnaik's argue, without the use of force, the centre would not have been able to solve its structural trade deficit with the tropical regions – something that force allowed them to do, as they could now simply levy taxes on the latter, thereby achieving a fictitious balance of payments. “[T]he producers appeared to be paid”, the Patnaik's write, “but were not actually paid since their economic surplus extracted as tax payment merely changed its form, from money to goods” (ibid: 34), meaning “that such commodities were obtained *gratis* by the metropolis” (ibid: 91), a process that the Patnaik's and others refer to as a “surplus drain”.

Following this analysis, we might hypothesize that this is how “true” popular sovereignty exists: as both the cause and effect of a colonial project aimed at overcoming the dual threat to popular sovereignty faced by the peoples of the temperate regions, of being either (a) subject to the tropical regions' willingness to trade on free terms, in which case the temperate regions would constantly find themselves at the mercy of a group of people who need them less than vice versa; or simply (b) slaves to their own less-than-optimal natural environment, in case they do not do (a). From this perspective, too, it seems no coincidence that the end of colonialism has ushered in a new era – that of globalization – which many see as being characterized precisely by a crisis of popular sovereignty. As free-trade advocate Thomas Friedman writes: “Globalization is not a choice. It's a reality. [...] And the most basic truth about globalization is this: *No one is in charge*. [...] It's like telling people there's no God. We all want to believe that someone is in charge and responsible” (Friedman 1999: 113).

From the perspective of economic anthropology, but to similar effect, Jane Guyer writes about globalization in terms of a shift in the temporal horizons by which societies understand themselves, from the “near future” – by which she means “the reach of thought and imagination, of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals, in short, of the process of implicating oneself

in the ongoing life of the social and material world that used to be encompassed under an expansively inclusive concept of ‘reasoning’ – to “a combination of fantasy futurism and enforced presentism” (Guyer 2007: 409). Clearly, popular sovereignty belongs only in the former of these time-scales – and, as Jonathan Friedman (2007: 426) has suggested in a commentary on Guyer, that time-scale itself seem to belong primarily to a “self-contained state-economy” that never existed.

In addition to this, there has also been some recent anthropological interest in looking at the concept and practice of sovereignty from the point of view of former colonies (see Hansen & Stepputat 2001; Bonilla 2017; Kauanui 2017; Geertz 2004; Bertelsen & Kapferer 2009; Sturm 2017). Having freed themselves from what can only be described as situations of anti-sovereignty – being zones of exception to sovereignty, on the basis of which sovereignty could be established in the metropolis – what kind of sovereignty can possibly be erected here upon independence? Perhaps a weak kind; perhaps a “graduated” kind (Ong 2000). In a review of this literature, Hansen and Stepputat suggest that rather than “an ontological ground of power and order”, sovereignty appears in post-colonial societies to be “a tentative and always emergent form of authority grounded in violence” – meaning, not a name for the power of the people to create the world in their image, but rather, an attempt by the state to maintain authority in the absence of such powers.

The point, of course, is that this is what sovereignty *always was* – and that only given the excluding inclusion of the colonies into the project of Empire could it ever appear to be anything else.

Marxism goes to Singapore: a critique of capitalism, or a critique of democracy?

This, then, brings us back to the Marxist case that globalization undermines democracy. At this point, it should be clear that this argument is really about the loss of popular sovereignty that globalization brings about, which in turn is seen to undermine the possibility of democracy. Looking at Singapore, it is hard to argue against the basic truth of this observation: to the extent that the Singaporean leadership has been forced to choose between acting in accordance with the general will of the people (however

defined), and what I have called the general will of the market, the choice has always been clear – they have gone with the market.

So far, so good for the Marxist critique, one might think. But is it? The problem with the Marxist analysis, I will argue, is that even if it is correct in its general diagnosis, when applied to the specific context of Singapore, it can only end up justifying the very thing it critiques, which is Singapore's democratic deficit. For if it is true that (a) globalization forces all nations to “pursue such policies as are demanded by finance capital”, such that “In matters directly affecting their material lives [...] the people are denied any electoral choice, even in polities characterised by formal electoral democracy”; and (b) the only way for nation-states to defend their democracies is therefore to “delink from the vortex of globalization” – Patnaik's two conclusions – then the conclusion in a place like Singapore must be that democracy is impossible, *because Singapore cannot delink*. This basic fact is not a matter of policy – it is a pre-political reality. As Patnaik admitted himself, when asked how his policy of delinking would work for small economies:

It's clear that delinking by a small economy is going to be a problem. I think it's a problem in Greece which [is] 90% import dependent and consequently you need hard currency – how do you delink? Cuba, exactly the same thing, how do you delink? I think large diversified economies – China, India, and so on – can delink more easily. [...] But for small economies I think there would have to be a coming together of many of these economies before a policy of delinking can be thought of. (Patnaik 2015)

Hence, as long as Singapore does not suddenly decide to link up with Malaysia and/or Indonesia, or some other big country (China?) – which is not going to happen anytime soon, if ever – the Marxist critique of capitalist globalization can only end up as its opposite here: namely, as a critique of democracy in the name of capitalist globalization, rather than as a critique of capitalist globalization in the name of democracy.

The aim of this thesis, then, is to propose a way out of this deadlock. By delving into various empirical domains of Singaporean society, I will seek to answer the

question: *How does one look honestly and realistically at Singapore's situation – of being a small and trade-dependent nation, with a large population, in a world of global capitalism – without ending up in the defeatist position that democracy has to be sacrificed at the altar of survival?*

Based on our discussion in this chapter – and as I will seek to show in the rest of this thesis – it is clear what the first order of (analytical) business must be: one must delink the very concept of democracy from that of popular sovereignty – and thus make the former applicable to Singapore. More specifically, I will argue, in order to break out of the Marxist deadlock, one must challenge some of the basic assumptions that inform the Marxist framework itself. Most important among these, I contend, is the notion that the interests of capital and labour are fundamentally in conflict with one another, and that capitalist democracy is therefore only possible insofar as labour is in a position to use “the strength of organised numbers [...] and state power to tie capital in to arrangements (and costs) which it would otherwise seek to avoid” (Pierson 2001: 459).

To that end, it should be noted that when Patnaik speaks about the “closure of politics” that globalization in his view brings about, he is really talking about the closure of *a particular kind of politics* and *a particular kind of democracy*, one that he happens to favour as a Marxist: a politics of left and right, labour versus capital, by which labour opposes the interests of capital, and asserts its own. According to most Marxists, of course, this is the only meaningful form of democracy anyway, as the interests of “the masses” are from their point of view always oppose the interests of capital – which means that, if the masses find themselves in a situation where doing so is no longer possible, then democracy must become impossible “even in politics characterised by formal electoral democracy”, as the masses will no longer be able to assert their interests.

But is this an appropriate view? I will argue that it is not. According to the analysis that I will present in this thesis, the reason why democracy is often difficult under conditions of global capitalism is not because globalization has finally allowed the interests of capital to dominate over the interests of labour. Rather, it is because globalization has brought about *a greater conflict between the interests of labour as*

they stand at any given moment, and the interests of labour as they stand over time, as globalization allows capital to assert its interests much more aggressively at every given moment, even as capitalism as a whole remains positive-sum over time.

I will refer to this as *the prisoner's dilemma of capitalism*: the fact that, even though the interests of capital and labour are aligned over time, and even though both in principle have more to gain from collaboration towards positive-sum increases in wealth than from zero-sum struggle over current output, the incentive structure of capitalism is such that it pushes both parties to nevertheless engage in zero-sum struggle at every given moment.

Globalization, I will argue, intensifies this prisoner's dilemma. As a result, governments that seek to resolve this dilemma may increasingly have to resort to coercion in their attempts to "convince" labour that it is in their long term interests to collaborate with capital towards positive-sum increases in wealth. Here, my argument will not be that governments that do so – like the Singaporean government – are necessarily acting in the interests of labour. Instead, my argument will be that this should be approached as an open-ended question: one that may receive different answers depending on the country that is researched, and not, as many Marxists would have it, as a foregone conclusion in the negative.

Outline of thesis

Primarily, the way that I will approach this question empirically will be by focusing on Singapore's pension system, the Central Provident Fund (CPF), which I will argue provides Singapore with its main tool for overcoming the prisoner's dilemma of capitalism. Specifically, I will argue, the CPF has allowed the Singaporean government to forge a social contract between the people and the state that is best understood as a form of social democracy adapted to conditions of global capitalism. In addition to this, I will suggest that this social contract is best understood as a scaling up of the middleman minority culture that had previously dominated Singapore during its colonial era, and that the first generation of leaders adapted to the project of social democratic state-making.

In chapter two, I will introduce the CPF system, and in particular the protests that erupted in 2013 under the banner “Return Our CPF”. Here, I will acquaint the reader with the CPF system, as well as the group of activists who organized protests around it. I will review the arguments that the activists advanced in service of their cause, as well as the counterclaims advanced by the state. I will also discuss what I see as the fundamental dilemma that underlies this issue, which is the fact that Singapore is approaching what appears to be an increasingly unsustainable old-age support ratio, as the country’s population has been rapidly ageing at the same time as the productivity of its labour-force has not been increasing fast enough to offset the burden that an ageing society places on its productive members. As a result, Singapore finds itself in the contradictory position of sitting on some of the world largest public wealth – contained in its two sovereign wealth funds, Government Investment Corporation (GIC) and Temasek – at the same time as many of its elders are not able, or allowed, to retire.

In chapters three and four, I will look at the history of Singapore’s social contract. In particular, I will look at the role played by the CPF in forging this social contract, as well a number of other policies that were important in bringing it about. Here, I will lay out my case against the Marxist perspective more thoroughly, by going through the Marxist argument against capitalism in general, and the Marxist argument against social democracy in particular, focusing my attention on the core of the problem, which I will argue is the labour theory of value. I will also develop my arguments a) that Singapore is best understood as a social democracy adapted to the conditions of globalized capitalism, and b) that Singapore’s form of social democracy is best understood as a social democracy with middleman minority characteristics, or what I will call a middleman minority state.

In chapters five and six, I will follow the “Return Our CPF” protests in more detail. In chapter five, we will look at the case of Roy Ngerng, a blogger who rose to fame in Singapore primarily for his writings on the CPF system, which resulted in him being sued by prime minister Lee Hsien Loong for defamation. In chapter six, I will follow the trial against three of the key participants at the “Return Our CPF” protests, who were charged with having committed a public nuisance during the protests.

In chapter seven, I will depart from the “Return Our CPF” protests, and instead look at the case of a young YouTuber, Amos Yee, who was taken to court after having uploaded a video in which he celebrated the death of Singapore’s first prime minister and “founding father”, Lee Kuan Yew. In this chapter, I will look at the sustainability of the Singaporean social contract in the context of the growing relevance of social media, as well as in the context of generational change. Drawing on the work of law professor Amy Chua, I will argue that Amos represents the same problem to the middleman minority state as the “third generation” has always represented to middleman minorities, which is the problem of assimilation into the “host society” – which, in the case of Singapore, means assimilation into the West, and in particular, the adoption of free speech as a master-value.

In chapter eight, the concluding chapter, I will synthesize the findings of the previous chapters in order to discuss the relevance of Singapore for how we understand the relation between capitalism, globalization, democracy and social democracy. Here, I will lay out my argument for why Singapore is best understood as a social democracy with middleman minority characteristics, and why as such it points to a (not always palatable) way out of the Marxist deadlock described in the introduction.

Method and disposition

This thesis, I suspect, will be somewhat different from what readers of anthropology are used to. In researching and writing this thesis, I have employed any method of enquiry, any academic theory, any source or form of material that has helped me to answer the research question that I have posed. As a result, the thesis may at first sight appear quite schizophrenic when it comes to its disciplinary identity: does it fit within anthropology, sociology, political science, political economy, international relations – in all of the above, or in neither? My hope is that, what the thesis lacks in terms of adherence to disciplinary conventions, it makes up for in terms of its approach to truth-seeking, as I have sought to use whatever approach that has best helped me explain my material. To that end, the title of the thesis is borrowed from the work of conservative economist Thomas Sowell, while much of the analysis of social democracy is borrowed

from Marxist theorist Adam Przeworski; I have drawn equally from Fredrich Hayek as I have from Antonio Gramsci. This captures the spirit of my work, which is that *all true perspective must ultimately line up* – meaning that Marxists and conservatives must have equally much to teach us about the world, insofar as they have both figured out something that is true. My view is that one does not need to be a disciple of either to find value in both; in fact, only by being a disciple of neither, it seem to me, is it possible to pursue truth with an open mind, since neither Marxists nor conservatives are likely to be right about everything, but equally unlikely to be right about nothing.

We anthropologists typically distinguish ourselves from other social scientists in terms of our preferred method of inquiry, which is participant observation. That is how I started out as well: I was doing participant observation within the small activist community in Singapore, building a network of contacts and informants, trying to get to know as many people there as I could. I began this work in June 2015, and stayed in Singapore until February 2017, returning again in 2019 to live with my wife (who is Singaporean), staying until late-2021. Since I do not speak any of the non-English languages that are spoken in Singapore – primarily Chinese (officially Mandarin, but also Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, and other Chinese dialects), Malay, and Tamil – all my fieldwork was done in English. For the most part, this was not a problem at all, as most Singaporeans are fully bilingual, speaking both English – or “Singlish”, the version of English spoken in Singapore, which incorporates elements of Chinese and Malay – and one or two of the other local languages. Doing fieldwork with some older activists, the language barrier could sometimes be a problem, as some of them have Chinese as their primary language, and do not speak English fluently. This problem, I dealt with simply by asking them additional questions to clarify what they meant, whenever necessary. This surely meant some loss of nuance, but hopefully not too much. Most of the time, however, my interlocutors were fluent in English – and indeed, most young people in Singapore nowadays have English as their primary language.

During my first stay in Singapore, between 2015 and 2017, I rented a room in a colonial-style bungalow in an area called Wessex Estates, a very charming little neighbourhood in the south-western part of Singapore, close to the city centre. Wessex

used to be a military quarter for the British, and then – briefly – a prison camp during the Japanese occupation, which lasted between 1943 and 1945 (during which time Singapore was renamed Syonan-to, meaning “Light of the south” in Japanese). In addition, the Japanese used some of the houses in the area as torture chambers, which is why many locals believe the area to be haunted (I however never experienced anything out of the ordinary, except a large python snake in my backyard, which to me was almost as scary as seeing a ghost). I lived in this area for the entirety of my stay, although I did shift houses once, as I got sick during the middle of fieldwork – diagnosed with type 1 diabetes – and therefore had to go home for a month of sick-leave, between May and June 2016. When I returned to Singapore, my previous room was no longer available; however, one of the activists that I had gotten to know through my fieldwork had an extra room in another house in the area, which she was kind enough to rent out to me.

As I began to form a clear idea of the question that I wanted to pursue, I soon realized that participant observation alone would not suffice, as there was no way to answer the questions that arose out of participant observation using only the material gathered from participant observation. Why did a protest around the pension fund seem to be about so much more than just the pension fund? What is the significance of the CPF in the social contract of Singaporean society? The material that I gathered through participant observation provided many question that it could not answer on its own accord. I needed to also study the history of Singapore, using both archival materials, political biographies and second hand sources. In addition, I needed to understand theories outside of anthropology – particularly those of political economy and macroeconomics – in order to situate the material that I had gathered through participant observation in its proper context.

In itself, this is of course nothing strange. As Tim Ingold (2014) has convincingly argued, ethnography should not be equated with participant observation, but is better understood as the art of making sense of participant observation – something that cannot be done simply by writing down what one sees in the field, and conjuring up some analysis by looking for patterns in the “data”. Rather, in order to make sense of

participant observation, one must combine it with other forms research – such as archival work, reading of second hand literature (often outside of anthropology), and applying various types of theories to it, among other things – in order to make sense of the first-hand data that one has gathered through participant observation. “Ethnography”, then, is what comes out of this combination; and “ethnographic theory”, in turn, is the body of knowledge that anthropologists (who do this kind of work) accumulate on the basis of this combination.

From this perspective, what makes this thesis somewhat unorthodox is not so much its method, but rather its disposition. The first two main chapters – chapters three and four – are historical and theoretical, rather than based on participant observation. While admittedly making the thesis somewhat clunky and front-heavy, this is borne out of necessity, or at least what I’ve perceived to be necessity. When writing this thesis and laying out its main arguments, I found that it was simply impossible to analyse the material that I got from participant observation without first situating this material within the broader context of history and theory. To be sure, this does not mean that the chapters based on participant observation are simply there to “illustrate” the macro-point that I make in chapters three and four. Rather, the chapters based on participant observation are there to complicate the picture presented in chapters three and four, and to provide some contingency and chaos into the picture. For this reason, I will begin with two historical and theoretical chapters, before delving into the participant observation. Beware, dear reader: these chapters are long, theoretically dense, and most importantly *contain almost no stories about people with whom I have interacted*. I hope that the reader will bear with me in this; while somewhat unorthodox, it reflects my best attempt at making sense of Singapore as I have found it.

Before getting into history and theory, however, we will first get acquainted with the main empirical problem that this thesis deals with, which is contained in the slogan: “Return Our CPF!”

Chapter 2:

“Return Our CPF!”:

Introducing the Empirical Problem

Return Our CPF!

During the summer and autumn of 2014, a series of large protests were organized in Singapore. Their message was: “Return Our CPF!”

The protestors pointed to what in their view is a great paradox in Singapore society. Singapore is an ageing society, and many Singaporeans are today reaching their retirement without having enough savings in their pensions account, called the Central Provident Fund (CPF). At the same time, the state sits on two of the world’s biggest sovereign wealth funds, called the Government Investment Corporation (GIC) and Temasek, which manage the nation’s collective savings, and which, taken together, are the world second biggest sovereign wealth fund, beaten only by Norway’s pension fund. The protestors’ question was simple: how can society sit on a massive surplus of savings, at the same time as its population does not have enough savings to retire?

The facts, in short, are these. When the citizens make their CPF payments – currently at 37% of the salary, in addition to tax; historically at most 50% – the money is invested in government securities, which are called Special Government of Singapore Securities (SSGS), and which have a guaranteed interest rate of 2.5%, plus an extra 1%

on the first S\$60,000. These securities are handled by the sovereign wealth funds, which invest them, together with the rest of the state's money – such as budget surpluses and proceeds from land sales – in the state's various for-profit corporations, the so-called government-linked corporations (GLCs), or in the global financial markets.

According to one of the main organizers behind the protests, blogger Roy Ngerng, the surplus of the state and the deficit of the people do not simply exist side by side, but are in fact two sides of the same coin. In speeches and in writing, his basic observation has been that GIC and Temasek have over time reported much greater returns on their investments than the 2.5%-3.5% that the citizens have earned on their savings, as the wealth funds have reported annual rates of return of 7% and 17%, respectively. In Roy's view, this implies that the state has been using the citizens' money to maximize its own profits, rather than to make sure that the citizens are able to retire. “[I]s this what you think your CPF should be used for,” Roy asks his readers in one blog post, “especially since today many older Singaporeans cannot retire? Did PAP return what they took from Singaporeans and earned?”⁸

In this chapter, we will pursue a simple question, one that I think most naïve observers would ask when confronted with these protests: why does the state not do as the protestors demand, and “return” all or parts of its financial surplus to the growing number of people who are reaching retirement age? In many ways, the situation would appear to be perfectly balanced, as the state sits on some of the world's largest sovereign wealth funds, at the same time as many people find themselves not having enough funds to retire. What one needs, the other has – so what is the problem?

“Private company wholly owned by the government”

According to the protestors, the answer to that question is simple: the Singaporean state, they claim, is a profit-maximizing corporation, which is only pretending to care for the people, while really pursuing its own selfish financial interests. “My only logical

⁸ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “What PAP Has Done to Your CPF and Doesn't Want Singaporeans to Know (The Real History)”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/08/19/what-pap-has-done-to-your-cpf-and-doesnt-want-singaporeans-to-know-the-real-story/>

conclusion”, Roy writes, “is that the PAP government does not want to take care of Singaporeans and that it only wants to make money off Singaporeans. If so, the PAP government is no longer a government that is in the interests of Singaporeans and it would be pertinent for Singaporeans to vote the PAP out, and to vote in a new government which will implement policies to protect Singaporeans”.⁹

From this point of view, the financial surplus that has been accumulated in the wealth funds is the very end-goal of government policy: the profits that the corporate state has made at the expense of the citizens – and as such, an index of the state’s exploitation of its citizens. In line with this analysis, many activists have posted pictures on their Facebook pages of the prime minister depicted as a blood thirsty vampire. A popular nickname for him is the “clown prince”. In view of the activists, the prime minister is both a tyrant and a buffoon. Similarly, PAP is often referred to by activists as “white devils”, due to fact that they wear white clothes (officially meant to signal their non-corruption) and “greedy pigs”. A common joke among activists is that the initials of PAP should be read as “Pay and Pay”, or alternatively, “Party Always Prosperous / People Always Poor”. When NASA published its first-ever image of a black hole, activists circulated an image in which they had replaced the fuzzy image of the black hole with an image of the CPF logotype, suggesting that whatever money goes in there, never comes back out. And so on.

In response to the arguments put forth by the protestors, the government has produced its own set of counterarguments. On a government website called *Factually*, an article was published with the heading, “Top 4 CPF myths debunked”.¹⁰ Among those was the “myth” that the interest rate of the CPF is too low compared to GIC’s self-reported earnings, which the government claims is the only wealth fund that uses the CPF. “CPF interest rates”, the article reads, “are guaranteed and risk-free”, as they are paid out regardless of how the investments that back up the interest rate of the CPF

⁹ Closing statement by Roy Ngerng presented at his trial:

<https://thehearttruths.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/roy-ngerngs-closing-statement-in-defamation-suit-with-lee-hsien-loong-1.pdf>

¹⁰ Available online:

http://www.gov.sg/government/web/content/govsg/classic/factually/factually_20140415_cpfmoniesfacts

perform. “So if GIC’s investments actually lose money [...] CPF members will still get the 2.5% interest on our funds”. GIC, on its part, “invests our foreign reserves in stocks, bonds, real estate and other assets that carry higher risks than SSGS”, which is why GIC enjoys so much higher returns over time. For these reasons, the article concluded, “There is no connection between GIC’s rate of return and the interest paid on our CPF accounts”. Also, and for the same reasons, there is no legitimacy to the protestors demand that the state should “Return Our CPF”, because just like a bank does not have to return the difference between interests on savings and interests on loans, the citizens cannot have the cake (low risk on investment) and eat it too (high risk returns).

Unsurprisingly, the protestors did not buy this argument. Instead, they wondered whether it makes sense for citizens to view state-owned funds the same way that bank customers views their bank. On GIC’s website, under the “Frequently Asked Questions” section, one reads that the relation between the wealth fund and the government “is that of a fund manager to a client”. According to the website, the Government “holds the Board accountable for the overall portfolio performance,” but it “neither directs nor interferes in the company’s investment decisions.” GIC, on its part, “operate, invest and measure our performance in the same way as any global fund management company”, despite the fact that the government is the sole shareholder. From this, it follows that “GIC is a private company wholly owned by the Government of Singapore”.¹¹

But what does this even mean, the protestors wondered – “private company wholly owned by the government”? According to Roy, it means nothing *except that the state is seeking to justify the fact that they have been profiting greatly off of the savings of the Singaporean people*. “You see”, Roy writes in one blog post, “when PAP makes themselves the middleman, PAP can claim to be managing our CPF and because they then make it sound so dangerous, they can then say that they will then take on the risk, give us low interest and they will be our saviour by doing so, but then whatever

¹¹ Available online: <https://www.gic.com.sg/who-we-are/faqs/>

additional returns earned, they will keep”.¹² In other words, it is not the protestors who want to have the cake and eat it too – it is the government! On the one hand, the government invests the citizens’ savings in several high risk assets, so that the money can earn as high rates of return as possible there. On the other hand, the government keeps the lion’s share of the returns by claiming that the citizens’ savings are invested in a different asset – the state securities, SSGS – that have a guaranteed, but therefore lower, rate of return.

The crux of the issue, then, is what the basis is for the guaranteed rate of return that the state promises to the citizens. The fact that such a guarantee exists is what underlies the government’s claim that there is “no connection between GIC’s rate of return and the interest paid on our CPF accounts.” However, if GIC’s investments would perform so poorly that they generated a lower rate of return than what is promised on the CPF – which is the only situation in which the guarantee would come into effect – where is the state going to get the extra money to cover its liabilities? The answer, it seems, is that they would have to tax the rest of the population. The state securities, after all, do not represent a separate investment channel through which the state is able to offer the citizens a *de facto* more secure investment. Instead, they represent a promise that the state makes to the citizens regarding their future returns. The problem is that the state only has two sources of income: returns on investment, and tax-income. Hence, if the state “guarantees” that there will be enough money in the future to cover the CPF liabilities, regardless of how the state’s investments are doing, this guarantee can only be based on the power of the state to tax the citizens. Which means that the citizens themselves have to stand as guarantee for the promise that the state gives to them!

Such, at least, is the view of economist Christopher Balding, who is one of the few academics who has looked into this particular aspect of Singapore’s pension system. He summarizes his argument in the following passage, which Roy also quotes on his blog:

¹² Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “The Truth: GIC Manages Only Singaporeans’ CPF and You Should Earn 6% On Your CPF?” Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/09/03/the-truth-gic-manages-only-singaporeans-cpf-and-you-should-earn-6-on-your-cpf/>

Singapore operates a one sided model where the tax payer assumes the risk but the government gets the benefit. If the investments do well, the government keeps everything above the 2.5-4% CPF interest payment; if the investments do poorly, and let's assume, the CPF collapses, the tax payer will guarantee the payment to CPF holders. In other words, risks are socialized while benefits are privatized. (Balding 2014)

Another economist, Mukul Asher, similarly talks about the difference between the returns as an "implicit tax". "The IMF", he writes (Asher 2004: 2116), "has estimated that [GIC] earned about 10.0 per cent per annum during the 1990s, substantially higher than the average nominal return of 3.4 per cent credited by the CPF". This implicit tax, Asher further notes, "is regressive as low-income individuals hold proportionately greater wealth in the form of CPF balances" (ibid: 2116), which is due to the fact that CPF contributions are subject to a wage ceiling, above which citizens are not required to contribute the 37%.

For Roy, on his part, the problem with the claim that the relation between GIC and the government "is that of a fund manager to a client" was brought home most clearly by the fact that GIC is not just wholly owned by the government, but overwhelmingly made up of the same people who make up the government. At the time of Roy's writing, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong was the chairman of GIC (and still is), and on the board of directors one found the country's two deputy prime ministers, Tharman Shanmugaratnam and Teo Chee Hean, the minister of finance, Heng Swee Kea,; and a large number of PAP cabinet members. In addition to this, Singapore's second wealth fund, Temasek, was for a very long time run by none other than the prime minister's wife, Ho Ching, who only recently stepped down from her position. In one blog post, Roy therefore exclaimed: "the GIC is the government!",¹³ an observation that in his view makes a lie of the claim that the government "neither directs nor interferes in the company's investment decisions", as the same group of people occupy both positions.

¹³ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: "Government Does Not Invest Our CPF in GIC?: Singaporeans, We Have Been Taken For Fools." Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/08/12/government-does-not-invest-our-cpf-in-gic-singaporeans-we-have-been-taken-for-fools/>

All about the money? Demography and savings

The question that lurks underneath all this, however, is whether it would in fact be possible for the government to return any money, even if it so wished. It would, of course, be literally possible to simply transfer the difference between the rates of return earned by CPF and GIC – let's say on average 300,000, which is what Balding believes to be the average amount of money that citizens have been deprived of due to the different rates of return (Balding 2014) – to citizens' savings accounts. The real question, however, is another one, namely whether or not the financial surplus of the state can unproblematically be used to finance the domestic consumption needs of a growing portion of the population who are no longer working.

For a long time, the CPF was held up as “a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow” (Wong 1982: 21). In 1977, Singaporean economist Wong Kum Poh prophesized that the high savings rate of the CPF would mean that each Singaporean will be “a quarter-millionaire” by the end of their work-life:

Suppose a young man begins his career now, or, at any rate, after the 1 January 1977. Further assume that his salary is \$300 per month and stays at this level for the rest of his working life. [...] If the young person is now aged twenty, then he will have at least thirty-five years to go before retiring from work. [A]t the age of fifty-five he will receive the CPF benefits amounting to \$158 thousand. If he works until sixty, he will be a quarter millionaire! [...] Let us err on the generous side and assume the rate of inflation exactly offsets the wage increments over time. We may now safely re-assert that our worker will be a veritable quarter millionaire. Suppose he retains his consumption habits born of a monthly expenditure of \$250, the CPF benefits will see him through for another 75 years. In all probability, he will not live long enough to enjoy all the benefits. Again, CPF marksmanship may have erred in over-shooting the target. (Wong 1977: 22)

This forecast, however, would prove very wrong – perhaps not in terms of the amount of savings themselves, as Singapore has indeed accumulated massive financial

surpluses, but in terms of how that particular twenty-year old would find himself at fifty-five. For anyone who has spent just a short amount of time in Singapore, one thing that immediately strikes the eye is the fact that many old “uncles” and “aunties”, who in other countries would be enjoying their retirement, are clearing tables at hawker centres, pushing carts at the airport, and doing a number of other forms of manual labour, simply because they do not have enough savings to retire. Recently, the national newspaper reported that Singapore’s oldest McDonald’s employee had passed away, at age 90, in a country that has one of the highest per capita income in the world (Lam 2018).

To understand this dilemma, it is helpful to imagine the extreme scenario in which every citizen of Singapore went into retirement tomorrow. The state’s finances would be precisely what they were yesterday. But there would not be anyone left to perform all the tasks that needed to be performed – nurses, mailmen, cashiers, bus drivers, doctors, lawyers, what have you. The fact that the state was sitting on enough money to pay for all these jobs would be of little help, as there would not be anyone of working age to perform them. Likewise, it would not be of much help if the money was “returned” to the citizens, as there would be no one to perform all the necessary tasks. Perhaps the country could import a large number of young people to perform all the jobs? But in a small place like Singapore, would that be possible? Also, what would happen to the national identity if the entire workforce had to be imported from abroad?

In this we come upon a general principle. If a growing portion of the population is reaching retirement age, it is not enough for the country to have saved money. In addition, something must have also happened to the younger, still working portion of the population: either, that they have increased in numbers, so that for every person leaving the workforce, another one is entering; or that they have become more productive, so that fewer people can now produce the same amount of economic value that used to be produced by more people. Economists call this the *dependency ratio*, defined as the ratio of persons of nonworking age to persons of working age. Modern monetary theorist Warren Mosler summarizes the problem well:

The ‘intergenerational’ story [goes] something like this: “The problem is that 30 years from now there will be a lot more retired people and proportionately fewer workers (which is true), and the Social Security trust fund will run out of money [...] So to solve the problem, we need to figure out a way to be able to provide seniors with enough money to pay for the goods and services they will need.” With this last statement it all goes bad. They assume that the real problem of fewer workers and more retirees, which is also known as the “dependency ratio,” can be solved by making sure the retirees have sufficient funds to buy what they need [...] [But] the real problem is, if the remaining workers aren’t sufficiently productive, there will be a general shortage of goods and services. More “money to spend” will only drive up prices and not somehow create more goods and services. (Mosler 2010: 56-57)

In this, we encounter what seem to be a fundamental dilemma for Singapore. Since independence, the country’s population has been ageing fairly dramatically. Throughout the last three decades, Singapore’s fertility rate – which used to be so high that it prompted the government to briefly introduce a “stop at two” child policy (discussed in chapters four and six) – has fallen significantly below the replacement rate of 2.1, and is now at 1.2. During the same period, mortality has gone down, so that the average citizen is now 40.5 years old, compared to 18 years in 1965 – and by 2030, the citizens above the age of 65 are expected to be 900,000 (Population White Paper 2013). At the same time, the economy has not been able to achieve the kind of productivity increases that would be required to balance the declining old-age support ratio. “The crux of the dilemma”, Asher writes (2004: 2119), “lies in the fact that Singapore’s policies have been predicated on the basis of continuous high growth and requirements of being a business centre”:

But an affluent and rapidly aging society experiences inevitable moderation in growth and an educated population has a tendency to express the need for genuine participation and voice in the running of the country. Thus the requirements of being a business centre and demands of wanting to be a country eventually come into conflict.

Can Singapore solve this contraction? Is it possible to be both a business centre and a country, indefinitely, or will the country eventually reach some fundamental limit to its growth strategy as the population is ageing?

Population white paper

In 2013, the government released a much discussed and highly controversial white paper, entitled “A Sustainable Population for a Dynamic Singapore” (Population White Paper 2013). In the report, it was explained that Singapore will have to increase its population to 6.9 million by the year 2030 – from its current 5.6 million – in order to maintain a sustainable old-age support ratio. Mainly, this would have to be achieved through labour immigration, both skilled and unskilled. In addition, the white paper explained, it would be necessary to increase the retirement age by creating “more opportunities for Singaporeans to continue working beyond the current retirement age, and encouraging employers to tap this increasing pool of experienced older workers” (ibid: 13). Unless both of these things were done, the report explained, Singapore will experience a rapid decline in the dependency ratio, such that by 2030 there will be only 2:1 working-age citizens for each pensioner, compared to 9:5 today. This “would mean rising taxes and a heavier economic load on a smaller base of working-age Singaporeans,” which in turn would result in something of a vicious cycle:

A shrinking and ageing population would also mean a smaller, less energetic workforce, and a less vibrant and innovative economy. Companies may not find enough workers. Business activity would slow, and job and employment opportunities would shrink. It would become more difficult to match the higher aspirations of a better educated and mobile population. Young people would leave for more exciting and growing global cities. This would hollow out our population and workforce, and worsen our ratio of younger to older Singaporeans. (ibid: 12)

The reason why the white paper became controversial was because, in the view of many, it prioritized economic concerns over social ones; the needs of the business centre over

the needs of the country. “The economy is not everything”, said one critic, Ravi Philemon from oppositional National Solidarity Party, at a rally that was organized in response to the white paper, which drew an unusually big crowd of 4000 people. “The economy has to be for the people and not the people for the economy” (*Yahoo News* 2013-02-16). More concretely, many critics feared that increasing the country’s labour immigration would put downward pressures on wages, while at the same time increasing the cost of living through overcrowding, thus squeezing ordinary Singaporeans from two directions at once.

Such concerns are no doubt understandable. In a small country like Singapore, growing the economy by continuously adding more workers will eventually result in some serious conflicts between the needs of the economy and the needs of “the people”, for whom economic growth must be measured against things like overcrowding, unwanted labour competition, and other problems that come from cramming too many people on the same small piece of land. At the same time, in a place like Singapore, it is equally the case that it is very difficult to tell exactly where the needs of the economy end, and where those of “the people” begin. As discussed in the introduction, being a small country with a large population but no natural resources, Singapore needs to import most of life’s essentials from other countries: water, electricity, food, etc. And in order to do so, the country needs hard currency. In that sense, the economy *really is everything*, as Singapore has no choice but to play by the rules set by the global market.

Rather than a simple conflict between people and economy, therefore, what Singapore appears to be running into is a situation of diminishing returns, whereby the costs associated with keeping up growth may increasingly outweigh the benefits – a difficult contradiction that cannot easily be thrown off, as Singapore cannot stop growing its economy even as it is coming up against some fundamental limits to growth. Has the government led the population into an impossible impasse, by prioritizing the needs of Singapore as a business centre over its needs as a country?

Perspiration or inspiration?

In 2010, Lee Kuan Yew voiced concern about this problem. “We’ve grown in the last five years by just importing labour”, he said. “Now the people feel uncomfortable, there are too many foreigners. Trains are overcrowded with foreigners, buses too; property prices have gone up because foreigners with permanent residency visas are buying into the market.” According to Lee, “The answer is simple: We check the flow of foreigners, raise your productivity, do the job better, so that instead of two workers, eventually you’ll do it with one worker [...]” (*Property Guru* 2010). Similarly, in 2014, economist Manu Bhaskaran observed that “Singapore faces a number of challenges stemming from changing demographics. As the population ages and total fertility rates remain low, Singapore has to drive economic growth through productivity [...]” (Bhaskaran 2014: 290). He further cautioned, however, that “it is not clear if Singapore has enough of the pre-requisites to execute such a transition” (ibid: 291), because despite efforts by the government to raise the productivity of the economy, “Singapore's efficiency ratio [at 0.64] is starkly lower than the average 0.77 among high income countries, and, of even more concern, is significantly lower than similarly-sized countries such as Sweden (0.81) or other northern European countries” (ibid: 301).

More problematically, this problem is not new to Singapore, but appears to be chronic. In 1994, Paul Krugman noted in a famous article that Singapore’s “economic miracle” has been based on “perspiration rather than inspiration”, by which he meant that Singapore’s impressive economic growth had been based on a steady increase of inputs rather than any increase of outputs per worker. “There is no sign at all of increased efficiency”, Krugman marvelled. “In this sense, the growth of Lee Kuan Yew’s Singapore is an economic twin of the growth of Stalin’s Soviet Union – growth achieved purely through mobilization of resources” (Krugman 1994: 71). Krugman’s central argument was that, while such growth might be impressive at first glance, it is also severely limited, as it is based “on one-time changes in behavior that cannot be repeated.” He wrote:

Over the past generation the percentage of people employed has almost doubled; it cannot double again. A half-educated work force has been replaced by one in which the bulk of workers has high school diplomas; it is unlikely that a generation from now most Singaporeans will have Ph.D.'s. And an investment share of 40 percent is amazingly high by any standard; a share of 70 percent would be ridiculous. So one can immediately conclude that Singapore is unlikely to achieve future growth rates comparable to those of the past. (ibid: 71)

Similarly, economist Alwyn Young observed around the same time that “rising participation rates, intersectoral transfers of labour, improving levels of education, and expanding investment rates [...] serve to chip away at the productivity performance of East Asian [countries], drawing them from the top of Mount Olympus down to the plains of Thessaly” (Young 1995: 645). Put differently, when controlling for increases in input, there is virtually nothing left to explain about Singapore’s enormous economic growth. It is all a matter of addition! Or, as the *Economist* magazine explained the same point more comically: “If you invest in more sausage machines and employ more sausage-makers, of course you will make more sausages. Where’s the miracle? Growth will slow down when you run out of extra sausage-makers.” As a result, in order to keep up growth, Singapore has kept importing more labour and kept expanding its land-mass through land-reclamations, pushing the buck of increased productivity further and further into the future, as more and more people inevitably nears retirement.

The problem defined

These, then, are the stakes of the empirical problem that I will address in this thesis. Today, Singapore sits on some of the largest sovereign wealth in the world. At the same time, many older Singaporeans are reaching retirement lacking enough savings to retire. Does this mean that Singapore’s “economic miracle” is really a miracle, covering up the fact that most of the wealth that has been produced has ended up as financial surplus with the state, while leaving the population unable to retire? Or has the CPF system, on the contrary, allowed the state to accumulate capital in order to make the country

successful? In the next two chapters, I will describe how the CPF sits at the centre of Singapore's social contract. Specifically, I will describe how the CPF system has functioned as a way for the Singaporean state to solve the prisoners' dilemma of capitalism under conditions of globalized capitalism. If the CPF turns out to have been a scam, then the entire social contract has been a scam. Hence, when the CPF is challenged, the stakes are high.

Chapter 3:

1968 in Singapore:

Globalization, Social Democracy and the “National Interest”

In many newly independent countries, politicians out to be popular with the people, and particularly with the workers because they happen to be in the majority, have invariably persecuted and impoverished the capitalists in the belief that as the rich become poorer, the poor would become richer. We have studied these examples with great interest and in every case the result has been contrary to what was expected: the capitalists certainly have grown poorer but the poor have grown poorer still.

- S. Rajaratnam, Speech to Parliament, 1968.¹⁴

The “national interest” and the authoritarian state

A quick recap. As Singapore was thrown into independence, having briefly merged with neighbouring Malaysia, the country faced the existential problem of how to feed its large and at the time fast-growing population, having neither a hinterland in which to grow food, nor much in the way of an export industry that could finance imports. The Winsemius Report had suggested that the solution to this problem would come through foreign direct investment and export to the global market. In order for that to happen,

¹⁴ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 472.

however, Singapore would have to offer something in return to those foreign investors – and having no natural resources, that offer would have to come in the form of cheap and docile labour, good infrastructure and a generally business friendly environment (Rodan 1989: 85-86). As the Winsemius Report put it:

Singapore will have to fight itself into world markets. [...] On the world markets, the Singapore manufacturers and workmen will be confronted with the most competitive countries in the world – countries with stable conditions where large amounts of capital are invested; countries with low wages in the beginning of the process of economic development; and countries having good co-operation between employers and unions where increase of orders and increase of jobs are considered a common goal (Winsemius 1963: 200).

In theory, this was a simple solution. In practice, however, it was anything but simple, as Singapore faced problems on both sides of the equation. On the one hand, Singapore's labour was too expensive for global export markets, much due to the fact that Singapore's entrepôt trade had inflated both costs and salaries on the island, at the same time as its industrial goods were not competitive enough (Winsemius 1963). On the other hand, the country's working class was largely organized by radical trade-unions, who understood independence in terms of getting rid of the colonialists, not in terms of inviting them back in another form as multinational corporations – especially not if the basis for their return would be to undercut the salaries of Singaporean labour (Fernandes & Loh 2007).

In this, as we've seen, the authoritarian state found its *raison d'être*. Since there was little hope of convincing the labour unions of the wisdom of the policies that were deemed necessary for survival, it was decided that the only way to nevertheless push through those policies would be to get rid of the labour unionists altogether. That meant to put them in jail – indefinitely, and without trial (see Poh 2015; Poh *et al* 2013; Ramakrishna 2015). According to PAP, this strategy was directly in service of the “national interest” – and therefore justified – as Singapore had no other way of finding

employment for its growing population besides attracting international capital (Rodan 1989; Chua 1995). As Winsemius succinctly formulated the problem in a retrospective lecture, “What did Singapore have to offer? Apart from a good port, not much more than a potential workforce. [...] What did Singapore want? Employment, as soon as possible”. Therefore, he reasoned, any “confrontational” approach to industrial relations had to be abandoned in favour of what he called the “harmony model”, because “in the long run the interests of the employers and the employees are parallel for say 90 to 95%” (Winsemius 1984: 6).

Winsemius plan yielded quite incredible results, and on the basis of it Singapore went on to become one of the richest economies in the world. Nevertheless, as we’ll discuss in this chapter, the “national interest” that PAP claimed to represented was highly ambiguous, not to say contradictory. When global capital came to Singapore, it did not do so because it had a vested interest in seeing the country flourish, but because it was promised cheap labour and low taxes, which would maximize its profits. Most immediately, therefore, what PAP called the “national interest” was based on undermining what would have appeared to many as the interests of the majority, as capital wished to get as much labour-power as possible for as little money as possible. In this sense, rather than an unproblematic partner in the pursuit of the “national interest”, capital could easily have been seen as *a threat* to the national interest – or at least, as a threat to the interests of the majority of the Singaporean people. Just like the colonialist, after all, capital’s goal in coming to Singapore was not primarily to maximize the wealth and wellbeing of the Singaporean people, but to maximize its exploitation of them as a resource (see Rodan 1989; cf. Patnaik). As Buchanan writes in one of the first Marxist analyses of Singapore, the country is “still a prisoner of its past and both external and internal forces have encouraged persistence of a colonial role rather than pursuit of a more independent development” (Buchanan 1972: 249). To the radical labour unionists too, this was precisely how the goal of attracting global capital was understood: as a continuation of colonial domination, rather than its replacement (see Poh 2016; Buchanan 1972).

The problem, then, was that both of these things were true at the same time. Global capital's main motivation for setting up shop in Singapore was that it could better maximize its profits here compared to anywhere else, which put their interests immediately at odds with the interests of Singaporean labour. At the same time, Singapore had no alternative way of employing its population, which meant that the interest of labour was ultimately to be whatever global capital wanted them to be, even as this meant going against their more immediate interests in the class struggle. As the Winsemius Report bluntly stated, "there does not seem to be – in the long run – an alternative; there is – as the Trade Union Congress rightly put it – no other way out" (Winsemius 1963: 195).

Singapore and social democracy

In this, we come to one of the central theme of this thesis, which is that Singapore's developmental program exhibits strong similarities with those of other social democratic countries. In fact, as I will argue in this chapter, it closely repeats the experiences of many of these societies.

Take Sweden, and the "Swedish model" of industrial relations. According to Svensson (2015: 613), the Swedish model "can be characterized as a tripartite corporatist system based on bipartite collective bargaining with the state remaining in the background but ready for action within the institutionalized dialogue between unions and employer organizations". The system originally came about in the 1930's in response to what was then a highly contentious and conflict-ridden labour market in the country. "At the time," Svensson writes, "Sweden suffered hard from unemployment and labor market conflicts, the level of strike activity being among the highest in Europe". In order to end conflict and secure employment for the population, a compromise was therefore struck between capital and labour – known as the "Saltsjöbaden agreement" – according to which "[e]mployer prerogative and labor peace were exchanged for social reforms and full employment". "The real breakthrough for the corporatist model", Svensson writes, "came in the late 1930s in a 'historic compromise' between labor and capital" (ibid: 613), according to which labour and

capital would organize themselves together in a corporatist system, on the basis of their shared interests. “Swedish social democracy”, Maisuria writes (2018: 10-11), “would be about creating a culture of unity and solidarity, specifically including women but disregarding the antagonisms between the capitalist class and workers.” As a result, “The social democrats would be allied with, rather than antagonistic towards, the owners of the means of capitalist production”.

Having largely brokered this deal, the Social Democratic party presented itself as a political force that represented not just the working class, but society as a whole. Rather than striving to overthrow capitalism in favour of socialism, the social democratic party ushered in the “realistic utopia” (Rosenblum 1980) of “the peoples’ home” – a society in which class struggle was exchanged for incremental progress on the basis of capitalist development, based on centralized wage bargaining, avoidance of strikes, and a solidaristic wage policy pegged to the export industry (see Andersson 2009; Rojas 2005; Brown 2008). In 1917, this approach resulted in a break between the social democratic party and the more radical elements of the left-wing, who left the Social democratic party to form a communist party, as part of the Comintern. After the first social democratic prime minister, Hjalmar Branting, took office in 1920, the social democrats enjoyed an unbroken hold on power until 1976; and for the last 101 years, the social democrats have been in power for 86.

Similarly, in Singapore, industrial relations have been organized according to a corporatist model under the National Wage Council (NWC), a tripartite body that gathers representatives from the government, the National Trade Union Congress (NTUC) and the government, i.e. all three “partners” in the labour market. Like many other things in Singapore, the system was originally envisioned by Winsemius. It was established in 1972 “with the hope of keeping costs of production within reasonable limits” (Chong 1986: 61). Its main function is to set wage-guidelines for the economy as a whole (Lim 1983: 756). Within the NWC, “high-level representation from employers’ organizations, the National Trades Union Congress and relevant government departments” (ibid: 61) are brought together – a collaborationist approach that, according to the Ministry of Manpower, represents “a key competitive advantage

for Singapore”.¹⁵ “This model of tripartism”, NTUC writes on their website, “is unique to Singapore”, and was “key in staving off the rising tide of animosity between union and management that marked Singapore’s history in the 1950s to early 1960s”.¹⁶

One important difference between the Singaporean system and the Swedish system, then, is that in the former the state takes an active role in wage bargaining, whereas in the latter wage bargaining is done independently by the parties (although the main labour union congress in Sweden, *Landsorganisationen*, LO, has always had very close ties with the social democratic party) (see Karlsson & Stern 2017). Nevertheless, the main ambition of the systems is essentially the same: to put aside the antagonisms between capital and labour in favour of cooperative relations, in pursuit of shared prosperity on the basis of capitalist production.

Since its implementation, Singapore’s system of tripartism has turned the country into a place where strikes and other work stoppages are more or less unheard of: the last major strike on record was in 1982, and it ended after two days. “We are aware that we enjoy a status, prestige and influence in the public life of the nation, which is the envy of trade unions in other developing countries”, said then NTUC secretary-general Devan Nair in a 1976 speech (Nair 1976: 57-58). “This has been achieved by dint of the fact that we have imparted a wider scope, and an ampler sweep, to our objectives as a trade union movement in a developing society.” According to its supporters, this system of wage bargaining is a prime example of the kind of pragmatism that Singapore’s success is built on. As a recent article on the subject, entitled “Why Singapore Works”, puts it:

Instead of following the then-politically correct approach of being anti-American and anti-multinational corporations (MNCs) in the 1960s and 1970s, Lee and Singapore went against the grain and ‘assiduously courted MNCs’ [...]. As a rational and pragmatic leader, Lee took Winsemius’ advice seriously, neutralised the communist

¹⁵ “What is Tripartism?”. Available online: <https://www.mom.gov.sg/employment-practices/tripartism-in-singapore/what-is-tripartism>

¹⁶ “NTUC and Tripartism”. Available online: <https://www.ntuc.org.sg/wps/portal/up2/home/aboutntuc/whoware/tripartism>

threat and attracted many MNCs from the USA, Europe and Japan to Singapore. [...] Singapore succeeded in developing its economy because Lee implemented the sound economic policies recommended by Winsemius. (Quah 2018: 7)

According to critics, on the other hand, the problem with this system is that it has effectively left workers with no one to truly represent their interests, since the same person often ends up representing all three sides – government, employer and employee – something that has at best resulted in serious conflicts of interest, and at worst in a complete betrayal of the working class in favour of global capital. As Singaporean journalist and oppositional activist Kirsten Han writes in a 2012 article, entitled “The sorry state of unions in Singapore”: “The original idea behind tripartism was to prevent disruptions and nasty disagreements between workers and their bosses, but has since become a cause for concern with regard to conflicts of interest, where the same person ends up wearing lots of different hats when he or she should just have the one” (Han 2012). To that end, Han notes how then deputy secretary general of the NTUC, Ong Ye Kung, not only was a member of parliament for the ruling PAP, but also a board member of SMRT Corporation, the government-owned company that employs most of Singapore’s bus drivers, and who in turn are represented by the NTUC. “So”, Han writes, “[...] a union leader is also on the board of the profit-driven company that employs the very public transport workers he is meant to represent, and also a member of the party that forms the current government. He is Tripartite all in himself!” Similarly, Fernandez and Loh describe how Singapore’s system of tripartism has not so much balanced competing interests within an overarching national interest, but rather allowed the state to subjugate the interests of labour to the interests of global capital, by denying the former independent representation and organization:

Where the left-wing unions had engaged in anti-colonial politics to advance workers’ interests, the NTUC supported the PAP’s policies of nation-building. [...] The government began to discipline labour in pursuit of its aim of achieving rapid industrialization by encouraging foreign multi-nationals to locate in Singapore.

Intended to be an obedient workforce engaged in routine factory work, labour could not be allowed to organize independently against employers (ibid: 221).

Likewise, Malcolm Caldwell, one of the most notorious critics of the Singaporean government, observes how Lee Kuan Yew “appreciated that a progressive and anti-imperialist image was an indispensable first condition for winning a degree of public support impressive enough to convince the British authorities that he was the horse to back”. Once he got into power, Caldwell writes however, his first order of business “was to dissolve, de-register and re-organise the Trade Union Movement to provide ‘cohesive policy and steady leadership’ – a phrase not hard to translate into the reality of co-operation with the state and its declared low wage policies” (Caldwell 1979: 5) Luther, in an early article, similarly observes how PAP’s main objectives as they got into power “were to get the unions under close control, to channel labour protest into state controlled institutions [...], and to set up a framework of labour laws in order to make wage conflicts more manageable”, bringing about an “economic miracle” that was ultimately “for the benefit of foreign investors and at the expenses of the Singapore working class” (Luther 1978). One of the main oppositional figures of the 1950’s and 1960’s, Poh Soh Kai, who spent 17 years in prison following Operation Coldstore, summarizes Singapore history under PAP rule in the title of his 2017 memoir, as “living in a time of deception”, as Singapore’s official history, in his view, consists of the big lie that the “communists” were detained for security reasons and not political reasons (Poh 2017).

The social democratic problem

In this chapter, I will argue that this basic problem – of how to convince workers that it is in their interests to consent to and even encourage the very institutions that they simultaneously regard as sources of exploitation: mainly, profits and private ownership of the means of production – is in no way unique to Singapore, but better understood as the quintessential social democratic problem. As Adam Przeworski writes in his seminal work on the relation between capitalism and social democracy, “Once private property

of the means of production was left intact” – rather than opposed in the name of socialism – “it became in the interest of wage-earners that capitalists appropriate profits”. Rather than organizing industrial relations on the basis of class conflict, therefore, “Social democrats protect profits from demands of the masses because radical redistributive policies are not in the interest of wage-earners” (Przeworski 1985: 43), at least as long as capitalism is accepted. Ashley Lavalley calls this the “catch 22” of social democratic governments: they are “expected to implement reforms in their constituents’ favour but [are] simultaneously compelled by economic pressures to introduce pro-capitalist policies that conflict with their constituents’ interests” (Lavalley 2008: 11). Callinicos, similarly, talks about “the reformer’s dilemma”:

Reforming capitalism necessarily means interfering either directly or indirectly with the economy. Even limited improvements in social welfare imply increases in public expenditure and taxation. Such interference may well produce adverse reactions from big business – for example, the flight of capital from the country – which will weaken and may even destroy the government. But if the social democratic ministers therefore avoid reforms for fear of annoying the bosses, then parliamentary democracy turns out after all to be incapable of even moderating the inequities of capitalism (Callinicos 1997: 17)

On this basis, many Marxists have criticized social democracy as being at best an insufficient and short-term solution to the contradictions of capitalism, and at worst a perpetuation of an economic system that is on the whole against the interests of workers. According to this view, social democracy may have succeeded in “civilizing” capitalism to some extent, as well as protecting the working class from the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation. However, because social democracy does not address the fundamental conflict of interest that lies at the bottom of the system, it is ultimately doomed to fail, as class conflict will sooner or later return with a vengeance. As Lavalley writes, “given their history of class collaboration and pursuit of reforms within the parameters set by the capitalist economy, social democratic parties were, by embracing neo-liberal policies, acting rationally” (ibid: 19). Here, the catch 22 reaches its logical

conclusion, as social democrats are forced to push through increasingly anti-labour policies in the name of representing the interest of workers. “From this flow the inevitable charges of betrayal” (ibid: 11).

The basic assumption underlying this critique is that social democracy represents an insufficient and contradictory approach to capitalism – one that seeks to address the problems of capitalism without addressing the underlying cause of those problems – and that Marxism, by contrast, provides a more fundamental understanding, and a more fundamental solution. Social democracy, according to this view, is essentially dead on arrival: treating the symptom but not the disease, and therefore only ever able to provide a temporary solution. “The source of social democrats’ relative failure [...]”, Lasalle writes, “lies in their pursuit of social reforms within the strictures of capitalism”. On this reading, the reason why social democrats fail is ultimately because they are social democrats – because they seek to improve the system from within, rather than bring about an end to capitalism in favour of socialism. “The only way out of the reformist dilemma”, Callinicos writes, is for workers “to replace the existing state with their own, radically democratic institutions, and use them to build a new society based on the socialist commitment to give first place to human need.” And since this is precisely what social democracy will not do, the argument goes, social democracy will at best amount to a weak and insufficient form of socialism, doomed to fail; at worst, it will betray the very idea of socialism – “capitalism with a human face, which is really a façade or a mask, i.e. another mystification” (Stevenson 2009: 242), aimed at getting workers to “consent to exploitation” (Przeworski 1985: 136).

In this thesis, however, I will take a different view. While Marxists pose the right question, and diagnose the right problem – which is that globalization intensifies the basic social democratic problem – I will argue that we cannot allow Marxism to set the terms of debate, if we want to understand the successes and failures of social democracy in a globalized world. As I will argue in the following, the main problem with the Marxist critique of both capitalism and social democracy is that it confuses what is true about capitalism at every given moment with what is true about the system over time. As such, I will argue, it is unable to make sense of social democracy – in general, and

in Singapore in particular – as social democracy is fundamentally based on overcoming the contradiction between what is true about capitalism at every given moment, and what is true over time. This point of view, however, is not self-evident, but requires some justifying. Before discussing Singapore’s form of social democracy, we must therefore go through – and criticize – the Marxist critique of capitalism and social democracy, in order to develop our own understanding of these concepts.

The Marxist critique of capitalism and social democracy

Let us begin with the most basic concept around which most of these debates centre: class, or class structure. “By class structure”, writes Marxist economist Richard Wolff (2016: 165), “I mean enterprises’ internal organization pitting workers against corporate boards of directors and major shareholders. Those boards seek first to maximize corporate profits and growth”, which means “maximizing the difference between the value they get from workers’ labor and the value of the wages paid to workers”. According to Marxists, this conflict between workers and managers is the fundamental fact about capitalist society, which no amount of reform within the system can change or overcome.

According to Marxists, therefore, social democrats may claim to have discovered the “national interest” somewhere between the interests of capital and labour. But this makes for a very weak definition of the national interest, since no society would accept such a definition in any other aspect of life – say, the national interest with regards to forests as lying somewhere between the majority who wants to keep them, and a minority of people who for some reason want to burn them down. So why accept such a balance-between-opposing-interests definition of the common good when it comes to the economy? According to Marxists, there is no good reason to do so. Hence, instead of seeking to define what is best for the majority on the basis of capitalist relations of production, they argue, a better choice would be to get rid of those relations altogether – meaning, as Wolff puts it, “to put workers inside each enterprise in the collective position of receiving the surpluses they produced in that enterprise”:

That would, of course, position them as also the distributors of those surpluses. The surplus producing workers in each enterprise would, in effect, become their own collective board of directors. They would replace traditional corporate boards chosen by and responsible to major shareholders. This would eliminate the capitalist enterprise's confrontation of workers and capitalists. It would thereby change the methods and results of board decisions about what, how, and where to produce and what to do with the surpluses. (ibid: 15)

On paper, this would get rid of many of the chronic problems of capitalism, which result from the conflicts of interest that populate the relations of production. For instance, as Wolff points out, a worker-owned corporation would not be likely to "move production to other countries [...], pay a few top managers huge salaries and bonuses while most workers' paychecks and benefits stagnate", or "install toxic and dangerous technologies as capitalist enterprises often do to earn more profits" (ibid: 287), because unlike in a capitalist company, the people in the position to benefit from these profit-maximizing activities would also be the ones bearing the costs of them. Hence, any attempt to exploit the workers for profit would result in self-exploitation; and so, the zero-sum nature of exploitation would become perfectly apparent to all.

According to social democrats, however, there is one large problem with this critique, having to do with the issue of wealth creation. Take, again, Wolff's description of a non-capitalist economy. According to him, the reason why workers should want to replace capitalism with socialism is because this will allow them to not only produce an economic surplus, but also to distribute that surplus according to their own needs. "For the first time in human history," Wolff writes (ibid: 287), "societies could democratically rethink and reorganize the time they devote to work, play, relationships, and cultural activities", because instead of letting a small minority of capitalists decide what to do with the economic surplus, this would be a matter of majority decision. "Democracy at work", Wolff calls it.

This forecast, however, is based on a two big and interconnected assumptions, both of which come out of Marx's labour theory of value: first, that all value is produced by labour; and second, that capital therefore represents a class of people who do nothing

but live off the surplus-value produced by someone else. As Marx puts it himself (1976: 344-345), “Whenever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the worker, free or unfree, must add to the labour-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra quantity of labour-time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owner of the means of production”. In fact, Marx says, the only important difference between the capitalist and his historical predecessors – like the slave-owner or feudal lord – is that the capitalist is not after a surplus of useful things that he will consume personally, but a surplus of money. As a result, Marx says, the capitalist’s exploitation of the worker must become “unlimited” (ibid: 346), as there is no limit to how much money that the capitalist might want to accumulate. “It is [...] clear”, Marx writes, “that in any given economic formation of society, where not the exchange-value but the use-value of the product predominates, surplus labour will be limited by a given set of wants which may be greater or less, and that here no boundless thirst for surplus labour arises from the nature of the production itself”. By contrast, in a society where exchange-value predominates, like capitalism, such a boundless thirst for surplus labour *will* appear. And that, according to Marx, is all the capitalist is: like the feudal lord or the slave-owner, he is someone who has monopolised the means of production, and who is therefore in a position to make everyone else sustain his wholly parasitical and useless existence. Only the capitalist is a bit worse than his historical predecessors, because his exploitation is *global and unlimited*, rather than *local and limited* – a fact that has led some writers, notably among them Samir Amin and Andre Gunder Frank, to conclude that the entire “world system” is organized as a giant zero-sum game, in which the development of the core is directly dependent on the corresponding underdevelopment of the peripheries (Amin 1997; Frank 1991; see also Wallerstein 2004; Arrighi 1994; Rodney 1981; Hornborg 2003). Under such circumstances, it is clear that the interest of the majority can only be to get rid of the capitalist.

The problem with this critique, social democrats claim however, is that it is far from obvious that you can simply hold the economic surplus as a constant, while removing capital as a variable. Granted, were this the case, then everyone should become an anti-capitalist tomorrow, as the capitalist would then be shown to be a

deadweight that the rest of society is forced to carry around – a “parasite” that is “killing the host”, as Michael Hudson (2015) puts it. If this is *not* the case, however, it becomes much less apparent why workers would be better off by getting rid of the capitalist. “All that is needed for workers to rationally opt for socialism out of their material interests”, Przeworski writes (1985: 174), “are two conditions: that socialism be more efficient in satisfying material needs than capitalism and that moving toward socialism would immediately and continually improve workers’ material conditions”. “For Marx”, Anthony Giddens observes similarly, “socialism stood or fell by its capacity to deliver a society that would generate greater wealth than capitalism and spread that wealth in more equitable fashion” (Giddens 1998: 2). However, Giddens adds, “If socialism is now dead, it is precisely because these claims have collapsed” (ibid: 2).

Why? According to Giddens, “the economic theory of socialism was always inadequate, underestimating the capacity of capitalism to innovate, adapt and generate increasing productivity” (ibid: 2). Capitalists, on this reading, do not merely hog the means of production in order to force the rest of society to produce a surplus, like the feudal lord or slave master. Instead, what is special about capitalism as a system is that it ties ownership of the means of production to the ability of capitalists to compete in the market with other capitalists. As a result, in order for the capitalist to maintain his ownership of the means of production – and thereby his ability to extract surplus-value from the workers – it is not enough for him to have appropriated the means of production at some previous point in history (what Marx calls “primitive accumulation”). Instead, if the capitalist wishes to remain a capitalist, he must continuously invest in or develop ever-more sophisticated means of production – a process usually known as innovation – because if he does not, somebody else will, *and that person will be in a position to outcompete him*. Hence, the reason why capitalism “produced all the break-through innovations and was much faster in other aspects of technical progress”, Kornai (2010: 639) writes, is because in capitalism “the entrepreneur plays a distinguished role”.

What this means, in other words, is that capitalism does not simply universalize the kind of exploitation that has always gone on in societies where a small minority controls the means of production, and where those at the bottom of the societal pyramid

are forced to “work for all” and “feed all” (as the famous “pyramid of capitalist system” portrays it). Instead, by making ownership of the means of production conditional on their continual improvement – i.e. by subjecting each capitalist to competition from other capitalists in the market – capitalism unleashes a positive-sum dynamic whereby societies continuously produce more and more value per unit of labour. Krugman (1994: 67) calls this “a crucial insight about the process of economic growth: sustained growth in a nation’s per capita income can only occur if there is a rise in output per unit of input” (see also Kornai 2010; Sowell 2015; Carlin *et al* 2001; Schumpeter 1992).¹⁷ According to its defenders, it is this *systemic tendency of capitalism to promote innovation* that distinguishes it from all previous systems of economic organization.

Innovation as exploitation: the concept of “relative surplus value”

Curiously enough, in his analysis of capitalism, Marx himself appears to admit to precisely this fact, through his concept of “relative surplus value”. His argument takes the form of a syllogism. Given that the working day can only be extended so much, he says, whereas capitalists are forced to increase the surplus without end, capitalism would soon run into serious trouble if capitalists’ only strategy for producing surplus-value was to extend the length of the working day. Hence, Marx suggests, in order for capitalism to function, production must over time also become increasingly more efficient – or, as he puts it: “The technical and social conditions of the process and consequently the mode of production itself must be revolutionized” (Marx 1976: 432). The increases in surplus-value that result from such “revolutions”, Marx calls “relative surplus-value”, which he defines as *an increase in the amount of surplus labour that workers are able perform within an otherwise unchanged working day*. “I call that surplus-value which arises from the curtailment of the necessary labour-time, and from

¹⁷ Another way to put this, suggested among other by Gregory Clark, is that capitalism allows societies to escape “Malthusian trap” that all human societies had previously existed under, wherein the only way to increase absolute wealth was to increase either the amount of people working, or the amount of hours that people work every day, and where any increase in absolute wealth would therefore be eaten up by increases in population (Clark 2007; see also Vries 2013: 23-34).

the corresponding alteration in the respective length of the two components of the working day *relative surplus-value*", he writes (ibid: 432).

In principle, this is not so different from what defenders of capitalism claim – namely, that capitalists must innovate in order to remain competitive. But here's the surprise: according to Marx, such increases in "relative surplus value" must be understood as yet another increase in exploitation, because once the innovative measures have been introduced, labour is forced to work so many more hours for free (ibid: 438). That is to say, after the innovations have been introduced, and the workers have performed a day's labour, they will have spent less hours producing value corresponding to their salary, and more hours producing "free" value for the capitalist, as the innovation shortens necessary labour-time. And so, they find themselves more exploited than before!

However, the reader may ask, in what sense do such increases in "exploitation" find any meaningful correspondence in the actual experience of the worker, who simply works the same amount of hours as before, for the same amount of money? Indeed, given Marx's definition of "exploitation", it would seem possible for a worker to be considered more exploited after having received a raise in salary, if that raise was (say) 2% but triggered by an increase in productivity of (say) 5%, even though such a worker would most likely experience himself as being less exploited afterward, as he got more money for the same amount of work. This, however, is where it must be remembered that Marx takes it as axiomatic that all value is produced by labour. Hence, whenever capital introduces an innovation that allows for more value to be produced from the same amount of labour, that increase must be counted as having been produced by labour; and so, all the extra value that ends up in the hands of capital as a result of that innovation must be viewed as having ended up there as a result of extra exploitation (ibid: 430ff).

This nevertheless suggests a glaring contradiction in the theory: how can Marx on the one hand maintain that labour is the source of all value, while at the same time claiming that the main way that capital increases surplus value over time is by investing in better and better means of production?

The answer is this: when Marx says that all value is produced by labour, he does not really mean labour, but “socially necessary labour” – a term he defines as “the labour-time required to produce any use-value *under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society*” (ibid: 129). This means, to put it more simply, that the “labour” that produces “all value” in Marx’s theory is not just labour, but also all the other things that contribute to value-production, which are not labour – such as “the level of development of science and its technological application, the social organization of the process of production, the extent and effectiveness of the means of production, and the conditions found in the natural environment” (ibid: 130). Clearly, this is a circular argument, as Marx’s claim that labour is the source of all value is ultimately based on a definition of labour as “that which produces value”. Thus he is able to protect his basic axiom from ever being falsified by experience, as there is no way for him to discover that something produces value without immediately defining that thing as “labour”, regardless of how it might otherwise be defined.¹⁸

Worse still, when we look at what actually happens empirically, we find that over time, increases in labor inputs only have a marginal effect on the surplus *compared to the effects of innovation*. As was shown for example in a classic study by Robert Solow (1957), between 1907 and 1957, labour inputs in the US accounted for only 13% of economic growth, whereas technological innovation accounted for the remaining 86%. More recently, Paul Romer (1989: abstract) has suggested that economic growth in capitalism “is driven by technological change that arises from intentional investment decisions made by profit maximizing agents”. Hence, as Przeworski admits, Marx’s argument must ultimately be “based on a tautology: since wages and profits are considered as shares of the value added by living labor (i.e. conflict is always at the margin), no absolute improvement is sufficient to moderate the conflict over

¹⁸ “The same doctrine expressed as a testable hypothesis”, Sowell writes, “would collapse like a house of cards. If labor is the sole – or even main – source of value, then in those economies where there is more labor input and less nonlabor input, output per capita and therefore real income would be higher. The opposite is blatant. In the most desperately poor countries, people work longer and harder for subsistence than in more elaborate and prosperous economies where most people never touch physical goods during the production process” (Sowell 1980: 226-227).

distribution. Capitalism is thus a zero-sum system by definition, and no material improvement can have legitimizing effects” (Przeworski 1985: 134). And so, the thesis that capitalism rests on exploitation of labour is shown to be a foregone conclusion, not a testable hypothesis.¹⁹

This, then, gives us the first important insight of social democracy, which is that getting rid of capital in order to solve the problems of capitalism will only result in bigger problems than it solves, as it will not only get rid of capitalist exploitation, but also the other (and positive) thing that capitalists do in pursuit of profits, which is to innovate. Removing the capitalist will therefore in the long run lead to stagnation and not, as Trotsky had hoped, “to increasing the power of man over nature and to the abolition of the power of man over man” (Trotsky 1938: 172). As Meidner notes, the reason why Swedish social democrats ended up abandoning most of their radical socialist goals was because “the market delivered the achievements which the socialists had aimed at: economic growth, which could be used for major social reforms, rising incomes, high employment” (Meidner 1993: 213).

Capitalism at every given moment: what Marx got right

That, however, is only half of it. The reason why I have laid out the Marxist argument in some detail is not only because I believe that Marx got some things wrong, but also because he got at least one important aspect right. And that is: just because the economic pie grows over time – and just because that in principle allows for a positive-sum game

¹⁹ Despite these obvious problem, the claim that labour produces all value is most likely what accounts for the political attractiveness of Marx’s critique of capitalism, as it implies that “reform is impossible; there is nothing for it but to overthrow the system itself” (Robinson 1962: 39). This is because, if capitalism is *based* on exploitation of labour, then any claim to represent the interests of labour within capitalism must be misguided at best, and more likely an ideological hoax perpetrated by the ruling elite. Thus Marxism provides the perfect theoretical justification for a revolutionary approach: the choice is in the end between socialism and barbarism! (see Luxemburg 2010). Analytically, however, this attractiveness comes at a very high cost, as it is based on broadening the term “exploitation” to refer to two very different things at once: on the one hand, the act of producing more by simply over-working people; on the other hand, the act of producing more by giving people increasingly better tools – which could otherwise be understood to be *precisely the difference between exploitation and cooperation*.

to develop at the level of the system as a whole – it does not follow that the relation between capital and labour cannot be one of zero-sum competition *at every given moment*.

Przeworski puts this point well. “[S]ince the national product generated by the capitalist sector of the economy is divided into a part appropriated by capital as profit and a part paid in exchange for labor power as wages the shares of capital and labor are inversely related” (Przeworski 1985: 171). Put simpler, the bigger the share of the surplus that ends up in the hands of capital at any given moment, the less of it will end up in the hands of labour, and vice versa. And regardless of how much bigger the surplus is *now* compared to some previous historical level, it is always in the immediate interest of both capital and labour to get their hands on as much of it as possible. As Marx puts this point with admirable clarity: “Even the most favourable situation for the working class, the most rapid possible growth of capital, however much it may improve the material existence of the worker, does not remove the antagonism between his interests and the interests of the bourgeoisie. Profit and wages remain as before in inverse proportions” (Marx 1952: 35).

To illustrate this point, take the example of a new technology that increases productivity. Even though such a technology will in principle allow for a positive-sum outcome – over time, or right away – it will always be introduced into relations of production that are most immediately based on zero-sum competition and not cooperation, as the capitalist will seek to pocket all the increased productivity as increased profits. “The fact that the worker, when the productivity of his labour has been increased, produces say ten times as many commodities as before, and thus spends one-tenth times as much labour-time on each,” Marx writes, “by no means prevents him from continuing to work 12 hours as before, nor from producing in those 12 hours 1,200 articles instead of 120” (Marx 1976: 438). Such a worker, then, would not be more exploited in terms of having to work longer hours for the same amount of pay. However, he would be able to look at the now massively increased surplus and conclude that his interests with regards to it are starkly at odds with those of the capitalist – a point that was nicely captured by David Graeber in his observation that, instead of living in a

world where technology has allowed us to work fifteen hours a week (as Keynes prophesized would be possible by now, assuming a constant pace of technological progress; see Keynes 1931), most of us are still working the same amount of hours but increasingly performing “bullshit jobs”, as the amount of necessary labour has been steadily automated away (Graeber 2018: 1-3; see also Paulsen 2014).

Of course, what’s missing from this picture is the obvious counterpoint: that while increases in productivity by no means prevent workers from working as many hours as before, such increases in productivity are also *the only thing that allows society to shorten the working day without seeing a corresponding decrease in overall wealth* (and by the same token, the only thing that allows for increases in salaries and consumption without corresponding increases in labour-time and/or decreases in profits). Furthermore – and most importantly – when Marx says that no amount of material improvements in the living condition of workers removes the antagonism between workers and capitalists, this is only true *insofar as we talk about their relation at every given moment, and not in terms of how it develops over time*. Because over time, profits and wages increase in a positive-sum manner, which means that time does remove the antagonism between their interests. (To see how this is so, imagine that you could show an English 19th century worker the living conditions of an English worker in the 21st century. Would he conclude that the relation between capital and labour had been one of zero-sum competition? Probably not; see Clark 2007).

The central insight that Marx hits upon here is nevertheless valid. No matter how much the productivity of capitalism increases over time, capitalism will never get to a point where the surplus has increased *sufficiently* for capitalists to voluntarily stop their competition with labour in favour of genuine collaboration. Instead, at each moment of interaction, the market pushes capital to maximize its profits, thereby pitting the interests of capital against the interests of labour, as the latter also seek to maximize their share of total output. “This point”, Przeworski says, is “always missed by Marx’s critics [...] That the game is not zero-sum does not yet imply that it is a cooperative one” (Przeworski 1985: 173-174). Bertrand Russell gives a more colourful illustration of the same point:

Suppose that, at a given moment, a certain number of people are engaged in the manufacture of pins. They make as many pins as the world needs, working (say) eight hours a day. Someone makes an invention by which the same number of men can make twice as many pins: pins are already so cheap that hardly any more will be bought at a lower price. In a sensible world, everybody concerned in the manufacturing of pins would take to working four hours instead of eight, and everything else would go on as before. But in the actual world this would be thought demoralizing. The men still work eight hours, there are too many pins, some employers go bankrupt, and half the men previously concerned in making pins are thrown out of work. There is, in the end, just as much leisure as on the other plan, but half the men are totally idle while half are still overworked. In this way, it is insured that the unavoidable leisure shall cause misery all round instead of being a universal source of happiness. Can anything more insane be imagined? (Russell 2004: 6-7).

This, then, is the dilemma that appears to lie at the heart of capitalism: both its best and its worst aspects can be traced back to the same institutional mechanism – the profit-motive.

On the one hand, it is the profit-motive that incentivises the capitalist to invest in the “invention by which the same number of men can make twice as many pins” – and over time, what distinguishes capitalism from other economic systems is precisely its tendency to generate those kinds of innovations on a consistent basis (see McAfee 2019; Schumpeter 1992). As soon as those innovations have been made, however, the profit-motive incentivises the capitalist to make sure “that the unavoidable leisure shall cause misery all round instead of being a universal source of happiness” – because to the capitalist, increases in productivity are only of interest insofar as they allow him to increase *the difference between total output and wages*. As Wolff writes, “Stagnating wages alongside rising productivity are perpetual goals of capitalists in their relentless struggle with their productive laborers” (Wolff 2016: 15), because whenever those two things can be made to happen simultaneously, “the result is an explosion of the capitalist surplus” (ibid: 5).

The universal compromise

This gets us to the second and most important insight of social democracy, which is that while the conflict of interest between capital and labour is real, it is not a necessary feature of capitalism that can only be overcome through revolution. Instead, it is *an unnecessary feature of the system that is best solved through compromise*.

The core of the insight is simple. Capitalism is a positive-sum game over time. Therefore, any gains that capital or labour can make at any given moment through zero-sum struggle over distribution, are dwarfed by what both stand to gain over time through general increases in productivity achieved through cooperation.²⁰ Given the incentive structures of capitalism, however, both parties are pushed into conflict, as both have more to gain at any given moment from maximizing their share of the output. Hence, everything else being equal, capital will always seek to increase productivity but keep wages stagnant, rather than collaborate with labour towards increased and shared prosperity. Labour will respond in kind.

As the reader will notice, this spells out a textbook example of the prisoner's dilemma: although the optimal strategy over time is for both capital and labour to establish a cooperative relation based on trust and tit-for-tat reciprocity, the best possible outcome at any given moment is for each party to "cheat" while the other cooperates (see Rapoport & Chammah 1965). "Any group", Przeworski writes, "is best off in this system if it obtains a wage increase and if other groups pay for the increases of productivity, since in this way it maximizes both its current income and the

²⁰ As a simple illustration, let us assume that total output at a given moment is 10, and that its distribution between capital and labour is equal – 5 to each. If capital and labour understand their interests as a matter of increasing their shares of total output relative to the other, then the best-case scenario for either party is at any given moment to gain whatever the other has, i.e. to go from 5 to 10 (and in reality not even that, as neither party can reduce the income of the other to zero). If, on the other hand, both understand their interest in terms of maximizing the size of the output itself, then both will be able to not only hope for much greater gains over time; they will be able to make those gains at no cost to the other. If, for instance, productivity increases tenfold over a given number of years – so that total output goes from 10 to 100 – then the *status-quo outcome* (where distribution remains equal) will be that both parties increase their earnings ten times. Hence, from a purely rational point of view, both parties have much more to gain from collaborating towards increasing productivity, than they do from struggling over a given output.

probability of increasing it in the future” (Przeworski 1985: 144), both of which cannot be achieved at the same time if everyone acts this way. Capital and labour are thus prisoners to their circumstance, unable to solve the collective action problem unless some external force allows them to do so.

How, then, does social democracy overcome this prisoner’s dilemma? Traditionally, by presenting capital with *a combination of a threat and a promise*. The threat is that of worker militancy: if capital chooses to pursue the non-cooperative strategy, organized labour will respond in kind, primarily by going on strike, but also by engaging in other forms of industrial action, and ultimately revolution. The promise, on the other hand, is that if capital agrees to invest its profits productively, and to share the fruits of increased productivity with labour, labour will in turn step back from its more radical claims and willingly participate in the production of a profit for the capitalist. “Any compromise”, Przeworski writes, “must have the following form”:

workers consent to the perpetuation of profit as an institution in exchange for the prospect of improving their material well-being in the future. In terms of such a compromise capitalists retain the capacity to withhold a part of the product because the profit they appropriate is expected by workers to be saved, invested, transformed into productive potential, and partly distributed as gains to workers. The general logic of cooperation is not always stated explicitly. [...] Nevertheless, whatever the explicit norm cementing a particular “social pact,” the underlying logic of cooperation must relate future wages to current profits. (ibid: 180)

From the social democratic point of view, the most important point about such a compromise is that it is not a compromise on the ultimate interest of either capital or labour. On the contrary: by compromising on what *appears to be their interests at any given moment*, both parties are able to bring about a future in which both their interests are much better served than had they sought to maximize their shares at any given moment. In the Winsemius report, this idea was well-summarized in the following passage:

From the side of the manufacturers, it should be realized that they have to find new opportunities, new markets, better technique and organization. It is only fair that once an improvement has been made in a certain branch industry, labour should have its share in terms of higher wages. [...] Trade union leaders will make an important contribution to the industrial programme if their policy would really be based on [...] long-term agreements. If they kept in mind that an increase of real wages – either direct or indirect – is in the long run only possible through increased productivity, this might be a firm basis for a positive policy. (Winsemius 1963: 115).

What ultimately defines social democracy, then, is not any particular policy – such as high taxes, socialized healthcare, or any other – nor, for that matter, any particular ideological commitment, such as that to socialism. Instead, what ultimately defines social democracy is *the ability to bring about a compromise between capital and labour, according to which both agree to step away from their most immediate interests in the class struggle and collaborate towards a positive-sum future.*

This point is of crucial importance to any discussion of social democracy's future, I contend, because it means that social democracy does not automatically “fail” once it steps away from Marxism and/or socialism, and begins to embrace market-oriented policies. In fact, we should not see such moves as moves away from social democracy at all. Socialism, after all, was never what made social democracy work – what made it work was its willingness to compromise! Hence, the test of whether or not social democracy works is whether it is able to achieve a compromise between capital and labour that leads to a positive-sum outcome for both. If it does, then it has done its job, regardless of how “socialist” it may look. If it does not, it fails. And while globalization appears to make traditional social democracy impossible – for exactly the reasons Marxists point out – globalization does not change the fact that capitalism is a positive-sum game over time.

Such a definition of social democracy breaks us out of the Marxist framework, while retaining the central insight of Marxism. Most importantly, it allows us to ask a

more open-ended question about the viability of social democracy under globalization: what sort of class compromise can achieve under conditions of globalization what traditional social democracy achieved in a previous era?

1968 in Singapore: consolidating class compromise

This gets us back to Singapore. Having gotten rid of most of the radical trade unionists in 1963, it was not until 1968 that Singapore's industrialization really got going. The proximate reason for this was the announcement by the British in that year that they would withdraw all of their military presence from Singapore two years later – in 1971 – and with that a large number of jobs, as the British military was at that point the biggest employer in Singapore. “If we are to [...] make good the \$450 million the British Armed Forces have been spending”, then minister of labour, S. Rajaratnam, said, “then there must be massive industrial expansions; accelerated economic growth through stimulation of our entrepot trade, tourism, shipping and so on”.²¹ And for this, there had to be foreign investment.

In order to attract foreign investments, however, something first had to be done about the situation in the labour market, which was still in the poor shape that the Winsemius report had found it seven years earlier. Between 1960 and 1967, the total number of work stoppages had been 389 – or almost *once a week* on average – representing a loss of 1,284,029 man-days²², most of which were due to a variety of standard management decisions, such as dismissals, demotions, recruitment of workers, reorganization, etc. “One can seriously ask whether in such a state of affairs any new employer would set up factories in Singapore”, Rajaratnam commented. “There must be a climate of industrial peace and stability to attract both local and foreign capital. It is essential to increase the productivity of our workers, the efficiency of entrepreneurs, so that our products can compete in the stiff competitive export markets of the world”.²³

²¹ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 10 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column 485.

²² Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, July 31 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 735.

²³ Hansard Parliamentary Debates: Official Report, 10 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column, 486.

Two bills were therefore passed in parliament – the 1968 Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act, and the 1968 Employment Act – which aimed to “rationalise employer-employee relationship with a view to attracting new investments and increasing the efficiency of our trading and industrial enterprises”.²⁴ Together, they came to lay the foundation for Singapore’s class compromise (see Mandels 1988).

The first, the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act, was an amendment to the original 1960 Industrial Relations Ordinance. The 1960 act had already made strikes illegal unless granted by the state, and the aim of the new bill was to further regulate how industrial relations were organized. Specifically, the new bill sought to “restore” rights to managers that, according to the government, had been eroded in the preceding years by all-too zealous labour unions, who had “trespassed” into the sphere of management.²⁵ The big ticket item of the bill was a long list of management functions that labour unions would no longer have a legal right to negotiate around, such as promotions, internal transfers, recruitments, retrenchments, dismissals and reinstatements of employees. All of these things would now be singlehandedly decided by the employer. The bill also sought to limit benefits – such as paid vacation and sick leave – and to tighten the conditions under which a union officer would be allowed to apply for paid leave. Lastly, the bill got rid of the principle “last in, first out”, which had previously regulated how retrenchment decisions were made, which it replaced with the principle “least efficient, first out” (something that had been recommended in the Winsemius report). “An employer”, Rajaratnam said, “would naturally want to retain efficient workers if he wants to run his enterprise successfully. The principle of ‘last in, first out’ prevents him from retaining useful employees in a redundancy or reorganisation exercise”.²⁶

The second bill, the Employment Act, sought to regulate employment conditions in the direction of greater uniformity and strictness, in order to both cut the costs and

²⁴ Hansard Parliamentary debates: Official Report, July 31 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 733.

²⁵ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, July 31 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 734.

²⁶ Hansard Parliamentary Debates: Official Report, July 31 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 737-740.

increase the productivity of labour. The bill introduced a number of new rules and regulations: the workweek was made longer, from 39 to 44 hours; the days of paid leave per year was reduced to one or two week/s per employee, depending on their years of service (one week for employees with less than ten years, two weeks for those with more); childcare leave for female employees was limited to three weeks; bonuses were tied strictly to productivity; employment of anyone above the age of 55 was prohibited (in order to get rid of older and less productive workers and make way for younger ones); retrenchment benefits were removed for employees with less than three years of service; the amount of overtime per month and employee was limited to 48 hours; and a few other, less important provisions.²⁷ “It is because we have learnt from the bitter experiences of those who promised prosperity without tears and without effort”, Rajaratnam said, “that we have decided to promise prosperity the only practical and effective way – the hard way.” That way, Rajaratnam admitted, “is not a popular way – that is popular with a weak and effete people. But we do not believe that our people are weak or effete”.²⁸

In this, Rajaratnam echoed something that Lee Kuan Yew had said a few years earlier, about how Singapore needed to become a “rugged society”²⁹. By this, Lee meant a society in which there is a general willingness to accept the hard facts of life – or, as he put it, a “mood in our people to be prepared to sacrifice, to make the effort to respond to a harsher situation”.³⁰ “The basic problem which we have already begun to solve”, he said, “is to get rid of this attitude that: ‘You owe me a living. I am born here. According to Charter of Human Rights, I am entitled to the following things: minimum wage, holidays with pay, education and so on’”.³¹ According to Lee, such an attitude had no place in a society where survival depended on the willingness of global capital

²⁷ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 10 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column 473-481.

²⁸ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 10 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column 472.

²⁹ Ministry of Culture. “Address by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, on the eve of National Day, August 8 1966”, p. 2. Online resource: <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/speeches/record-details/73d65645-115d-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad>

³⁰ Ministry of Culture. “Transcript of address by the Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew, at the annual dinner of the Singapore Employers’ Federation, held at the conference hall, Trade Union House, May 31 1967”, p. 2.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

to invest in its labour, and on the ability of its exports to compete in the stiff world markets. “Unless you dispel this belief that the world owes us a living,” he said, “then none of our other problem will even begin to be solved”.³²

Not surprisingly, when the two bills were introduced in parliament, they were both met with some protest from representatives of organized labour, who saw them as excessively restrictive and draconian. One of them, PAP member Abdul Aziz Karim, complained that the new bills gave powers to employers over employees that should rightly only concern private property, and that the bills therefore treated human beings like things. “The common assertion that it is the employers’ right to make business decisions free from collective bargaining”, he said, “is based on property rights. Such a contention is valid as far as the right to organise and to direct machinery, materials and money is concerned, but never men”.³³ He also protested against the decision to remove the rights of unions to bargain with employers around bonuses, as he feared that this would lead to employers simply getting rid of bonuses altogether. “It is too far-fetched”, he said, “to believe that all employers who are making profits will pay a productivity bonus notwithstanding the profits which can be attributed to the productivity of labour. If [this clause] stands unamended, workers can expect to lose everything in the form of bonus”.³⁴ Another PAP member of parliament, Ho See Beng, similarly cautioned that “the provisions of this Bill [are such] that even the most scrupulous of employers would be stupid not to take advantage of them to the detriment of their employees”, and that the bills therefore relied too much on the good will of capitalists. “In the overall interest of the working class,” he said, “the dangers and threats posed to their security by this amendment Bill must be squarely faced in the hope that employers would also rise to the occasion and not abuse the absolute managerial functions handed to them in this ‘silver statute’”.³⁵

³² Ibid., p. 5.

³³ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, July 31 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 776.

³⁴ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 10 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column 536.

³⁵ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 781.

Others, who would no doubt have been even more critical of the acts, did not get a chance to voice their criticism in any significant way. In part, this was because many of the leading figures of the left-wing labour unions were still in jail, having been put there during Operation Coldstore. In part, it was because the main opposition party at the time, Barisan Sosialis, had decided to boycott the 1968 general elections (held only a few months prior to the passing of the bills) in order to protest the fact that so many oppositional figures were still in jail, pursuing instead a “back to the streets strategy” (Mauzy & Milne 2002: 149; see also Anonymous 1972). As a result, all the seats in parliament that election went to PAP by default, handing them an absolute parliamentary monopoly that they maintained all the way to 1981.

For most of the period when Singapore went through its industrialization, therefore, the only organized political opposition that remained in the country were the student unions in the universities and polytechnics. Here, the radical, anti-capitalist and socialist vision that had animated the labour union left of the fifties and sixties was kept alive by a second generation of dissidents, who sought to awaken their fellow students from what they saw as the “political apathy” that had gripped Singaporeans. In particular, the students believed that they had a moral responsibility to politicize and radicalize their fellow students, as they understood their own ability to educate themselves to be made possible by the taxpayer-dollars of working-class Singaporeans, who provided much of the funding for the universities and polytechnics. As one reads in the 1976/77 Student Union Orientation Handbook that was handed out to new students at the Singapore Polytechnic:

The bulk of the money used for our education is subsidized by the tax-payers and these are the people at large – the workers, farmers, fisherman etc. These people are responsible for changing the landscape of our country, they are the builders, the creators of wealth, but they are exploited, *The wealth they created flows into the pockets of the rich* – the industrialists, the capitalists. The people await us with outstretched hands and our immediate role is to identify with the working people. (SPSU 1976)

Not surprisingly, when PAP's parliamentary monopoly was finally broken in 1981 – by lawyer and activist JB Jeyaretnam of the Worker's Party – much of the grassroots organizing was carried out by these student activists, many of whom I met and got to know through fieldwork in the activist community of Singapore.³⁶ Equally unsurprising, a number of these student activists were arrested in 1987 by the Internal Security Department, this time during a covert security operation codenamed “Operation Spectrum”, on charges of being part of a “Marxist conspiracy [...] to subvert the existing social and political order, using communist united front tactics to establish a Marxist state” (Ministry of Home Affairs 1987; see also Barr 2010). Among those pointed out by the government as the leaders of this “Marxist conspiracy” was political exile and previous student leader Tan Wah Piow, who had fled Singapore in 1975 after being imprisoned on charges of rioting (Tan 2012a). According to the government, his flight from Singapore had been orchestrated by Marxist writer Malcolm Caldwell. In a press statement, then minister of home affairs said: “Whoever are the real leaders behind Tan Wah Piow, their tactics have changed. The old rallying cries of anti-imperialism are no longer effective” (Jayakumar 1987: 7), but the basic threat of communism remained as ever the same:

A classless society? Do they believe they can achieve this without violence? Surely you must first eliminate all property owners and, in Singapore, this includes about 650,000 HDB owners. Must you not also eliminate all the 20,000 shopkeepers? Do they believe this can be done without them putting up a fight? “Get rid of multinational companies” – there are more than 700 foreign companies employing more than 50 per cent of our industrial workforce. Suppose we get rid of the MNCs. Thousands will become unemployed. Then what? Disorder, turmoil, violence, bloodshed [...] would be inevitable (ibid: 10).

Today, these student activists are mostly in their fifties and sixties, yet many of them are still very active. During my stay in Singapore, a young filmmaker named Jason Soo

³⁶ The following paragraphs are based on interviews that I conducted with several student activists involved in this campaign.

– with whom I went to Kuala Lumpur to interview Poh Soo Kai, one of the detainees during Operation Coldstore – produced a documentary about Operation Spectrum, called *1987: Unracing the Conspiracy* (Soo 2015). For more than a year, Jason screened the movie every month or so at an alternative movie theatre in Singapore called *The Projector*. After the screenings, the audience was given a chance to ask questions to some of the former detainees, who showed up for Q&A. I attended many of these screenings, and was struck by how often young Singaporeans would begin their questions by exclaiming: “I had never heard about this! Thank you for sharing your story!”, apparently shocked at what their history lessons had left out.

Back to 1968. In response to the criticisms that were voiced in parliament when the two bills were introduced, Rajaratnam explained the philosophy behind them, saying that they must not be understood in terms of abstract rights and responsibilities, but instead, must be seen “in the context of the new problems an independent Singapore faces”. “We are not restoring these rights to management merely out of a sense of justice and fair play,” he said, “but because we are convinced that unless proper management functions are allowed to be performed unhampered there would be little or no economic expansion or fresh investments”.³⁷ According to Rajaratnam, “No investor or entrepreneur is going to risk millions of dollars if he has not the final say and the responsibility to decide how the enterprise should be run”.³⁸ Even more importantly, he argued, while it may seem that the new bills do nothing but make life worse for workers, this is only so at the moment of their introduction, at which point workers will indeed lose some privileges that they had previously enjoyed. But the reason why they were introduced, he insisted, was not ultimately to make life worse for workers, but to attract investment – and in the long-run, this would greatly compensate for any short-term losses that workers would experience. “Those who read the Employment Bill carefully”, he said,

³⁷ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 10 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column 485-486.

³⁸ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, July 31 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, 734.

will discover that it in no way precludes workers from seeking their due and just share in expanding prosperity. *But, first, there must be expanding prosperity and this cannot be brought about by dividing and sub-dividing a static level of prosperity.* That is why this Bill relates rewards, not to some abstract and arbitrary principle of justice, but to more tangible and more meaningful norms like efficiency, effort, productivity and so on. Rewards whether by way of profits or wages should be related to economic growth and efficiency.³⁹

On the basis of this analysis, Rajaratnam declared PAP to be the sole defender of what he called the “national interest”. “Naturally for the trade unionists,” he said, “they are only interested in the trade unions and the workers”, just as the employer “is concerned only with his own sectional interest”. However, “as a Government, our interests are national. We are interested in the welfare of Singapore as a whole – workers, employers and professional men. [...] And the overriding test to which we submit any legislation”, he said, “is, will it help to bring about these objectives – economic expansion, new investments, increased productivity?”⁴⁰ Several members of parliament agreed. “The end result”, one of them said, “will be a more prosperous Singapore in which everyone – be he an employer or a worker – will share in this prosperity. What is considered a sacrifice in the short-term interest will produce material and financial benefits in the future”.⁴¹ Even though the bills “may appear to the superficially minded and the superficially inclined as a move against the interests of labour”, another said, “[...] in reality it is not so”, as “[t]he Government’s measures are an attempt to establish a balance between the needs of the workers and the requirements of entrepreneurs in the context of our national interest”.⁴²

³⁹ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 10 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column 482, emphasis mine.

⁴⁰ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 789.

⁴¹ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 11 Jul 1968, Second Reading of the Employment Bill, Vol. 27, column 531.

⁴² Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 780-781.

For workers, this was nevertheless a bitter pill to swallow. In order to satisfy the interests of international capital, they would have to accept cuts in pay, longer work-days, fewer days off, and lower job security, etc. – and they would have to do so on the promise that, in the long run, this would be in their interests as well, even though in the short run it was directly against their interests. In order to get the working class onboard with the industrialization effort, therefore, a third bill was introduced as a companion to the two others. This was the 1968 Central Provident Fund (Amendment) Act – in my view the most important bill of the three, as it lay the basis for the social contract between people and state, thereby providing the social foundation for the other two.

Central Provident Fund: a “stake in the country and its future”

When introducing the Central Provident Fund (Amendment) Act to Parliament, Rajaratnam explained its purpose. While the purpose of the Employment Bill and the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Bill had been “to have more realistic terms and conditions of service and employer-employee relations”, he said, the new bill “deals with another inter-related problem – the marshalling of domestic savings for the economic and social benefit of our people”.⁴³ The bill primarily made two updates to the CPF system.

First, it increased the contribution rate. As an initial step, the monthly contribution would be increased modestly, from 10% to 11.5% of the salary. In addition to this, however, the bill also gave the government the power to schedule future increases in the rate of contribution, with the aim of steadily increasing contributions as the economy grew in size. As part of this, the contribution ceiling was increased from the previous maximum of \$25 per month to a new maximum of \$150, in order to make room for the increased savings that the government expected to come in. Eventually, this would lead to a highest-ever contribution rate of 50% of the salary in 1985, split evenly between employer and employee.

⁴³ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Central Provident Fund (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 791.

Second, the bill enabled CPF members to use their funds to purchase apartments from the Housing and Development Board (HDB), a government owned real-estate developer, and so to become homeowners. At the time this decision was made, a large portion of Singaporeans were living in so-called *kampongs* – auto-constructed and often unsanitary urban villages or slums on the fringes of the city centre – which PAP had long wanted to get rid of, as they were “deemed to be inimical to the vision of a modern state” (Loh 2013). Together with the increased savings rate, the housing policy was intended to give citizens not just access to clean and affordable housing, but a “stake in the country and its future”. “This is an exercise in social innovation and social transformation,” Rajaratnam said when introducing the bill, “an attempt to create as large a proportion of property-owning population as possible so that they would have a deep and abiding stake in the country and thereby revolutionise the pattern of living of our people for the better”.⁴⁴

The way that the system works is as follows. Whenever a new HDB building is constructed, the HDB issues 99-year leases for the apartments in it. The leases are then bought by citizens using their CPF savings, either to be paid in full or (more commonly) through monthly instalments on the loans, which are also issued by the HDB.⁴⁵ Both the prices of the HDB apartments and the conditions of the loans are highly favourable compared to market prices, something that’s allowed Singapore to become a “home-owning society”, as more than 80% of the population own their HDB apartments (see Chua 1997; Asher 2004). In his memoirs, Lee Kuan Yew reflected on this issue, writing:

My primary preoccupation was to give every citizen *a stake in the country and its future*. I wanted a home-owning society. I had seen the contrast between the blocks of low-cost rental flats, badly misused and poorly maintained, and those of house-proud owners, and was convinced that if every family owned its home, the country would be more stable [...] I had seen how voters in capital cities always tended to vote against the

⁴⁴ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, August 1 1968, Second Reading of the Central Provident Fund (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 797.

⁴⁵ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 1 August 1968, Second Reading of the Central Provident Fund (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 794.

government of the day and was determined that our householders should become homeowners, *otherwise we would not have political stability*. (Lee 2000: 160)

The decision to allow CPF members to use their funds to pay for housing was in other words not just a practical way of getting people out of the kampongs and into high-rise buildings, and so bring about a more rational use of Singapore's limited land. More fundamentally, it was a way of creating *a lasting bond between the government and the people*. Through home-ownership, Lee thought, the citizens would be given a financial stake in the long-term performance of the economy, as the values of their apartments would increase as the economy increased in size. And this, in turn, would translate into a strong preference for continued PAP rule, as Singapore's attractiveness as a business centre depends largely on its social and political stability (see Castells 1988; Chua 1997). "As Singapore prospers", Lee said in 2011, "the value of their HDB homes also appreciate. Home ownership motivates Singaporeans to work hard and to aspire for a better future for their family, to upgrade to better and bigger flats" (Lee 2011).

Since this social contract was first formulated, its basic point has been repeated many times by Singaporean politicians. "With homes", said then minister of labour in a 1984 speech, "our citizens have a stake in the wellbeing and future of the country. Thus CPF has been an instrumental factor in bringing about a sense of belonging, where citizens have real interests to safeguard" (Jayakumar 1984: 3). More sentimentally, the same idea was presented in a 1998 book by the National Heritage Board, entitled *Singapore: Journey into Nationhood*, in which the reader was shown an image of a man looking out the window of his HDB apartment, together with the quote, "My flat is my little piece of Singapore" (National Heritage Board 1998: 128). The book also explained how "[c]hanging the strategy from producing for the region to producing for world markets is paying off", as "more and more Singaporeans have money to buy their own homes." (ibid: 107).

More recently – and, some would say, more nefariously (e.g. Ortmann 2010) – PAP has leveraged the HDB/CPF scheme as a more direct means of ensuring electoral support, by tying votes for the government with HDB "upgrading", promising voters

that “those precincts and constituencies which supported PAP would be first in line for upgrading while those which voted for the Opposition would move ‘to the back of the queue’” (Muazy & Milne 2002: 151). The first time this strategy was used was during the 1997 general election, following three general elections during which PAP had seen some decline in voter support – from 77.7% in 1980 to 61% in 1991. In the 1997 election, as in the previous two elections, the opposition contested only a minority of seats. This was a matter of tactics: if the opposition did not even have a theoretical chance of ousting the government, it was reasoned, this would increase the amount of voters willing to vote for them, as more people would be interested in “sending a message” than in actually changing government. It thus made dissidence “safe”, and so allowed the opposition to win more votes from an electorate taught to fear political change (ibid: 151). Anxious to regain their control over the voter base, PAP responded by turning this safe rebellion into a potentially fatal decision, as dissenting voters now had to weight the limited gain of a few more oppositional candidates against the severe cost of not having their HDBs upgraded – something that to a “home-owning society” was clearly understood not only as a matter of living standards but also as a matter of “asset enhancement”, as those voters who received upgrades would end up with apartments of higher resale value (see Low 1999; Ortmann 2010: 26-27). “By linking the priority of upgrading to electoral support”, said then prime minister Goh Chok Tong, “we focus the minds of voters on the link between upgrading and the people whose policies make it possible. This has the desired result” (*The Straits Times* 1998-01-12; see also Ortmann 2010: 26-27, 118-119). And indeed, the results were quite immediate, as the following elections saw a strong upswing for PAP: 65% in 1997, and 75% in 2001. “Thus,” commented blogger Andrew Loh in 2011, “[...] the purpose of the vote was reduced to a question of whether one wanted estate upgrading, to the virtual exclusion of all other issues, including national ones” (Loh 2011).

This has resulted in some jokes online. For example, the satirical Facebook page “Singaporeans supporting the government because of covered walkways” makes fun of the economic pact between government and people by posting pictures of covered walkways in various areas of Singapore, put there by the government to shelter Singaporeans from both rainfall and sunlight, together with comments like: “So much

thoughts and planning went into this. Nothing is by accident and what you see here is the farsightedness of our beloved government”; “No way any opposition party is going to outdo this!”; and, “Without our sacred Government, we will never have the best living standards in this world – the envy of many countries!” (just to mention a few). In a similar vein, but without the irony, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong questioned in a 2006 speech the very utility of having an opposition. “What is the opposition’s job?”, he asked, proving the answer: “It’s not to help the PAP do a better job!” Instead, the only “job” of the opposition, Lee thought,

is to make life miserable for me so that I screw up and they can come in and sit where I am here and take charge. Right now we have Low Thia Khiang, we have Chiam, we have Steve Chia [at that time the only three oppositional members of parliament]. So we can deal with them, it’s ok. But supposing you had a parliament with 10, 15, 20 opposition members out of 80. Then, instead of spending my time thinking of what is the right policy for Singapore, I’m going to spend all my time – I have to spend all my time – thinking what is the right way to fix them, what’s the right way to buy my own supporters over, how can I solve this week’s problem and forget about next year’s challenges?

Along the same lines, in 1981, Lee Kuan Yew cautioned that Singapore’s increasing prosperity might lead citizens to call for more opposition in parliament, something that, in his view, would at best have no effect on governance at all, and at worst would lead to an upending of the social contract, as populist politicians would offer citizens short-term gains at the expense of the nation’s long-term viability:

In the next few years, they will learn that an opposition, if we are lucky, makes no difference, to good government. Unfortunately, they may well discover, at great cost, that if we are unlucky, like most developing countries, an opposition can make for confusion by raising false expectation of unattainable benefits from greater welfare spending, as in Britain and so many Third World countries. Instead of sound planning

and hard work to achieve the progress of their countries, these opposition groups raise false hopes of easy giveaways from an imaginary pie. (Quoted in Rodan 1989: 168)

According to the two Lees, therefore, it is better to not have an opposition at all, as that will allow the government to focus all their energies on what is really important – i.e. how to safeguard continued economic development for the benefit of the nation as a whole – not having to devote any time worrying about how to “fix” the opposition, responding to their “false expectations” of “unattainable benefits”. Has PAP not proven themselves to the people? Have they not lived up to the promise that workers will get their share in expanding prosperity? Have they not earned the people’s trust? Do they really need a “check” on their power? “Compare yourself with your counterparts in other countries and see how well you have done”, then prime minister Goh Chok Tong said in his 1994 National Day speech. “If you are a taxi driver, compare yourself with taxi drivers in Thailand, Taiwan, London, or anywhere else in the world. How many own their homes? How many of them own shares?” (Goh 1994).

In this way, *a close-knit social contract* between government and people has been formulated, according to which Singapore’s economic success justifies PAP’s continued monopoly on power, which in turn is what explains the economic success. And at the very centre of this social contract sits the CPF/HDB scheme, through which PAP’s continued rule is simultaneously enforced and justified. “The extensive public-housing programme”, Chua writes (1997: 139-140), “is symbolically, and hence ideologically, a powerful sign and constant reminder to the population of the existing regime’s ability to fulfil its promise to improve the living conditions of the entire nation”. Equally, it is a reminder of the government’s ability to punish anyone who dares step out of the social contact, since home-ownership gives the government a strong hold over the citizens, who have to weigh the limited benefit of “sending a signal” against the severe cost of not getting renovations.

A gift to the people? Complicating the stake in the country

It is important, I believe, to stress the ideological and political nature of the CPF/HDB scheme, because the link between industrialization and housing is not necessarily as one-directional as the notion of “a stake in the country and its future” assumes. In fact, when we look at history, we find that neither the decision to increase the savings rate of the CPF, nor the decision to allow CPF members to use their savings to buy property, were made because this was something that the citizens had asked for. Instead, there were other motives at play.

First, the reason why the savings rate was increased as Singapore industrialized was not primarily to finance a housing scheme, nor to give Singaporeans a “stake in the country” more generally. Instead, the causality seems to have gone the other way around. With or without a housing project, the savings- and investment rate of the economy would have had to increase as Singapore industrialized, as there was no way of absorbing all the increased output as private consumption without this leading to serious inflation. Also, for the success of Singapore’s industrialization, domestic savings was just as important as global capital, in that it allowed the government to invest in the kind of infrastructure developments that would safeguard Singapore’s continued attractiveness as a centre for investment. “Singapore’s capital abundance”, Castells writes, “is only partly due to attractive conditions for foreign investment [...] [M]ost of the savings, as well as most of the investment, come from Singapore herself” (Castells 1988: 24). Part of those savings are accounted for by the CPF, which has been invested into the public housing scheme. However, as Castells also points out, “even with massive investments in public housing and urban infrastructure mainly financed from CPF contributions, CPF still had a large surplus that, by law, was required to be held mainly in government securities” (ibid: 25) The housing project, in other words, was not the ultimate cause behind the increased savings rate. Instead, it was a way of legitimizing and giving the citizens a “stake” in a process that would have taken place anyway – a process of “primitive accumulation of capital” by which the state “directly and indirectly [seized] a substantial share of the value produced and [allocated] it for

investment or saving along carefully defined economic, social and political objectives” (ibid: 27-28), only one of which was housing.

Second, getting people out of the kampongs and into modern high-rise apartments was not simply a gift from the government to the people, made possible by industrialization. Instead, like the increased savings rate, it was itself an integral part of making industrialization possible, as it represented “an important step in the active proletarianization of the Singapore population” (Chua 1997: 135). “In pre-industrial Singapore,” Chua writes (ibid: 135), “the low cost of housing maintenance or low rents which were paid irregularly [...] was an arrangement tailored to the financial condition of a population on irregular income.” The government, however, needed the citizens to be factory workers, meaning individuals dependent on having a regular income, and perhaps also some aspiration to move ahead in life, both socially and economically. Getting the citizens out of the kampongs and into the HDBs was therefore not just a matter of getting the population something that they already wanted. Rather, it was a way of creating a whole new set of needs and a whole new (bourgeois) lifestyle – thereby inculcating into the population what Weber (2001) calls “the spirit of capitalism”. As this is the more important point for the argument that I will pursue in this thesis, I will spend some more time on it.

A Weberian Transformation

Weber famously noticed that whenever capitalism seeks to establish itself in non-capitalist societies, a common problem that capitalists face is that workers will not respond properly to the incentive structure of a capitalist economy. Specifically, he noticed that while capitalism is based around the values of expansion and progress – always wanting *more* – non-capitalist societies are typically organized around the central value of maintaining a certain traditional lifestyle (ibid: 22). When capitalists encounter non-capitalist populations, therefore, a common frustration among the former is that the latter will “not work appropriately” – as Michael Taussig (1986: 54) reported the attitude of British colonialists towards South American Indians – meaning that they will not work more if you pay them more, but rather less. For Weber, the prime example

of this dynamic was found in the increased piece-rates that capitalists have often given to agricultural workers in pre-capitalist societies, in the hope that they would work more and harder if they were paid more. In those cases, Weber observes (2001: 23), “a peculiar difficulty has been met with surprising frequency: raising the piece-rates has often had the result that not more but less has been accomplished in the same time, because the worker reacted to the increase not by increasing but by decreasing the amount of his work.” The reason for this, Weber suggested, is simple: the workers are not interested in earning more, but simply want to maintain their current lifestyle, which they can do from less work if they are paid more. “A man”, Weber writes (ibid: 24), “does not ‘by nature’ wish to earn more and more money, but simply to live as he is accustomed to live and to earn as much as is necessary for that purpose” – which is why, if you pay them more money per hour of work, they will simply work fewer hours. The problem that capitalists encounter in such people, therefore, has nothing to do with the economic incentives themselves, as a person with the right “spirit” would respond to them precisely as intended. Instead, it has to do with the cultural mindset of a people whose values are not (yet) aligned with capitalist ones – which is why, Weber writes (ibid: 24), “Wherever modern capitalism has begun its work of increasing the productivity of human labour by increasing its intensity, it has encountered the immensely stubborn resistance of this leading trait of pre-capitalistic labour.”

For Weber, of course, it was Protestantism – or more specifically, Protestantism’s combined teaching that work is a virtue in itself, but that (over)consumption is a sin – that originally supplied people with the “spirit of capitalism”, as it pushed them to pursue more money than they needed to maintain a particular lifestyle, which they would then invest rather than consume, leading to an accumulation of capital that could be used to pursue even more money, and so on. Weber’s point, however, was not that capitalism specifically requires Protestantism in order to function, but only that it needs *some* sociocultural system of value that instils into people the drive of pursuing money for money’s sake. Protestantism *just happened* to provide this sociocultural context as capitalism developed in western Europe.

From this perspective, we may understand the CPF/HDB scheme as providing not just housing but the more importantly a “spirit of capitalism” to the Singaporean population. As a consequence, had the Singapore government embarked on its industrialization effort without at the same time revolutionising “the pattern of living of our people”, as Rajaratnam put it, the result would most likely have been similar to that described by Weber in the case of the increased piece-rates. The kampong population might have welcomed factory labour as a more efficient way of maintaining their kampong lifestyle, as the higher salaries earned in factories would have allowed them to work fewer hours for the same pay. But it is unlikely that they would have felt motivated to work full-time, or even to take up regular employment, as that would not have been necessary to maintain their lifestyle. Kampong life, as Chua writes (1997: 135), was one of “relatively high degree of personal freedom from toil”. Hence, to many Singaporeans, moving out of the kampongs and into the formal economy would not have seemed like an obvious improvement, as it would have meant working longer hours for a change in lifestyle that they did not necessarily desire in the first place, and indeed often actively resisted (see Loh 2013: 73-98). In order to work, therefore, industrialization required not just a change in the technological character of labour, but more fundamentally *a change in the cultural attitude toward labour itself* – a Weberian transformation – something that kampong clearance “expedited [...] by bringing these workers out of residential spaces that existed largely beyond the reach of the state and into planned housing that required a regular payment and a steady income derived from full-time work” (ibid: 7).

Furthermore, while the kampongs were quite unruly places, and provided fertile ground for political opposition, public housing had the additional benefit of isolating people in their individual apartments, thereby reducing their ability of collective organizing. As Gook observed in 1981, at a time when over 60% of the population had been rehoused into the HDBs: “While the demolition of the squatter colonies and slum dwellings is defended by the regime in terms of social welfare, it is no secret that these were the strongholds of opponents of the regime, mostly working classes”, continuing:

And characteristically, the needs and preferences of the people who were supposed to live in the high-rise blocks were never heard. Living in the new blocks has meant higher rents and the curtailment of a side income, to say nothing of the loss of community they once knew. In the early sixties, the government housing policy was met by organized resistance, until demolition had to be carried out in the presence of heavily armed riot police. Even up to the present day, the government is frequently spared the embarrassment of having to evict with force because fires “conveniently” do the job of razing the slum dwellings. (Gook 1981: 244)

On the more positive side of things, even though the people growing up in the kampongs may not have harboured a latent desire for modern living, public housing did turn out to be highly popular, once the citizens had gotten a taste for it (see Loh 2013: xxvii). As such, its role in maintaining a good work ethic has over time migrated from that of being merely a stick – bills to be paid – to becoming a carrot. “Looking back”, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong recalls, “it looks so natural or inevitable, this sprouting up of housing estates all over Singapore. But each step along the way [...] entailed much effort. In some cases, the unhappiness over resettlement remained for years, maybe never went away entirely” (quoted in *Public Service Division* 2015).

In this way, while the promise of homeownership may not have been what motivated the kampong populations to take up employment in the formal economy, the equation did work, as it were, retroactively: once it had been thrust upon them, the fact of homeownership provided the citizens with a compelling reason to become factory workers. *But first it had to be thrust upon them* – without their consent, and against their will. “And I say it without remorse”, Lee Kuan Yew commented in the 1980s, “that we wouldn’t be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit ... or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think” (*Straits Times* 1987).

“One united people”: ethnicity, class, and the imagined community

In addition to this Weberian transformation, the CPF/HDB scheme had the added benefit that it made the citizens “visible” to the state in a way that they hadn’t been before (cf. Scott 1998), thereby allowing the government to further transform them into the *national community* needed for industrialization.

The most notorious aspect of this are the ethnic quotas that are attached to each HDB precinct, which specify that the racial mix of each precinct must reflect “the racial mix of the population as a whole”.⁴⁶ This was an important ambition of the HDB system from the very beginning, as the government was keen on making sure that the previous kampong populations, who had typically lived in ethnically segregated enclaves, were resettled into public housing on the basis of ethnic mixing.⁴⁷ The hope was that, as Singaporeans of all ethnicities lived side-by-side with one another, they would no longer view themselves as belonging to separate ethnic communities, but would instead view each other as forming one large multi-ethnic nation – “one united people, regardless of race, language or religion”, as the national pledge formulates it.

In the late 80s, however, it had become apparent that people were reselling their flats in order to move into neighbourhoods that had a higher degree of co-ethnics. As a result, “concentrations of racial groups are beginning to form”,⁴⁸ such that some neighbourhoods were beginning to resemble the previous kampongs in terms of ethnic homogeneity. An explicit ethnic quota was therefore introduced in 1989 to deal with the distribution of residents, both those entering the housing market, and those moving from one apartment to another (see Sin 2002 for some discussion of this). Speaking to parliament as the new ethnic quotas were introduced, then minister of national development, S. Dhanabalan, explained their background and rationale. “In the late 50’s

⁴⁶ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 16 February 1989, Better Racial Mix in HDB Housing Estates (Statement by the Minister for National Development), Vol. 52, column 652.

⁴⁷ I am going to exclusively use the term “ethnicity” when I talk about this, while noting that both terms and “ethnicity” and “race” are used by people in Singapore. I do not make much of the difference between the terms; in context, they refer to the same thing, namely whether someone is classified by the state as Chinese, Malay, Indian or “Other” (typically abbreviated as the “CMIO” classification system). (For some in-depth discussion of this issue, see Goh 2008.)

⁴⁸ Ibid, column 650.

and early 60's," he said, "various sections of our population were gathered in different pockets, distinguishable by their race or dialect groups", continuing:

It was clear that something had to be done if we wanted to build a cohesive, stable and harmonious society and a nation. The Government seized the opportunity of the massive public housing programme to mix the population. [...] *This explains how we have been able to forge a consensus on social issues and carry the population with us.* Mixing the various communities in proportions that approximate the general population has given us racial tolerance and harmony for the last 20 years and more. To allow them to regroup now will be to go back to the pre-1965 period when conditions bred distrust and misunderstanding among the various races and when there were even racial riots.⁴⁹

More recently, deputy prime minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam explained how these ethnic quotas are "fundamental to the Singapore social and economic model, and our identity", as they have laid the foundation for Singapore's multi-ethnic society. "[I]t's interaction as you go up and down the lift every day," he said, "it's about the kindergartens that your children go to [...], it's just that ordinary, daily interaction that breeds familiarity and a sense of sameness" (Tharman 2017). Therefore, he said, although the ethnic quotas represent the "most intrusive" policy in Singapore – "intrusive", he said, "because they constrain choice" – they are also the most important (ibid.).

Less commented on, though in my view no less important, a second quota system also exists for class. It works just like the ethnic quota, only instead of ethnicity it screens prospective buyers for income level, in order to make sure that each neighbourhood has a mix of socio-economic status (Chua 1997). Two things in particular are important about this quota system. First, given that each neighbourhood is populated by people of different income-levels, there are no disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Singapore, as there is no way for any neighbourhood to become populated only by people of low socio-economic status. "The less successful", Lee

⁴⁹ Ibid, column 652, emphasis mine.

Kuan Yew said, “are spread over every new town, so you don’t have the unsightliness of going into a slum area, where shops are poor, streets are dishevelled, people are looking dispirited” (quoted in Public Service Division 2015). Second, because each neighbourhood is socio-economically mixed, every homeowner is essentially in the same boat with regards to homeownership as being a financial “stake in the country and its future”, as no area is vastly more attractive than any other, and therefore not much better than any other as an investment. “Because we do not have any disadvantaged neighbourhoods in Singapore”, Tharman said, “[...] everyone sees home appreciation at roughly the same rate, based on the performance of the overall economy and the avoidance of serious social problems” (Tharman 2017). For this reason, while Singapore’s economic development has resulted in an uneven economic landscape of relative winners and losers (see Teo 2018; Tan 2012; Ho 2012), it has also produced a strikingly equalitarian landscape of economic benefit when it comes to housing. Not only do different neighbourhoods offer almost identical living standard – they offer almost identical returns on investment! Hence, while Singapore’s remarkable GDP growth since independence can in some ways be said to hide the fact that not everyone shares equally in this wealth, GDP growth also functions as something of a *direct index of the government’s fulfilment of the social contract*, as housing values rise with GDP, and as no particular class or ethnicity can be said to benefit from this rise more than any other.

Together, then, what these two quota systems do is make sure that when the government claims that housing gives “the people” a “stake in the country and its future”, the use of the term “the people” is actually quite descriptive, and not – as is so often the case – a way to conceal differences that exist within the population along the lines of class and ethnicity. Whether you live in a HDB located in a central area, or in the outskirts of the city, you will live in almost identical neighbourhoods, both in terms of the style and quality of the buildings themselves, and in terms of the people who populate them. As a result, when travelling between the different areas of Singapore – say, from the airport into the city centre – you will not be traversing the same kind of social distance as when going from the city centre to the outskirts of most other cities of comparable or even smaller size, where you will often experience the inner city and

outskirts as in many ways *different societies*. In Singapore, you will traverse almost no social distance at all, but everywhere encounter the same familiar sights: the same beer uncles socializing in the coffee-shops; the same hawker centres and community centres; the same local police station; the same aunties doing Zumba; the same retirees increasing their meagre pension by collecting (and later selling) cardboards from the trash; weddings and funerals taking place in the void decks; the occasional, scheduled visit from a PAP politician – and everywhere the same mix of Chinese, Malays and Indians, celebrating their various holidays, cooking their various foods, and so on. As a result, as one HDB policy document puts it, public housing has “helped to build a unique national identity and collective experiences for Singaporeans”:

Every true-blue Singaporean would have had supper at the corner coffee shop, attended a wedding at a void deck of an HDB flat or played a ball game at a nearby park. And, almost all marriage proposals in Singapore have started off with an application for a new HDB flat.⁵⁰ The HDB living experience has created and shaped our communities, and provided the foundation for our social stability and economic growth. (HDB 2010: 3)

In this way, the role of the HDBs in Singapore’s nation building has been much the same as Anderson assigns to the newspaper and novel in 19th century Europe – namely, as a social technology that allows the nation to imagine itself as a community by providing citizens with a shared frame of reference rooted in everyday life. As James Madison, the first person to formulate this idea, put it: “A circulation of newspapers through the entire body of the people is equivalent to a contraction of territorial limits” (quoted in Lepore 2018: 310). In the same way, the HDBs have shortened the social distance between citizens, and turned them into a community with shared experiences, shared frames of reference – and most importantly, shared returns on investment!

⁵⁰ This is because Singaporeans under 35 only have access to HDB if they are in a married, heterosexual couple. “Do you want to get BTO?”, meaning build-to-order, has therefore come to largely replace the question, “Do you want to marry me?”, in Singapore.

Housing and hegemony

What the HDB system has ultimately done for Singapore, I will argue in closing, is provide a solution – temporarily, if not permanently – to a *contradiction that all capitalist societies have to deal with as they seek to industrialize their economies*, and that Singapore had to face more than most.

At its most basic, industrialization is a process of taking workers out of their previously diverse trades and putting them into factories, where they will be surrounded by one another for several hours a day, performing more or less similar kinds of labour. On the one hand, this process of *proletarianization* requires large amounts of coercion, as workers will typically not abandon their previous livelihoods voluntarily, but often actively resist the loss of identity that industrialization brings about. On the other hand – and here’s the contradiction – because industrialization demands that workers spend large portions of their days in factories together with other workers, this will tend to lead not only to a loss of identity but also to the formation of a new identity: that of proletarian class-consciousness, i.e. the perception that there is something about being a worker *as such* that puts you in a relation of shared interest with *all other workers*. For Marx and Engels, this famously implied that “the development of modern industry” will necessarily lead to the end of capitalism, as the capitalist class will ultimately have no choice but to produce “its own grave-diggers”:

The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage labour. Wage labour rests exclusively on competition between the labourers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the labourers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of modern industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. (Marx & Engels 1992: 46)

Historically, one way that capitalist societies have dealt with this problem is to simply resort to coercion: to de-register labour unions; to use the monopoly of violence of the state to break up strikes or outright ban them; to arrest and detain labour unionists and socialists/communists; etc., which we've indeed seen a lot of in Singapore. For this reason, it was the general assumption among Marxists and other socialists during the 19th and early 20th century that capitalism could *never* co-exist with democracy, as workers would soon enough use democracy as a means of overthrowing capitalism in favour of socialism (Przeworski 1985: 133ff). As one of the early chief ideologists for the Swedish Social Democratic Party, Ernst Wigforss, put it in 1928: "The universal suffrage is incompatible with a society divided into a small class of owners and a large class of unpropertied. Either the rich and the propertied will take away universal suffrage, or the poor, with the help of their right to vote, will procure for themselves a part of the accumulated riches" (quoted in *ibid*: 33; see also Tilton 1979). Hence, it was believed, capitalists will never allow democracy to come about, and will use violence to stop any outbreak of workers organization.

The problem with coercion, however, is that it provides a highly unstable foundation for society, as it continuously provides fuel to the very flame it seeks to put out. In addition, it is simply inefficient: it uses up a lot of manpower and resources that could have been used productively elsewhere. As Gramsci was early to point out, therefore, capitalism works much better when it does not rest on coercion alone, but when it rests on *an equilibrium between consent and coercion*. Gramsci famously called this equilibrium "hegemony", about which he wrote: "The 'normal' exercise of hegemony on the now classic terrain of the parliamentary regime is characterized by a combination of force and consent which balance each other so that force does not overwhelm consent but rather appears to be backed by the consent of the majority, expressed by the so-called organs of public opinion" (Gramsci 1992: 155-156). What Gramsci sought to address in this way was a contradiction in the Marxist worldview: if, according to Marxist theory, democracy should sooner or later lead to revolution, then why is it that in most cases when workers have been given the vote, the revolution has not followed? The answer that he provided is essentially a version of the standard

Marxist reply – that the workers must suffer from “false consciousness”⁵¹ – but with one important difference, namely that hegemony “must rest on a material basis” (Przeworski 1985: 135). “Undoubtedly,” Gramsci wrote, “the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, and that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed – in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporate kind” (Gramsci 1971: 161). For Gramsci, of course, this did not mean that capitalism can be said to ultimately serve the interests of workers, but only that capitalists are able to exploit “with the consent of the exploited” – a view that he came to through the usual (and, as I have argued, erroneous) Marxist assumption that profits are by definition based on exploitation.⁵²

Nevertheless, the general problem that Gramsci identified is real. Regardless of one’s theoretical perspective, it remains a fact that workers can relate to profits in one of two ways, both of which are equally born out of experience: either, as an economic goal that at any given moment motivates only a small minority of people (the capitalists), and that pits that minority against the majority (the workers); or as an economic goal that all members of society should at all times be equally concerned with

⁵¹ “[T]he forms of freedom in bourgeois organisations”, writes Lukács (1967: 319) on this topic, “are nothing but a ‘false consciousness’ of an actual unfreedom; that is to say, a pattern of consciousness in which man contemplates from a position of formal freedom his own integration in a system of alien compulsions and confuses this formal ‘freedom’ of his contemplation with an authentic freedom”.

⁵² What ultimately sustains this claim is the (unsustained) assumption that it would always be in the interest of workers to opt for socialism over capitalism, since in socialism workers would be able to see the same improvements in living standards as they would in capitalism, but would not have to accept exploitation (capitalist profit) as a necessary condition for such improvements. As Przeworski puts this point, with unusual honesty: “The hypothesis that material interests lead necessarily to a preference for socialism asserts that *if* workers are interested in a continual improvement of their material conditions and *if* they are rational, they must opt for socialism. This hypothesis would be false if its premises are true and one or both of the following could be shown to be also true: socialism is inferior to capitalism in efficiently allocating resources to socially preferred uses [...] and/or conditions exist under which a move in the socialist direction makes workers worse off than a move along the capitalist direction. I will immediately reject the first possibility and will assume throughout that as a system of organization of production socialism would not be inferior to capitalism in satisfying material needs [...] *Suppose, therefore, that socialism is superior to capitalism. The crux of the problem is whether this superiority is sufficient for workers to opt for socialism*” (Przeworski 1985: 176). It is difficult, I submit, to find a better example of the “begging the question”-fallacy, whereby the author assumes the very thing to be demonstrated – in this case, that socialism is superior to capitalism.

– workers as much as capitalists – as profits are the very thing that keeps capitalist society moving over time. As Przeworski puts this point very well:

If capitalists do not appropriate profit, if they do not exploit, production falls, consumption decreases, and no other group can satisfy its material interests. Current realization of material interests of capitalists is a necessary condition for the future realization of material interests of any group under capitalism. This organization of the capitalist system of production provides the basis for the organization of ideological and political hegemony of the capitalist class or some fractions of it. *Under capitalist organization of production, capitalists appear as bearers of universal interests.* (Pzeworski 1985: 139)

Here, the problem that Gramsci identified is that no matter how true it may be in objective terms that capitalists are bearers of universal interests under a capitalist mode of production, simply pointing this out to workers will scarcely provide a basis for consent. “No ideology”, Przeworski writes (ibid: 136), “[...] can perform its function of coordinating individual wills unless it is validated continually by daily life”. For Gramsci, this meant specifically that ideology must find “concrete correspondence” in the daily lives of the workers (Gramsci 1995: 360), meaning that the profits that capitalists appropriate today must be linked to future realization of workers’ interests, not just through vague promises about future cornucopia (e.g. “a rising tide lifts all boats”), but through concrete commitments in the present.

In Singapore, as we’ve seen, this was the reason why the three 1968 bills were introduced together. The first two – Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act and Employment Act – set out in straightforward terms what the government believed to be the objective but unpopular conditions for industrialization; what Rodan describes as “draconian measures [...] to reduce wages and drastically curtail and circumscribe the bargaining power of unions” (Rodan 1989: 85-86). The third bill – the Central Provident Fund (Amendment) Act – represented on its part one of the more ingenious ways of solving the problem of consent in capitalist society, as it stipulated that part of the

surplus that the industrializing economy would produce – largely as a result of the first two bills being passed – would be taken out of workers’ salaries and invested into various state assets, thereby giving the working-class a direct financial interest in the long-term success of industrialization *even as industrialization more immediately relied on the exploitation of workers by global capital*. Whether they liked it or not, the workers had now become share-holder of “Singapore Inc.”. As a consequence, they now had a compelling reason to privilege the long-term perspective over the short-term perspective – meaning, to understand their interests not in zero-sum terms, but in positive-sum terms as cooperation with capital towards increases in wealth over time. Furthermore, and most importantly, as industrialization progressed, this would only get truer, as workers would find themselves increasingly invested in state assets – and with that, increasingly likely to identify their economic interests with the performance of the economy as a whole.

Hegemony, then, rests on *an equilibrium of consent and coercion*. On the one hand, the Singaporean citizens were not given a choice whether or not to have their salaries invested in state assets. Instead, they were simply told that such investments would be made; that the portion of their salary set aside for such investments would increase over time; and that all of this would be “for the economic and social benefit of our people”.⁵³ Indeed, for Lee Kuan Yew, one of the main reasons why the CPF program was necessary was because the workers, in his view, would not invest their salaries in any “substantial or permanent asset[s]” if they got to dispose over them as they wished. Instead, he thought, they would “buy enormous quantities of clothes, shoes, furniture, television sets, radio, tape recorders, hi-fis, washing machines, motor cars” (*Asian Wall Street Journal*, October 21, 1985). In order for the citizens to adopt a properly long-term vision of their economic interests, therefore, they could not be trusted to make their own decisions as to how they would spend their money. Instead, that decision had to be made for them, without their consent – *and only then* could they be trusted to “freely” decide whether PAP’s “draconian measures” were acceptable or not, as they could then be trusted to make the “right” decision. Consent thus required quite a lot of coercion: a

⁵³ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 1 August 1968, Second Reading of the Central Provident Fund (Amendment) Bill, Vol. 27, column 791.

lot of top-down social engineering aimed at training the citizens to make the right choices. “Mine is a very matter-of-fact approach to the problem”, Lee said:

If you can select a population and they’re educated and they’re properly brought up, then you don’t have to use too much of the stick because they would already have been trained. It’s like with dogs. You train it in a proper way from small. It will know that it’s got to leave, go outside to pee and to defecate. No, we are not that kind of society. We had to train adult dogs who even today deliberately urinate in the lifts.

To that end, Chua notes how Singapore’s public housing program operates an almost perfect equilibrium between consent and coercion. On the one hand, the government’s role as universal provider has given it a high degree of legitimacy, as people in general appreciate their apartment. At the same time, it has allowed the government to operate a form of political clientelism, through which housing has been used as leverage for pushing through other political goals. “[T]he absence of alternative housing, except for those who could afford high-price private housing,” Chua writes (1997: 132), “has turned the overwhelming majority of Singaporeans into clients of the state as provider”, which means that “the PAP government is able to use housing as a mechanism to push through other less palatable social policies without risking serious damage to its legitimacy to govern.” Another way of putting this, I submit, is that the housing project put into motion a dynamic *precisely the opposite* of that prophesied by Marx and Engels, whereby the development of industry did not “cut from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products”, as Marx and Engels thought it would, but on the contrary strengthened that social foundation, as workers came to increasingly share the interests of capital the more that they became financially invested in the corporate state.

Conclusion: Social democracy for a globalized capitalism

In this chapter, I have made two main points. First, I have argued that social democracy should not be understood as a weak form of socialism, but as a political project that

seeks to overcome the problems of both socialism and capitalism. To that end, I have suggested a definition of social democracy which does not equate it with the “traditional” social democracy of Western Europe, but which views that form of social democracy as a historically specific instance of a more general logic. Social democracy, as I see it, is not “about” instituting socialism within capitalism. Instead, it is about solving a much deeper problem, which is that capitalism is positive-sum over time, but zero-sum at every given moment – and that unless some compromise is struck between capital and labour, the two will end up competing over current distribution rather than collaborate towards future increases in wealth, even though the latter serves their interests much better than the former. On this reading, social democracy ultimately provides a solution to *the prisoners’ dilemma of capitalism*: how parties who experience each other as antagonists at every given moment can be made to relate to one another as partners and collaborators.

Globalization and social democracy have often been thought of as incompatible, as globalization allows capital to escape the class compromise that has been imposed on it by social democratic governments and labour movements operating within nation-state. As one of the main architects behind the Swedish model, Rudolf Meidner, described what he saw as the failure of Swedish social democracy in 1993:

Swedish capital, liberated from all legal restrictions, is moving out of Sweden to get closer to foreign markets or simply to find cheaper labour. And the resulting loss of jobs in manufacturing industries has not been compensated for by an increase of jobs in private service trades or in the public sector. [...] The attempts to realize the concept of a classless society within a framework of an internationalized market economy will be brought to an end, not because the model was a failure, but because the conditions have changed. Social democracy has fulfilled its purpose well in a singular phase of Swedish history but must step down as a driving force as Sweden becomes just a small part of a large block of capitalist states. (Meidner 1993: 226-227)

On this reading, it is simply game over: the model was correct, but not for this world; *the operation was a success, but the patient died*. My argument, however, is that this is only true insofar as we accept the Marxist premise that social democracy is “socialism light”. If, on the other hand, we take the view that I have been proposing, it becomes possible to consider a much broader range of societies as social democratic. And with that, the question of social democracy’s future becomes an empirical one, rather than a foregone conclusion: what does a successful class compromise look like under conditions of global capitalism? What are the conditions of possibility for such a social democracy? Rather than assuming that social democracy *must look like Sweden* – and from there go about “proving” how social democracy and globalization are incompatible – we can ask these questions with an open mind.

From this, second, I have sought to show that Singapore, rather than illustrating the impossibility of social democracy in a global economy, is better understood as a social democracy *adapted to global conditions* – and as such, an important innovation, rather than a bastardization of the “true” social democratic project. Most importantly, Singapore’s form of social democracy was set up on the basis of attracting capital to the country, which meant that its class compromise had to be struck much more on capital’s terms than on labour’s terms. For this reason, Singapore’s leaders had to find a way of bridging a much greater gap between what they claimed were in the long-term interest of workers (to collaborate with capital) and what most workers would have understood to be their immediate interests (to resist capital), as collaboration and compromise would in the short-to-medium term look much more like increased exploitation than positive-sum collaboration.

This is why, in this chapter, I have devoted much space to detailing the social contract of Singapore, as I believe that is really the central piece of the puzzle. In order for social democratic politics of compromise to work under conditions of global capitalism, what needs to change is not the basic logic of compromise, but the *underlying social contract that makes compromise possible and legitimate*. I have discussed the CPF as the centrepiece of such a globally viable social contract of social democracy.

In the next chapter, we will look more at the details of this social contract. Here, I will argue that the “third way” that the Singaporean state embodies – beyond market fundamentalism and classic social democracy – is one in which the state models itself on the basis of a corporation, and where the social contract between state and citizens is based around the same promise that a corporation makes to its shareholders, namely, to increase shareholder value. To that end, I will ask what the differences are between this form of social democracy and neoliberalism, as the latter has been described as a political rationality that “disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities [...] and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors” (Brown 2015: 31), and therefore would seem to provide a perfect description of Singapore’s social democracy. In response to this question, I will introduce the main concept of this thesis, “middleman minority state”, which I will argue provides a better understanding of the kind of social democracy that Singapore represents.

Chapter 4:

Neoliberalism, or Middleman Minority?

Historical and Cultural Roots of Singapore's Corporate State

“Singapore’s function, right from the time Raffles set foot here, has been that of the middleman, a collection and distribution centre.”

- G. Raman, 1972.

Neoliberalism’s conceptual revolution

In the introduction to their ground-breaking volume, *Money and the Morality of Exchange*, anthropologists Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1989) observe how in most societies that anthropologists have studied, economic life tends to be organized around “two related but separate *transactional orders*: on the one hand transactions concerned with the reproduction of the long-term social or cosmic order; on the other, a ‘sphere’ of short-term transactions concerned with the arena of individual competition” (ibid: 24). Roughly speaking, these translate into the more familiar distinction between “society” and “market”; and while both these “spheres of exchange” (Bohannan 1955) are necessary for any functioning society, Bloch and Parry say, there exists in most cultures a strong moral imperative to prioritize the long-term order over the short-term order. “While the long-term cycle is always positively associated with the central precepts of morality,” they write (Bloch & Parry 1989: 26), “the short-term

order tends to be morally undetermined since it concerns individual purposes which are largely irrelevant to the long-term order”. As a result, in order to decide whether any action undertaken in the short-term order (the market) is morally positive or not, one must typically ask to what extent it serves the values of the long-term order (society), because on their own, actions in the market – like buying and selling – carry no moral valance at all. Bloch and Parry explain:

If [...] that which is obtained in the short-term individualistic cycle is converted to serve the reproduction of the long-term cycle, then it becomes morally positive [...]. But equally there is always the opposite possibility – and this evokes the strongest censure – the possibility that individual involvement in the short-term cycle will become an end in itself which is no longer subordinated to the reproduction of the larger cycle; or, more horrifying still, that grasping individuals will divert the resources of the long-term cycle for their own short-term transactions. (ibid: 26-17)

To see more clearly what this means, think of a company that’s polluting the environment. From the point of view of the long-term order, such a company is the moral opposite of a company that specializes in cleaning up the environment, as “the environment” is included in the long-term order as one of the things that are “transacted” from one generation to the next. From the point of view of the short-term order, by contrast, both companies are doing exactly the same thing – namely, trying to produce a product that they can sell at a higher price than the total cost of producing it – and whatever impact their activity has on the environment is here seen as an “externality”. Hence, Bloch and Parry say (ibid: 26), while all societies have to make “some ideological space within which individual acquisition is a legitimate and even laudable goal”, such activities are typically “consigned to a separate sphere which is ideologically articulated with, and subordinated to, a sphere of activity concerned with the cycle of long-term reproduction”. The market, in short, is a great tool for achieving a certain outcome, but terrible at telling us what to do, as the market will happily facilitate (and reward!) selling kids into slavery, unless there is some external mechanism prohibiting it (see also Hann & Hart 2009).

At the very the end of their article, however, Bloch and Parry make a crucial observation to the contrary. “While we believe the pattern we have identified [...] is typical of a wide range of societies”, they write (ibid: 29), “it is arguable that the mature ideology of capitalism would be an example of something entirely different”, because:

By a remarkable conceptual revolution what has uniquely happened in capitalist ideology [...] is that the values of the short-term order have become elaborated into a theory of long-term reproduction. What our culture (like others) had previously made room for in a separate and subordinate domain has, in some quarters at least, been turned into a theory of the encompassing order – a theory in which it is only unalloyed private vice that can sustain the public benefit.

Today, most people would probably use the term “neoliberalism” to describe this conceptual revolution. David Harvey, for instance, describes neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade”, as well as “the financialization of everything”. Others have made similar observations, including Wendy Brown, who suggests that “neoliberal rationality disseminates the model of the market to all domains and activities [...] and configures human beings exhaustively as market actors” (Brown 2015: 31); Paul Treanor, who describes neoliberalism as “a philosophy in which [...] the operation of a market or market-like structure is seen as an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action, and substituting for all previously existing ethical beliefs” (Treanor 2005); Mark Fleming, who understands neoliberalism as “the extension of a market logic to the governance of ever more spheres of activity” (Fleming 2016: 786); Pierre Bourdieu, who describes neoliberalism as a “programme for destroying collective structures which may impede pure market logic” (Bourdieu 1998); Aihwa Ong, who argues that neoliberalism brings about a new mode of “flexible citizenship”, which does not afford rights and benefits to people on the basis of their belonging to specific nation-

states, but on the basis of their marketable skills in the global economy (Ong 2006); journalist George Monbiot, who describes neoliberalism as an ideology which “redefines citizens as consumers, whose democratic choices are best exercised by buying and selling, a process that rewards merit and punishes inefficiency” (Monbiot 2016); and many others (see in particular Peck 2010; Ganti 2014; Foucault 2008). What all these writers point to is the same phenomena, namely that what used to be seen as a separate and subordinate domain of human activity (the market) has increasingly been “turned into a theory of the encompassing order”, as there is no longer any way of speaking about society in terms that do not involve market logic. Everything is the market; nothing is outside the market. “Greed is good”.

At first sight, Singapore would seem to perfectly exemplify this “conceptual revolution”. As we saw in the previous chapter, not only has Singapore wholeheartedly embraced the notion that the market should function as a guide for society; Singapore took this notion as its *founding principle*, as the condition of possibility for the country was from the beginning understood as a matter of attracting investment to the island, and to produce goods and services that could “compete in the stiff export markets”. To that end, as we’ve seen, the national interest was from the very beginning understood and formulated not in terms of giving the citizens what they wanted – which was socialism – but in terms of organizing society in such a way as to offer global capital and the foreign consumer what they wanted, while convincing the citizens that this was “in the long run” what they should want too, as the alternative would not be better pay and longer vacations (or any other benefit), but unemployment and starvation. If neoliberalism is defined in terms of a conceptual revolution whereby the values of the short-term order have become elaborated into a theory of long-term reproduction, therefore, Singapore would appear to be the neoliberal society par excellence.

As I will argue in this chapter, however, there is a crucial problem with this analysis. According to critics, neoliberalism represents a new form of political rationality that has replaced an older one; a process of “undoing the demos”, as Brown calls it, through which “the precepts and principles of democracy are remade” (ibid: 10). It came about, Brown argues, as a result of a “stealth revolution” by which “the

commitment to individual and collective self-rule and the institutions supporting it [were] overwhelmed and then displaced by the encomium to enhance capital value, competitive positioning, and credit ratings”. And the more successful neoliberalism has gotten, the more it has come to undermine democratic “practices and principle” such as “speech, deliberation, law, popular sovereignty, participation, education, public goods, and shared power entailed in rule by the people” (ibid: 10). On this reading, neoliberalism ultimately represents *a condition of loss* – what Angela McRobbie, in a review of Brown’s work, calls a “re-programming of liberalism”, through which the state has been cast “in a new role as servant or handmaiden to the market economy rather than [...] a force capable of constraining the full effect of the market and competition”, thereby bringing about an “end of the social” and a “denigration of democracy” (McRobbie 2016: 121-122).

To Harvey, this loss specifically represents a loss of social democracy, as he describes neoliberalism as “a political project carried out by the corporate capitalist class as they felt intensely threatened both politically and economically towards the end of the 1960s into the 1970s”, and therefore “desperately wanted to launch a political project that would curb the power of labor.” Similarly, Guyer describes the shift in public policy from Keynesianism to monetarism – and with that, from social democracy to neoliberalism – as a loss of “the temporal horizon of the near future”, by which she means “the reach of thought and imagination, of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals, in short, of the process of implicating oneself in the ongoing life of the social and material world that used to be encompassed under an expansively inclusive concept of ‘reasoning’” (Guyer 2007: 409). This, she contrasts with the “combination of fantasyfuturism and enforced presentism” that in her view characterizes monetarism and neoliberalism, both of which deny the possibility of collective action and economic planning by casting all human affairs in terms of the universal and eternal principles of the market, best kept away from human intervention. As a result, she says, politics has increasingly become replaced by prophesy, as politics has been reduced to a matter of interpreting the elusive signs of the market – which operates “in mysterious ways” and is always beyond the grasp of any single human mind (see Hayek 1945) – thus forcing humans to always

submit to the present situation on the argument that the market will “in the long run” lead to better outcomes than what conscious and collective action could possibly bring about.

On its face, again, this would appear to provide a perfect description of Singapore. The problem, however, is that in contrast to the (mostly Western) social democracies that experienced neoliberalism as a loss – as denigration, undoing, re-programming, undermining, etc. – Singapore did not start out as an already-existing social democracy that was then *gradually remade* by a neoliberal reform program, according to which the market should always take precedence over society. Instead, the sequence was the reverse. In Singapore, the market always preceded society, and was from the beginning taken as the very condition of possibility for society to exist at all. As a consequence, “neoliberalism” – or, more precisely, the idea that the market should act as a guide in all social and political matters – did not come about as an ideological (and utopian) attempt at “remaking” a previously social democratic society in the image of the market, but was on the contrary always taken to be pragmatic terms of survival for. “In the end”, as one writer puts it, “what seems to result is a city-state that functions as an aggressive ‘individual’ [...] within the global free market, but within the country, as a paternalistic, interventionistic state, supported by a bureaucratic technocracy” (Wee 1999: 350). If there was going to be social democracy in Singapore, it had to be formulated according to the terms provided by the market.

For Singapore, I will argue in this chapter, this was both a blessing and a curse. The curse, on the one hand, was that Singapore had to survive as what Lee Kuan Yew called an “unnatural country”, having neither natural resources nor a domestic capitalist class worth the name, but having to import both. The blessing, on the other hand, was that this unfavourable starting point meant that Singapore had to organize itself on the basis of global economic competition from day one. As a result, rather than coming to the age of globalization as an already-existing and fully formed social democracy – organized around values and institutions that might not survive the transition to a globalized economy – Singapore had to organize its form of social democracy around a set of values and institutions that would not just be compatible with globalization, but

that would stand to actively gain from it (see Phelbs 2007). As deputy prime minister Tharman put this point in an interview:

We had every disadvantage you can think of for a nation, and we did not expect to survive, we were not expected to survive. But that, to Lee Kuan Yew and the pioneer team of leaders, was converted to advantage, because it forces you to realize that all you have is yourself. The world owes you nothing; your piece of granite rock [...], not even the waterfall or mountains that allow you to have a bit of hydroelectric power – nothing! Just a group of people of different origins willing to work hard and [...] to fend for themselves and make themselves relevant to the world. And that mindset – thinking of yourself as not having the advantage of size or history, and that you’ve got to create it for yourself – turns out to be a phenomenal advantage.⁵⁴ (Tharman 2015)

This, then, is *a societal narrative formulated wholly in market terms*. What brings Singapore together as a society, Tharman says, is neither shared history, nor shared claims over domestic resources, nor common ancestry – nor, for that matter, shared aspirations about what kind of society that the majority wishes to live in – but simply the fact that everyone is in the same boat with regards to having to “make themselves relevant to the world”. The point, however, is that Tharman does not by the same token mean that “there is no such thing as society”, or that it is “only unalloyed private vice that can sustain the public benefit”. On the contrary: according to Tharman, this was the condition that Singapore found itself in *as a society* and *as a nation*. Hence, when Tharman describes how Singaporeans had to learn that “all you have is yourself” and that “the world owes you nothing” – otherwise classically “neoliberal” virtues – he is not talking about individuals and their families, but about the nation as a whole. Society,

⁵⁴ In the comment section to the YouTube video of the interview, the second most “liked” comment reads: “I am a Singaporean. And I have to say, I am not really concern about having the types of liberties that the west are enjoying. I wouldn’t want to trade the stability (think Baltimore riot, Charlie Hebdo publications that happened in the west) that I am enjoying with the West’s liberty. So stop imposing democracy on other Asian nation. (that is undemocratic)”. (The number one most liked comment is a complaint about how the interviewer, Stephen Sackur, is “always interrupting” Shanmugaratnam, so it is not of interest for our purposes.)

he argues, needed to become economically competitive in the global market; society needed to realize that no one owes it a living.

In this chapter, I will undertake a conceptualization of the Singaporean state that seeks to capture all this – first, by describing it as a corporate state; and second, by introducing the central concept of this thesis, “middleman minority state”, according to which Singapore is best understood as a nation state-version of the classic middleman minority, as describe by Sowell and Bonacich. This latter concept is an attempt to replace neoliberalism as the main frame for looking at Singapore, and it will also form the theoretical basis for the three chapters to follow, which are based on participant observation. My argument, in short, is that although it is possible to define Singapore as a neoliberal society, doing so requires broadening the concept to the point that it has very little meaning. Specifically, one will have to explain how an authoritarian state that has a hand in most aspects of social- and economic life is nevertheless to be understood as neoliberal, something that in my view requires way too much ad hoc theorizing. By contrast, understanding Singapore as middleman minority state will allow us to capture the specificities and idiosyncrasies of the Singaporean state – specifically, its combination of political authoritarianism with free trade economics – as this combination fits perfectly with the middleman minority framework.

State or market – or both?

In the scholarly literature, Singapore’s apparent blurring of market and society has given rise to some disagreement about how to explain the country’s economic success: is it thanks to the free market, or is it thanks to state intervention?

On the one hand, there are scholars who see Singapore as a perfect example of a free market success story, as Singapore’s economy is highly open and has achieved its remarkable growth on the basis of export-oriented industrialization and foreign direct investment (see Mitchell 2014). On the other hand, there are those who point out that Singapore actually operates on the basis of large measures of planning and control, undertaken by a “heavily interventionist” state (Lim 1983). As Lim writes in a seminal article, “Tax concessions, efficient infrastructure, wages kept low by government

subsidies on low-income housing and other social services, by many years of low National Wages Council wage increases, by easy access to foreign labor, and by docile unions, and the low level of risk and uncertainty afforded by political stability and labor peace – all these have made investment in Singapore very attractive, especially to multinational corporations engaged in labor-intensive manufacturing for export” (ibid: 757). Similarly, Huff describes how state intervention in key areas of the Singapore economy has given the government “a substantial measure of [...] direction of the entire economy” (Huff 1995: 1424), arguing that this is what provided Singapore with its developmental edge. Another researcher, economist Ha-Joon Chang, even goes so far as to suggest that Singapore, by combining free-market policies with strong state intervention and planning, “combines extreme elements of capitalism and socialism” (quoted in Korea Joong Ang Daily 2014). “So I challenge my students”, he says, “to tell me one economic theory, Neo-Classical or Marxist or whatever, that can explain Singapore’s success. There is no such theory”.

One question that could be asked of all this scholarship, however, is whether it really makes sense to view state intervention and free market economics as opposing principles, when studying a society in which state intervention has always been aimed at increasing the competitiveness of the economy in the global market. This, indeed, is fundamentally what Lim shows: that Singapore’s high degree of state interventionism has always been a way for the state to provide the nation with a competitive advantage in the global market. To that end, she observes how although Singapore operates what appears to be a large public sector – made up of a myriad of state-owned enterprises (or “government-linked corporations”, as they are called) – the important difference between Singapore’s state-owned companies and those of other countries “is that, with the exception of health, education, and the lowest-income public housing, they all at least break even, and most are profit making. They are not subsidized by tax dollars” (Lim 1983: 755). However, because she is committed to the view that state intervention is by definition the opposite of free market economics, she remains blind to what would otherwise be the obvious conclusion from her own observations, namely, that state intervention in Singapore is *in itself a free-market phenomenon*, as the state understands its mission as one of making the nation maximally competitive in the global market.

The corporate state

In order to capture this latter point, some writers and scholars have suggested that Singapore is better understood as a corporation than as a classic nation-state. Michael Barr, for instance, writes that it is “a lot easier to understand Singapore if you put aside notions of modernity and ordinary governance, let alone democracy, and begin from the premise that it is a Chinese family business, complete with a patriarch, an eldest son, *guanxi* networks and questions of cross-generational continuity” (Barr 2014: 108). Similarly, journalist Louis Kraar observed in 1974 how the “dazzling growth” of Singapore appears to be the result of the fact that the country “is run very much like a corporation”, with a government that “coldly weighs every move, from school curriculums to foreign relations, against cost-effectiveness.” Likewise, when science fiction writer William Gibson visited Singapore in 1993 – describing the country as “Disneyland with the death penalty” in a famous essay – he came away with the impression that Singapore is “micromanaged by a state that has the look and feel of a very large corporation,” speculating that, “If IBM had ever bothered to actually possess a physical country, that country might have had a lot in common with Singapore” (Gibson 1993; see also Ong 2006: 177ff; Balding 2012; Singh 2019).

Add to this, modern Singapore was founded by an agent of the British East India Company, and set up as an outpost of that corporation to be a free-market haven, quickly earning its name as one of the most profitable branches of the entire British colonial empire (Turnbull 1977). Also, when the first generation of PAP leaders went about setting up the first non-colonial government in 1965, they did not look primarily to other states for inspiration, but to private corporations. In particular, the Shell Oil corporation was used as a model, from which the government and civil service took its philosophy of meritocracy, according to which people in power should be promoted according to their merit rather than their seniority. As Singaporean diplomat and political scientist Kishore Mahbuhbani describes the process: “The leaders [...] simply asked which organisations in the world were most successful and why. The answer they got was that private sector companies were often more successful”. And over the years, Mahbuhbani

says, Singapore has perfected its “talent selection process” to the point that it is now “comparable to those of the most successful organizations in the world, including McKinsey and Harvard University” (Mahbuhbani 2018).

Conceptually, what is primarily gained from thinking about Singapore as a corporation, I would say, is that it allows us to get rid of the assumption that the internal organization of the country – e.g. how much the state intervenes in the economy – should determine whether or not its economic success is a free market story. Very few, after all, would make this assumption about IBM or Shell or any other corporation. Yet, just like states, corporations like these are organized internally on the basis of planning and conscious direction, rather than the “invisible hand of the market” – meaning that there is a board of directors at the top who decide what to produce, at what time, using what materials, etc.; and a corporate chain of command through which these decisions are delegated and effected. As Barkan writes, while we often think of corporations and states as opposites, they are in many ways better regarded as sibling, as both are “collective entities composed of individuals united into a single body”, created through “some animating act of incorporation that establishes their legal existence”, and set up “to achieve ends of government” (Barkan 2013: 5). Also, when we look at the biggest corporations in the world, we find that some of them are economically as big as or bigger than medium-sized nation-states, “a relation expressed in the oft-repeated lists of the world’s ‘largest economies,’ which render the profits of multinationals’ comparable to the gross national products of nation-states” (ibid:5). Hence, it would seem that it is not the absence or presence of significant pockets of economic planning that determines whether or not a market is considered “free”, as most would not consider Walmart (or any other corporation of its size) a sign of “creeping socialism”.

Instead, if we are to find a key difference between states and corporations, it seems to come down to how the two typically make their money: by selling goods and services in the market, or by levying taxes. As Milton Friedman famously put it, “Fundamentally, there are only two ways of co-ordinating the economic activities of millions. One is central direction involving the use of coercion – the technique of the army and of the modern totalitarian state. The other is voluntary co-operation of

individuals – the technique of the market place” (Friedman 1982: 19). On this reading, what ultimately makes the market “free” is not that it contains no pockets of economic planning, but rather that it contains *no actor who is capable of coercing others into parting with their property* – something that applies equally to individuals and corporations, as the latter, like the former, cannot force anyone to work for them, or buy what they sell. Conversely, according to this view, the reason why the state represents the opposite of the free market is because the state’s income is ultimately based on coercion – collection of taxes – which means that any increased role of the state in the economy can only come at the direct expense of the free market (thus laying the ground for the familiar “pro-government vs. pro-market” opposition in politics).

As the reader will notice, however, this is precisely where the distinction between state and corporation breaks down in Singapore, as most of Singapore’s state-owned enterprises are either self-sustaining or profitable. And because of this, the very role of the state in the economy changes as well, since the Singaporean state is a market actor in its own right, working to make sure that “the Singapore product” remains competitive in the global market, rather than maintaining a separate and tax-funded sector of the domestic economy. “Lee”, Kraar (1974) observes, “rules as though he were the autocratic chief executive of Singapore Inc.”, continuing:

The Prime Minister has hitched the island to the global economy through multinational corporations, which supply needed capital, expertise, and export markets. Singapore ardently woos foreign business, a rare policy among countries that have only recently emerged from colonialism. Besides providing such familiar tax incentives as a five-year income-tax exemption for coveted corporations, the government often shares the cost of training workers and even puts up part of the capital for plants and equipment.

Along the same lines, Mary Kay Vaughan described in the late 1970’s how Singapore’s entire economic model appeared to be built around “the runaway shop”, by which she meant Western companies seeking to relocate their business to countries offering better terms and conditions. She wrote:

Like other Southeast Asian countries, Singapore promises generous tax conditions and a docile, controlled labour force. Companies are tax-exempt for five years, and their profits are taxed at a 4 percent rate. Low wages are government enforced, sick pay and sick leave are severely restricted, and management are able to hire and fire virtually at will. [...] As one businessman noted, “If I had been assigned to write the labor ordinances of Singapore, I couldn’t have done a better job for my company or any other”. (Vaughan 1978: 25-26)

This, then, is fundamentally what it means to say that the Singaporean state is run like a corporation. Rather than living off the money that can be gained by taxing the domestic market, the state enters into mutually beneficial deals with multinational corporations, whereby both stand to gain. In exchange for investment, expertise and access to export markets, the Singaporean state offers the perfect business environment to multinational corporations (see Tan 1976; Ong 2006: 255). And just like any corporation, the goal for the state in this exchange is to spend less money at the point of “production” than it is able to make at the point of “realization”, such that the total cost of running society (measured in things like healthcare, education, housing, policing, infrastructure, salaries, etc.) ends up being smaller than the total output that society is able to generate.

As a consequence of this, one of the most distinctive features of Singapore is that society as a whole can be said to have a “bottom line”, as the entire society – and not just individual business within it – is organized around the imperative to make a profit. The clearest manifestation of this, of course, is the ever-increasing savings rate of the CPF, which is not just structurally similar to a corporate profit – in that it represents the surplus of the state as a corporation – but used by state in much the same way as a corporation would its profits: namely, as a source of capital accumulation, on the one hand, and as a source of bonus payments, on the other, as civil servants and politicians are given end-of-year bonuses based on how well their respective areas of government manage to reach key economic targets (see Singh 2019: 163).

But what about the political consequences of this set-up? Singapore, after all, is not a corporation in any traditional sense, but a country in which people live their entire lives. Also, unlike a traditional corporation, the Singaporean state has a monopoly of violence, and therefore has the ability to force population to hand over their money on a monthly basis. What distinct political features does such an organization require? We turn to this question now.

“No natural resources except our people”: three key political features of Singapore’s corporate state

The fact that the Singaporean state sits on a large financial surplus does not on its own make Singapore altogether unique, as there are many other states that similarly sit on large economic surpluses – states like Norway, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. What does make Singapore somewhat unique, instead, is that unlike those other states, Singapore’s surplus is entirely *manufactured*, meaning that it is not based on any natural resources, but extracted from the productive labour of its population. Economist Christopher Balding explains the difference:

In the absence of pre-existing wealth, as in the case with natural resources, the state is claiming manufactured wealth for its own purposes and managing it on behalf of the citizenry. [...] To put it another way, a commodity state legitimately claims its own existing wealth as its own; the noncommodity state claims the wealth of its citizens as its own. [...] The noncommodity fund nationalizes wealth creation, while the commodity fund manages existing national wealth. (ibid: 42)

Balding calls this a “subtly different claim”; and politically, I will argue, it has three main consequences.

First, while commodity-based sovereign wealth states can rely on a fairly traditional form of sovereign power – understood as *power over territory* – the noncommodity-based sovereign wealth state must rely on a form of sovereign power

that can best be described as *biopolitical*. In Foucault's famous formulation, this means a power that attempts to shape how people live their lives in positive terms, rather than one that merely limits what people are allowed to do in negative terms. In the previous chapter, I described this as the Weberian transformation that the Singaporean population had to undergo in order to be successfully mobilized into factory labour, and the central point is this: a population does not produce a surplus if all you do is leave them alone; instead, they must be *actively moulded into a surplus producing resource*. This means that, in order for the noncommodity-based sovereign wealth state to produce a surplus, it must wield a power that "exerts a positive influence on life, that endeavours to administer, optimize, and multiply it, subjecting it to precise controls and comprehensive regulations" (Foucault 1978: 137; see also Ong 2000), because unless it does so, it will not be able to extract a surplus from its population.

In Singapore, the most extreme manifestation of this biopolitical approach to governance is the so-called "Graduate Mothers' Scheme", which was introduced in 1984 as an outright eugenics program, and put in place specifically to deal with the fact that women of higher education were on average having fewer kids than women with less education. At the beginning of the industrialization effort, the government had introduced a "stop at two" policy to deal with the fact that the population was growing at a faster rate than the ability of the economy to provide housing and jobs for all. By the eighties, however, it had become apparent that the "stop at two" policy had resulted in what the government called "a very lop-sided birth pattern" (Tay 1984: 2), as educated women were producing babies at a lower-than reproduction rate (at the time 1.3 babies per person), while uneducated women were producing at a higher-than reproduction rate (see *ibid*). "Premised on the assumption that intelligence is genetically inherited," Wong and Yeoh (2003: 8) write, "the then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew believed that such a trend would threaten Singapore's ability in the long-term to compete economically on the global stage".⁵⁵ In order to reverse this trend, incentives

⁵⁵ Lee Kuan Yew was a big admirer of Charles Murray, whose book *The Bell Curve* (Herrnstein & Murray 1994) he took as providing irrefutable evidence for the correctness of his policy. "The Bell curve", Lee said, "is a fact of life. The blacks on average score 85 per cent on IQ and it is accurate, nothing to do with culture. The whites score on average 100. Asians score more ... the Bell curve authors put it at least 10 points higher. These are realities that, if you do not accept, will lead to

and disincentives were introduced. On the one hand, graduate mothers were told that, if they had three kids or more, their kids would be given priority enrolment in the best schools. Uneducated mothers, by contrast, were told that their kids would be given second priority (after the kids of graduate mothers) if they “stopped at two”. In addition, uneducated mothers were offered a \$10,000 reward if they sterilized themselves after having had their first or second child (to be paid back with interest if they ended up having more), and they were encouraged to abort any kids that they had in excess of two. Lastly, both groups were told that, depending on the group they belonged to (graduate or nongraduate), having more or less kids was not just an individual decision, but a matter of *national interest* and *collective responsibility*, with some propaganda posters reading: “If you have more, they will have less”; “Girl or Boy: Two is enough”; and “One, two ...and that’s ideal: Sterilization – the best method for family limitation”. A *New York Times* article from the time reported:

Mr. Lee and the Deputy Prime Minister, Goh Keng Swee, say it is wrong for highly educated women to remain single, potentially robbing the nation of a talented generation vital to maintaining the island nation’s prosperity. They also say it would be “wrong for the less educated to have children without restraint,” adding that “‘responsible’ love should have the interests of the state at heart” (*New York Times* 1984-02-12).

Today, the scheme is no longer in operation, though it lives on in less intrusive form through the Social Development Network, a governmental body set up by the Ministry of Community Development in 1984 as part of the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme, “to encourage love matches among graduates” (Wong and Yeoh 2003: 9).⁵⁶ In fact, when it was introduced, the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme was so unpopular that it was

frustration because you will be spending money on wrong assumptions and the results cannot follow” (quoted in Han *et al.* 1998).

⁵⁶ Not everyone is happy about the SDU either, as it is perceived to be overly intrusive and patronizing; some have even joked that the acronym should really be read as “Single, Desperate, and Ugly” (see *Asiaweek* 1994).

discontinued already in 1987 after massive complaints by the population, “a rare demonstration of vehemence in Singaporeans’ objections to a policy initiative” (ibid: 10). Nevertheless, the scheme provides a clear illustration of how the government has tended to view the population, which is as *resources to be optimized for economic productivity*, whose individual rights have tended to be treated not as universal and inalienable, but rather as functions of citizens’ differential value to the “greater good” (see Teo 2007, 2012) as defined by the government – which, in the extreme case of the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme, translated into a policy where those who were considered to be of large value to the “greater good” were asked to literally make more of themselves, while those considered to be of less value were asked to remove themselves from the gene pool. As one prominent Singaporean civil servant put it, “We are a small country [...] We have no natural resources except our people” (Sadasivan 2007: 157). Naturally, the value of that resource must be maximized.

Comparing Singapore to traditional social democracies, this is an area of policy where we again find both a lot of overlap, but also some important distinctions. Like Singapore, Sweden and the other Nordic countries operated far-reaching eugenics campaigns, starting in the early 1900s and continuing all the way until the mid-1970’s, during which thousands of citizen were sterilized by the state. Similar to the Singaporean system, the goal of these campaigns was to make sure that only certain citizens got to reproduce, on the argument that industrialization and urbanization would otherwise bring about a “crisis in the population question” (*kris i befolkningsfrågan*; Myrdal & Myrdal 1934), as lower quality individuals would have more children than the rest. Apart from the relative longevity of the Nordic programs, the main difference between these and the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme is that the latter was more narrowly focused on educational achievement, whereas the former were geared towards improving the quality of the body politic in a more holistic way. “A distinguishing feature in Scandinavian eugenic policies up to the 1940s”, Mattias Tydén writes, “is their sociopolitical component”, meaning that they were geared towards removing not just the economically or physically weak from the gene pool, but also “persons belonging to the ‘social problem group’ [...] whose ‘antisocial behavior’ was only

loosely regarded as genetically determined”, including “the feebleminded” and “carriers of venereal diseases or inborn epilepsy” (Tydén 2012: 7).

From our perspective, this betrays a more general difference, which is that Singapore’s form of social democracy is corporate in nature – caring primarily about the ability of its citizens to compete in the global economy – whereas the Nordic countries have tended to be more holistic in nature, caring about their citizens as social and moral actors as well. As a result, while both forms of social democracy have engaged in eugenics, and have tended to treat their populations as collective entities – organic bodies made up of more and less valuable parts, rather than as collections of rights-carrying and sovereign individuals – the difference is that the Nordic countries have done so in order to create a *perfect society*. Singapore, on its part, has focused more narrowly on creating a *successful business*, which is why the country has sought to optimize the body politic according to a narrow economic criteria – graduation/non-graduation – rather than according to a holistic notion of the good citizen.

The second political consequence of Balding’s “subtly different claim” is tightly related to the first one, and has to do with the fact that in order for the noncommodity sovereign wealth state to maximize the value of its population-as-a-resource, it must exercise a form of sovereignty that is not just biopolitical, but also “graduated”. In her work on Southeast Asian state craft, Aihwa Ong uses this term to describe the discriminatory treatment that citizens are often subjected to in highly globalized societies, such as Singapore, where national “competitiveness” is valued higher than individual rights. “To remain globally competitive”, Ong writes, “the Asian tiger state makes different kinds of biopolitical investments in different subject populations”, meaning that “[d]ifferent sectors of the population are subjected to different technologies of regulation and nurturance, and in the process assigned different social fates” (ibid: 8). Put differently, as nation-states become increasingly exposed to the competitive pressures of global markets, citizens will increasingly become separated into two groups: those who are able to leverage the opportunities that globalization offers, on the one hand, and those who are “left behind”, on the other (see Goodheart 2017; Stiglitz 2002). Because of this, governments will increasingly govern their

populations not on the basis of the citizen/non-citizen binary, but on the basis of how individuals and groups in the population “relate or do not relate to global capitalism” (Ong 2000: 59) – a new continuum that cuts right through the older citizen/non-citizen binary, as both citizens and foreigners will be found at each point along the spectrum.

In Singapore, Ong observes specifically, citizens are subjected to competition from skilled foreign workers (“foreign talent”) who are brought into the country to compete with locals for jobs and careers, explicitly with the goal of improving the quality of the body politic. “Ordinary citizens”, Ong writes, “are now expected to develop new mindsets and build digital capabilities, while professionals are warned that they must achieve ‘technopreneurial’ attitudes and skills or lose out to expatriates and be reduced to de facto second-class status in their own homeland.” Put another way, citizens are not treated as citizens, but as employees in the state-as-a-corporation. *And like any corporation, the goal of the state is not primarily to protect the jobs of its citizens/employees from outside competition, but to get the best person for the job* – something that is best achieved by actively subjecting the citizens to competition from the outside.⁵⁷ Phelps, to that end, talks about Singapore as operating an extraterritorial rather than territorial form of sovereignty, by which he means that there is “no necessary territorial coincidence among nation, state, and processes of capital accumulation” (Phelps 2007: 372) in Singapore, as the country is “unique in the degree to which national economic development has, from the outset, been so closely articulated with the interests of overseas MNEs” (ibid: 378).

The outcome of this, I propose, is a form of sovereignty which is paradoxically both highly egalitarian – as it confers few benefits to citizens that it does not also confer to expatriates – and highly inegalitarian, as the exposure of citizens to global competition leads to highly unequal outcomes within the population. Thus it mirrors what some have argued is the logic of globalization itself, which is to decrease inequality between countries but to increase inequality within countries (see Maskin 2015).

⁵⁷ The other end of the continuum is the migrant worker, who functions in the corporate state much like a temporary worker, who can be fired at any point, and has much fewer rights than a normal “employee” (see Ong 2006: 186).

This, in turn, leads us to the third and last political consequence of Balding's "subtly different claim", which is the kind of social contract that must be put in place to support the state's appropriation of funds. As Balding points out, for resource-rich states, surplus-accumulation is a more or less self-justifying act, as the state can use its surplus of natural wealth to invest in "modern welfare states with free education and jobs for everyone", thereby essentially buying the loyalty of the citizens (Balding 2012: 11). For noncommodity-based sovereign wealth states, by contrast, the same act of wealth accumulation has a much less clear justification, as any surplus that the state ends up with has to be extracted *from* the citizens. "Sustained and structural fiscal surpluses in the absence of commodity exports", Balding writes, "reflects extracted savings from the domestic population" (ibid: 41).

The question is: why would the citizens accept this? Why would the citizens accept an economic arrangement in which they are consistently made to produce more value for the state than they are given back? Are such citizens not, in fact, exploited in the exact same way that Marxists have always claimed that workers are exploited by corporations – being made to produce a surplus for someone else, who in turn gets to invest that surplus back into the very machine that produced the surplus in the first place, in order to produce an even bigger surplus, and so on? Balding, indeed, thinks that is the case, as he writes:

So where does Singapore get its "national wealth"? From the financial capture of the economic productivity of its population. [...] Whereas oil rich states have enormous sovereign wealth funds because they won the geographic lottery, Singapore created enormous sovereign wealth funds by capturing the economic productivity of its people. *The government of Singapore has built sovereign wealth funds not through natural resource wealth or shrewd investments, but capturing the financial wealth of the people of Singapore.* The people of Singapore work for the government. (Balding 2012a, emphasis original)

This gets us to the heart of the social contract. In one sense, the CPF could easily be understood as a tax in disguise, as it represents money that has been forcibly taken out of the hands of Singaporeans and put in the hands of the state, in order to be invested into state-owned corporations. Only the CPF is slightly worse than a tax, as the CPF is not given back to the citizens in the form of a public sector, but invested into the state's profit-driven corporations.

The key difference between taxes and the CPF, however, is the sort of expectations that are attached to the money. Taxes are fundamentally a form of forced collective consumption: they are taken out of the hands of individual citizens in order that the state may invest them in public goods, which the citizens get to enjoy "for free" (as they have already been collectively paid for). The CPF, by contrast, represent forced investments into the corporate state – meaning savings, money that will be returned later, and with interest. Hence, rather than an act of zero-sum redistribution – money taken from one part of the economy, and given to another – the CPF represents a promise about future cornucopia: a societal marshmallow test of sorts, in which the citizens are asked to forego current consumption in order to have more money later (see Mischel & Ebbsen 1970).

Importantly, this implies two very different social contracts. On the one hand, a social contract that is made on the basis of taxation is one that positions the long-term order of "society" in opposition to the short-term order of "the market", as the state collects taxes to finance a separate sphere of exchange – the public sector – in which goods and services are produced and distributed according to nonmarket criteria. To that end, one of the main goals of the Swedish welfare state was always to "de-commodify" social life by expanding the number of services that are given to individuals "as a matter of right", thus reducing the power of the market over society (Esping-Andersen 2006: 163). "When workers are completely market-dependent", Esping-Andersen writes (ibid: 163), "they are difficult to mobilize for solidaristic action [...] De-commodification strengthens the workers and weakens the absolute authority of the employer".

By contrast, the social contract that is made through the CPF is made *fully in line with market dynamics*, as the CPF is not collected with the goal of financing a separate and non-market sphere of the economy. Instead, it is collected to be invested into the state's various corporate ventures, all of which operate as for-profit entities in the domestic and global markets. Hence, rather than a socialist pocket of the capitalist economy, the Singaporean social contract represents the same contract as that which lies at the bottom of capitalism itself, namely, one in which savings are invested as capital on the expectation that the money will be returned to the investor with an interest. The only difference is that, instead of a contract between free individuals in the market, the CPF is a socio-political contract between state and citizens. As such, it forms the basis for the long-term transactional order of "society", rather than the short-term transactional order of "the market". Better yet, *it collapses the distinction between the two*. Consequently, its moral status is different compared to a "normal" investment, as it is not simply an individualistic pursuit of short-term gain, but "a stake in the country and its future" – a commitment to the long-term viability of society as a whole, yet understood in terms borrowed from the market.

Neoliberal after all?

To many critics and scholars, of course, it is precisely this blurring of the economic and the political – market and society – that makes Singapore a neoliberal society. "By urging Singaporeans to ground their relationship to the nation in values and practices of economic competitiveness, efficiency, and consumption," Singh writes, "the government's neoliberal rhetoric constructs an image of the nation as a corporation peopled by brave workers, satisfied shareholders, and eager customers" (Singh 2019: 171-172). Similarly, Dutta writes that Singapore is "both a role model and pedagogue of extreme neoliberalism", as the country "has continually experimented with and perfected the techniques of authoritarian repression, exploitation of labor, and accumulation of primitive capital", and "has invented the statecraft of disciplining labor and silencing dissent as model governmentality, while turning itself into the Asian gateway for transnational capital" (Dutta: 2020: 2). Neoh, likewise, argues that

Singapore's general approach to policy, which holds that "[i]f a measure of social control is shown to contribute to economic growth, it is considered as necessary to Singapore's survival", is neoliberal because it "stresses the importance of survival in the market place by emphasizing citizens' responsibility to self, fellow citizens, and the state, thereby shrinking the scope of state intervention and limiting citizens' critical involvement in society" (Neoh 2020: 68). Lastly, Harvey suggests that Singapore has "combined neoliberalism in the marketplace with draconian coercive and authoritarian state power, while invoking moral solidarities based on the nationalist ideals of a beleaguered island state (after its ejection from the Malaysian federation), Confucian values, and, most recently, a distinctive form of the cosmopolitan ethic suited to its current position in the world of international trade" (Harvey 2005: 86).

What most of these arguments have in common, I would say, is that rather than they define neoliberalism on the basis of what its leading theorists claimed it to be – which was a form of capitalism that seeks to minimize state intervention in the market, on the argument that intervention disturbs the price-mechanism in ways that will have unintended, long-term consequences (see Hayek 1945; Sowell 2011) – they all define neoliberalism in general terms as a "political rationality" or "governmentality" which understands humans and societies in terms of the market. To that end, Liow suggests that the reason why Singapore "appears to be transiting from a developmental state to a neoliberal regulatory one" is not because the state is retreating from the economy (which it is not), but because "in many a speeches by PAP politicians, policies to be undertaken must possess economically-rational justifications and be regarded as 'market-friendly'", as such policies are understood to "form the most 'rational' approach, given the operation of the global economy in accordance to so-called 'market principles' i.e. capitalist logic" (Liow 2011: 248). To illustrate this point, Liow mentions two policies as prime examples of neoliberalism in practice. First, he says, Singapore's labour immigration system is organized around a distinction between two different categories of workers: on the one hand, skilled workers referred to as "foreign talent", and on the other hand, low-skilled workers referred to a "foreign workers". According to Liow, this distinction is neoliberal, a) because the "rationale for the system is purely economical and utilitarian" (ibid: 253), and b) because it reflects "the desire of the

Singapore neoliberal-developmental state to create and sustain economic growth in the most economically efficient and ‘pragmatic’ manner possible” (ibid: 254). Second, Liow mentions the government’s program of “worker skills upgrading”, a tax-funded program through which individuals can apply for a variety of courses aimed at giving them the skills needed “in order to better their chances of employability” (ibid: 255). According to Liow, this is also a form of neoliberalism, a) because the “upgrading” in question is understood purely in market terms, such that individuals should be upgraded to meet market demands and nothing else, and b) because it brings about an “individualization of success (and conversely, failure) in terms of finding and securing employment” (ibid: 256), thus removing “society” from the equation altogether, as well as treating citizens as commodities to be bought and sold. “The engagement of self-commodification and self-promotion on the part of the individual”, Liow writes, “are part of being a neoliberal subject – highly competitive, self-reliant and living according to market principles as a guide for everyday living” (ibid: 257). Hence, he states, “The upgrading discourse [...] conveys the idea that the objective is a society where the opportunity for participation in the market economy is to be made as equal as possible, underscoring the very existence of the neoliberal political rationality” (ibid: 257).

This understanding of neoliberalism as a “political rationality” or “governmentality” is very common, and is echoed by a variety of leading thinkers, such as Brown (2015), Harvey (2005), Ong (2006), and Foucault (2008), who all in various ways describe how the increasing power of the market over society has eroded previous forms of political solidarity (see also Guyer 2007). The problem with this mode of analysis, as I see it, is that when applied to a place like Singapore, it tends to brush over more than it actually explains. That is to say, while it is true that Singapore is a highly market-oriented society, the *reason why* Singapore is a market-oriented society is not because the Singaporean government has read Hayek and decided that, as a matter of principle, the state should intervene in the market as little as possible. Nor is it because globalization has come to undermine a previously Keynesian welfare-state, which could not survive under conditions of global capitalism. Instead, as we’ve seen, it is because Singapore’s survival was always understood as a matter of making the country as attractive as possible to global investors, which was why the country from the beginning

had to take the market – meaning the global market – as fundamental to society, regardless of what kind of society that the ruling elite, or the population, wished to set up.

From this point of view, the problem with defining neoliberalism broadly and generally as a “political rationality” that sees the market as fundamental to society is that we will then have no way of distinguishing between neoliberalism, on the one hand, and what I have described as Singapore’s form of social democracy, on the other – not because there is no difference between the two, but because neoliberalism has been defined so broadly as to include any viable form of social democracy under its umbrella. “Consequently,” Liow concludes, “to challenge the Singapore neoliberal-developmental state is to confront the neoliberal political rationality and ultimately, capitalism” (Liow 2011: 259). In this, he is correct. The problem is that, if this is how neoliberalism is defined, then the only way for Singapore *not* to be neoliberal is to condemn itself to economic failure and starvation, because that is ultimately what “challenging capitalism” would mean here! As a result, we are left with a largely unfalsifiable concept, as any viable form of (social democratic) society in Singapore would have to be defined as neoliberal *simply for being viable*. Thus, neoliberalism becomes little more than “a sloppy synonym for capitalism” (Ferguson 2009: 171), rather than an analytical tool capable of distinguishing between meaningfully different social formations.

Beyond these conceptual objections, however, the main problem that I have with this analysis is simply that it appears to be more animated by a desire to criticise and complain about capitalism in general, than by a genuine desire to understand Singapore on its own terms. In particular, when one takes a more detailed interest in Singapore as a society, one finds that most of the country’s “neoliberal” characteristics are in fact of much older origin, and precede neoliberalism as an intellectual movement. Most importantly, before Singapore had become an independent nation-state, the island had long been the home to a people who occupied the role of *middleman minority* in the broader Malayan region – primarily, but not exclusively, the overseas Chinese – who had migrated to Southeast Asia (or “Nanyang”, as it was known in Chinese) in pursuit

of a better life. In terms of values and behaviour patterns, these people could no doubt be described as “proto-neoliberal”, as they were all “highly competitive, self-reliant and living according to market principles as a guide for everyday living”. However, to do so would be to get the story completely backwards! Rather than relying on a global and abstract concept like “neoliberalism”, therefore, I propose that we turn our attention to the social and cultural patterns of these middleman minorities when looking for the origins of Singapore’s particular form of society.

Middleman minority

The term middleman minority was coined by Blalock (1967), and later developed by Bonacich (1973) and Sowell (1996; 2005), to describe an ethnic minority group whose role in society is that of an intermediary, either “between producers and consumers, whether in the role of retailers or money-lenders” (Sowell 2005: 66), or between different social and/or ethnic groups who for various reasons prefer not to interact directly with one other. The paradigmatic example of a middleman minority are the Jews of Europe; however, others include “the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire, Ibos in Nigeria, Marwaris in Burma, overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia, and Lebanese in a number of countries” (Sowell 2005a), not to mention the Parsis in India, all of whom have occupied similar roles in their host societies, and who have often been compared to the Jews (as a term like the “Jews of the East”, referring to the Chinese in Southeast Asia, attests to).

Apart from their role as middlemen, what most notably distinguishes middleman minorities from other ethnic minorities is the spectacular successes that they have achieved in their host countries. “Again and again”, Sowell (2005: 72) writes, “[...] the middleman minority has arrived on the scene as a destitute immigrant, owning virtually nothing and barely able to speak a few words of the language of the country”, only to work their way up to great fortunes within the span of a generation or two.⁵⁸ Among

⁵⁸ As is for instance told about one such individual in Singapore, Kwek Hong Png, founder of the Hong Leong Group, one of the country’s most successful property developers, whose son is today one of the richest individuals in Singapore: he “came to Singapore in 1928 at the age of 16 [...] with only an \$8 ticket, a mat and a quilt for warmth. After arriving in Singapore, Kwek began working at his brother-

their host societies, this entrepreneurialism of middleman minorities has often inspired admiration. Equally often, however, it has inspired a special kind of hostility – manifesting throughout history in “efforts to cut off their means of livelihood, riots and pogroms, exclusion movements and expulsion, removal to concentration camps, and ‘final solutions’” (Bonacich 1973: 589). In part, this hostility is explained by the fact that the economic activities of middleman minorities “have long been regarded by the economically unsophisticated as not ‘really’ adding anything to the economic well-being of a community” (Sowell 2005a), as middlemen minorities “only” act as intermediaries between producers and consumers: not producing anything themselves, but living off the differences in price between buying and selling. In part, the hostility is due to the fact that the success of middleman minorities depends on their ability to remain culturally distinct from the majority group, as this is what provides them with a competitive advantage in the market. As a result of this, they become an easy target for demagogues looking for a scapegoat, as middleman minorities are not only more successful than the majority, but also culturally different from them, thus providing ample “evidence” that they “stick together”, and make money “at the expense” of the majority (ibid: 90). Again, Sowell:

How could middleman minorities rise from such [low] beginnings? Clearly, their values, their discipline, and their culture, had to be different. Moreover, if they wanted their children to succeed, they had to make sure to keep these intangible assets different. Accordingly, middleman minorities around the world have distanced themselves and their children from social involvement with the very different people around them – whose differences were the basis of their livelihood – and have therefore often been accused of being clannish. [...] Middleman minorities, struggling up from the bottom,

in-law’s hardware shop as a store-hand. [...] From a store-hand, he rose quickly to the position of clerk, then manager and eventually general manager. Although he excelled in his job, Kwek felt he could do better if he were on his own. He decided to set up his own company [...] Hong Leong was established in 1941 as a general trading firm dealing in ropes, paints, ship and rubber estate supplies. [...] Kwek saved for 10 years and accumulated \$7,000 as starting capital. As his business grew, he was able to inject more funds into the company as working capital” (Ong 2008). Kwek died a billionaire in 1994.

could not afford to have their children absorb the values of the society around them. Clannishness was all but inevitable. (ibid: 73)

When Singapore split from Malaysia in 1965, this type of hostility against the middleman minority played an important, not to say decisive, role. Already in 1961, when merger between Singapore and the Federation of Malaya was first proposed, Winsemius had voiced concern that such a union might not work, “mainly on account of the ethnic composition of the Singapore population.” “I was completely sure at the time that [Singapore] would [...] economically take the lead”, Winsemius recalled in a later interview. “A common market would mean free competition from Singapore throughout Malaysia. And Singapore, the average Singaporean is better than the average Malay. It’s as simple as that”. For this reason, Winsemius suspected that “a number of [...] ‘Federation Politicians’ would be afraid of Singapore. They would try to keep Singapore down economically as much as possible, which they did” (Tan 1982: 95-96).

This provided the background for the struggle over “Malaysian Malaysia”, which ensued as soon as Singapore and Malaysia merged. “Malaysian Malaysia” was Lee Kuan Yew’s term for what he hoped would be an alternative to the *bumiputra* legislation that existed (and still exists) in Malaysia, according to which the native Malays are guaranteed a number of special right and protections under the constitution, such as privileged access to employment, education, political office, and jobs (see Sowell 2004: 56ff). For Lee and PAP, the goal of merger was to transform Malaysia into “a modern state which would aim to deliver economic prosperity to the population, while moving inexorably towards the ideal of equality of status and opportunity for all of the population regardless of race” (Barr 1997: 4). For the Malaysian leadership, however, the goal was the direct opposite: to get the productivity of the Singaporean trade-economy as part of the tax base, while making sure that the economically strong Chinese, who lived throughout Malaysia but concentrated in Singapore, did not end up completely outcompeting the Malay population, who the Malaysian leadership saw as their primary constituency (ibid: 4). The risk of separation was therefore written into

the very terms of merger, as the two parties went into the union wanting essentially opposite things.

The most famous expression of the Malay point of view came in a book published five years after separation, entitled *The Malay Dilemma*, written by Mahathir bin Mohamad. At the time of publishing, Mahathir was in political wilderness after having been voted out of office during the 1969 elections. However, during merger he had been one of the most important critics of Singapore and Lee Kuan Yew, and he would later go on to serve as a two-time prime minister of the country (in office 1981-2003, and 2018-2020). In his book, Mahathir observes how the Chinese in Malaysia “are the universal middlemen. They not only sell the whole country the necessities of life and the luxuries, but they often buy up the produce of their customers and dispose of it elsewhere”, noting how they are “an essential cog in the machinery of the Malaysian economy” (Mahathir 2008: 48). The problem, Mahathir adds however, is that the business methods of the Chinese are in his view often unfair, as the Chinese organize themselves around strong family loyalties, exclusive guilds and exclusive chambers of commerce (ibid: 75), making it almost impossible for other groups to compete with them on equal terms. “The Malays”, Mahathir writes (ibid: 72), “are as much as everyone else for a free enterprise system. But”, he adds, “it is becoming more and more apparent that the competition which should be between individuals and business groups has developed into a competition between racial groups in which one group has an absolute advantage over the other.” In particular, Mahathir observes, because the Chinese tend to rely on unpaid family labour, they are able to maintain lower prices compared to other businesses, thus crowding out all other businesses from the market:

The Chinese retail shop is invariably a family affair. As such, wages are unknown. The proprietor and all the members of his family work for the food that is provided and no more. The saving is tremendous and the amount of goods sold and the size of the shop, as well as operational capital, increase very rapidly. There is no fixed price for anything, and most certainly the prices are not marked on the goods. This permits flexibility in

price, but family loyalty ensures that any excess profit does not go to the salesman. (ibid: 76)

In order to protect the native Malays from the entrepreneurial Chinese, Mahathir therefore argued, free competition had to be ruled out, as free competition would over time reduce the Malays to second-class citizens in their own land. “With the Chinese”, he said, “every form of business [...] is monopolized by them. Not even the crumbs are left to others” (ibid: 78). However, “the Malays are the rightful owners of Malaya”, and so “if citizenship is conferred on races other than Malays, it is because the Malays consent to this. That consent is conditional” (ibid: 161).

While Mahathir spoke in general terms about the economic interests of “the Chinese” and “the Malays”, it should be emphasized that this does not mean that all Chinese people in Singapore and Malaysia could be put into the category of middleman minority – then or now – nor that all Malays had some general interest in common against the Chinese. As I said earlier, most of the people living in Singapore at the time of independence were living in *kampongs*, making money in and through the informal economy; and as we’ve seen, most working class Singaporeans were attracted to socialism, which is clearly at odds with the ethos of the entrepreneurial middleman. The point is that, to the extent that the Chinese have achieved greater economic success than other groups in Southeast Asia – which they have – they have done so by occupying the role of middleman minority within their various host societies. “Although the Chinese had begun much poorer than the Malays,” Sowell writes, “their incomes rose over the years until they were earning more than double the average income of the Malays”, not because they enjoyed any special privileges but because “their frugality enabled them to begin to move out of the ranks of laborers by setting up small businesses, usually tiny retail shops” (Sowell 2004: 57-58).

Most importantly, while the middleman minority concept does not apply to all or even most Chinese people, it does describe the *Chinese elites* in Singapore, most of whom would historically have worked their way up from nothing, and whose social and cultural patterns of behaviour have shaped the history of Singapore more than any other

group (with the possible exception of the British). When we say that the Chinese in Singapore came into conflict with the Malays in Malaysia, therefore, what we are really talking about are *different strategies for acquiring wealth and power* – one based on ethnic privilege, the other based on working your way up from the bottom – which are associated with these different ethnic groups. Because of this strong correlation between ethnicity and patterns of wealth acquisition, however, the two simply tend to be conflated – which is why, for someone like Mahathir, it made sense to write that:

Races are differentiated not merely by ethnic origin but also by many other characteristics. [...] How these characteristics develop is another matter, but when races compete in a given field, these characteristics play an extremely important role. The Jews, for example, are not merely hook-nosed but understand money instinctively. The Europeans are not only fair-skinned but have an insatiable curiosity. The Malays are not merely brown, but are also easy-going and tolerant. And the Chinese are not just almond-eyes people, but are also inherently good businessmen. Their progress in the whole of Southeast Asia will testify to this. (Mahathir 2008: 110-111)

In this context, what is special about Singapore's story is not the fact of this ethnic conflict, nor the fact that it was framed in racial-essentialist terms – wherever we find a middleman minority, we tend to also find this kind of thinking. What is special, instead, is how the conflict was resolved: not through segregation, ethnic cleansing or genocide, but through “one of the most remarkable political decisions: Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965 – one of the few times in history when a country has voluntarily divested itself of part of its own” (Sowell 2004: 59). As a consequence of this, Malaysia got to maintain its Malay majority, allowing the country to keep its *bumiputra* legislation in place – and with that, Malay political supremacy. Singapore, on its part, ended up in the rare position of having to transform a city that had that had previously been the centre of a middleman minority culture into an independent nation-state, in which the previous minority was now the majority.

On the one hand, this presented a serious problem for Singapore, as it was not clear how the country would be able to survive as an independent unit – “a heart without a body”, as Lee Kuan Yew put it. At the same time, the problems facing independent Singapore – primarily, how to survive as a small country with no natural resource, having to live on exports and trade – were remarkably analogous to the problems that had previously faced the middleman minority, who had similarly taken on the prospect of surviving as a small unit in a bigger economy over which they had no power, having to survive on the basis of nothing but their willingness to work hard and save. When the first generation of Singaporean leaders went about the task of setting up a nation-state, they therefore did not have to start from scratch, but could carry over many of the strategies and values that had already proved successful for the middleman minority – only now applied to the problem of state-making! The result of this, I will argue, was the world’s first and as of yet only “middleman minority state”, meaning *a state that operates in the global economy much like the classic middleman minority operates in a host society*. Looked at in this way, the parallels are striking, and they are many.

Middleman minority state

The first and most obvious parallel between the classic middleman minority and the Singaporean state is the economic role of middleman itself. For the classic middleman minority, this role was occupied within a host society, where the middleman minority inserted itself between producers and consumers, employer and employee, or between different social groups. For the middleman minority state (henceforth “MM state”), on the other hand, this role is occupied within the global economy, where the MM state inserts itself between multinational corporations and its own population, attracting the former by offering the latter for sale as (cheap and docile) labour-power. Because of this, the MM state has been accused of the same kind of parasitism as the classic middleman minority, as the MM state does not “produce” what it sells (which is the labour power of its population), but merely facilitates the process by which global capital is able to buy it, in exchange for which the MM state takes a cut of the resulting profits (see Caldwell 1979).

As Sowell points out, however, rather than a parasitic activity, this mediating function is precisely the value of the middleman, as the middleman provides the infrastructure through which parties who both have something to gain from exchanging with each other can meet in a smooth and hassle-free way. “Consumers”, Sowell writes, “could, in theory, drive to factories to buy goods directly, but retailers make this time-consuming activity unnecessary, for a price” (Sowell 2005: 81). Likewise, multinational corporations who invested in Singapore during its industrialization could easily have found cheaper labour elsewhere (see Castells 1988: 16-18). What made Singapore such an attractive place of investment was that the state offered a *total business environment* – a labour “shop” – in which multinational corporations were provided not just relatively cheap labour (compared to the West) but also social and political stability, world class infrastructure, tax-concession and other pro-business policies, all of which made Singapore preferable to other, cheaper places (see *ibid*: 9-20).

More recently, Singapore has also become one of the world’s leading financial centres, a classic middleman minority role. The first person to suggest that Singapore take up this role was Albert Winsemius, who pointed out that the country’s time-zone would allow it to fill a gap in global trading hours. Today, Singapore is a global financial hub, where millions of dollars trade every day on the Singapore stock-exchange, one of the most important stock exchanges in Asia. The same goes for shipping, where Singapore operates the second-busiest port in the world, after Shanghai. Also, Singapore has come to function as something of a middleman of Asian tourism, as the country has positioned itself as a great place to stay in-between trips throughout the region, providing travellers with a two-or-three-day break in a clean, airconditioned environment. Again, it was Winsemius who suggested this role for Singapore, as he envisioned that the country could become “the entrepôt for tourists, like [we are] the entrepôt for a lot of products” (quoted in UNDP 2015: 22). Singapore, on this understanding, is not the destination, but the place you go in-between destinations, in order to recharge your batteries.

At the social/political level, too, this middleman role has been played by PAP, who, as Singapore was gaining independence in the late 1950s, presented themselves

as something of a political middleman between the local population and the British colonialists. As Lee made this clear in an early speech, given while he was still a student at Cambridge:

Despite the fact that the communists are more organized than we are, the returned students have the advantage of being the group most acceptable to the British. The returned students have also the best chance of finding a solution to Malaya's racial problems and of forming a united national political front strong enough to achieve decolonization without resorting to force. Besides these advantages, the common man in Malaya regards us as superior anyway, so we are the natural leaders of the new movement. (Quoted in Barr 2000a: 17)

According to Lee, in other words, what made PAP the “natural leaders” of independent Singapore was the fact that they were able to mediate between the local population and the colonial power, rather than simply representing the interests of one against the other. Unsurprisingly, therefore, many of the political criticisms levied against PAP have been strikingly similar to those levied against the classic middleman minority. In particular, a number of Marxist scholars have argued that PAP's role as political middleman was really a way for the party to facilitate the exploitation of the working class by MNCs, rather than to achieve “true independence”. Malcom Caldwell, to that end, writes that Lee Kuan Yew “perceived with unusual clarity that the transition to independence might entail social revolution, and therefore the demise of the class to which he belonged and of the economic formation – capitalism – which nurtured it, unless the colonial power and indigenous reactionaries succeeded in the delicate task of crushing genuine nationalist and socialist forces while persuading a portion of the people to accept neo-colonial status as true independence and a paternalism akin to fascism as ‘social democracy’” (Caldwell 1979: 3). Likewise, Luther writes that Singapore's “economic miracle” was achieved “for the benefit of foreign investors and at the expense of the Singapore working class” (Luther 1978: 219). And Glassman, in a more recent analysis, suggests that “whether or not Singaporean workers' standards of living rose – and clearly they did in the 1960s–80s – Lee was unambiguously subordinating them firmly

to the prerogatives of capitalists and capitalist state planners” (thus echoing Marx’s contention that “even the most favourable situation for the working class [...] does not remove the antagonism between his interests and the interests of the bourgeoisie”) (Glassman 2018: 591-592; see also Buchanan 1972 for similar arguments).

Like the classic middleman minority – who have often been charged with having “dual loyalties” (Bonacich 1973: 591) – the MM state is thus accused of being untrustworthy, and of having a hidden agenda. “In post-colonial societies”, Bonacich writes, “this distrust was probably exacerbated by the fact that middleman minorities tended to be allied with the colonial masters. Indeed they have an interest in ‘law and order’ for continued trade, hence tend to oppose disruptive political movements” (ibid: 591). In the same way, the Marxist critique of the Singaporean state is that, by acting as a middleman between foreign MNCs and the local population, the state exploits the latter for the benefit of itself and the former. And in that pursuit, the MM state opposes all “disruptive political movements”, such as “genuine nationalist and socialist forces”, which, according to the Marxist point of view, represent the true interests of the people.⁵⁹ The MM state also has a strong interest in law and order, as Singapore’s very strict laws against drugs (among other things) attest to.

The second parallel between the Singaporean state and the classic middleman minority is their shared focus on hard work combined with high levels of savings and investment. “The ability to save has played a key role in the rise of middleman minorities”, Sowell (2006: 73) observes. “Because being a peddler or even a small storeowner does not require any large amount of capital, these are occupations open to innumerable people, so that widespread competition has been common – and that in turn means that profits cannot come easily without long hour of work and much

⁵⁹ As Singaporean economist Augustine H.H. Tan wrote, however, “if MNCs are undesirable, as their critics say, what are the alternatives? [...] Another model of economic development available to developing countries is the nationalistic model. [...] Existing foreign investment and multinationals are nationalized while new ones are discouraged. The rationale is the fear of exploitation by the MNCs. The net result is economic stagnation, if not retrogression. Nationalised industries, in developing and developed countries, often prove to be nonviable and require huge state subsidies to shore them up. The reason is simple: lack of good, knowledgeable management. The managers appointed to head nationalised industries are usually civil servants or political cronies who lack sufficient expertise” (Tan 1976: xx).

attention to the business, as well as living within limited means” (ibid: 76). Likewise, Bonacich talks about middleman minorities as having a “future time orientation” – meaning, an exceptional willingness to delay gratification – which she contrasts with the social and cultural orientation of the majority populations among whom middleman minorities live, “who generally wish to live more rounded lives” (Bonacich 1973: 585).

Similarly, because Singapore did not start out with any natural resources, nor any other unearned advantages, the only way for the country to compete in the global market was by working harder than other countries, while at the same time consuming less. Like the middleman minority, therefore, the Singaporean state could only succeed by convincing its population that it was in their own interests to delay gratification over a long period of time. Unlike the classic middleman minority, however, the Singaporean state had to convince an entire nation of people that it was in their interest to delay gratification, and not just a family or a clan, as has typically been the case for the middleman minority. Hence, in order to instil the appropriate “future time orientation” in the population, the state could not rely on cultural transmission alone, but also had to pass laws which *institutionalized this orientation*. The most important of these, as we’ve seen, were the three 1968 bills, which not only institutionalized the middleman ethos of hard work and high savings, but also positioned the state as the (not so) metaphorical “patriarch” of the national “family” – a “benevolent dictator” (Boo 2015) or “good autocrat” (Kaplan 2011) whose job is to force the national community to work hard and save well, and to invest any surplus back into the “family business” (Barr 2014: 108).

The third parallel is one we’ve already discussed at length, namely the necessity of maintaining a social contract that in one way or another incentivises people to view their interests in terms of the multigenerational project of upward mobility. Specifically, because both middleman minorities and the MM state begin with virtually nothing, they both have to maintain labour regimes that under different circumstances would be experienced as clear instances of worker exploitation, as this is initially the only source of surplus-value available to them. As Sowell reports, “During the earlier rise of Chinese shopkeepers in Southeast Asia, sixteen-to-eighteen-hour days were [...] common”, noting how “[o]nly those willing to endure such deprivations, and to put in

long hours of work for the sake of the future, are likely to last long enough to begin to move up the economic ladder to the remarkable success which middleman minorities have eventually achieved in many societies” (Sowell 2005: 98). Similarly, Bonacich writes that:

The typical middleman minority business is a family store (or truck farm) resting heavily on the use of unpaid family labor. If wage labor is needed, members of the extended family or of regional associations are preferred, and are treated like kin, sometimes living with the family behind the store. *Employees work excessively long hours for low or no wages and are loyal to the owners. In exchange they are likely to become partners or to receive training and aid in setting up their own business in the same line.* The middleman firm is labor-intensive but able to cut labor costs drastically through ethnically-based paternalism and thrift. (Bonacich 1973: 586, emphasis mine).

In much the same way, when the people of Singapore were mobilized into factory labour, they were told that they would have to accept hard work and high savings in exchange a “stake in the country and its future”, in the form of investments in housing and the pension fund. Hence, like the classic middleman minority, the social contract forged in the MM state was one in which current exploitation – or what would be experienced as exploitation under normal circumstances – was legitimised and accepted on the grounds that those doing the work would be made “partners” in the state as a corporation. With that, the workers were given a strong reason to remain loyal to the “owners”, even though what was asked of them in the short-to-medium term was often completely at odds with their economic interests (or what they would have understood to be their economic interests).

In this context, it is interesting to note that while Singapore’s housing program is often described as world-unique – as deputy prime minister Tharman recently said: “Very little else that we do is unique [...] but I would say our housing and neighbourhood strategy is unique” (Tharman 2017) – this is only true insofar as we compare Singapore to other nation-states. Once we admit other social formation into

comparative view, however, we discover that precisely this policy has been deployed elsewhere, not by any state, but by the company towns of the US. As Crawford describes this in her excellent book on the subject:

The steel companies' major innovation was to sell houses to their workers. In Vandergrift, Ambridge, and Wilmerding, Pennsylvania, Gary, Indiana, and Granite City, Illinois, steel workers could buy houses at below-market prices or with special mortgage plans. [...] The welfare director of a steel firm summarized the companies' logic: "get workers to invest their savings in their homes and own them. Then they won't leave and they won't strike. *It ties them down so they have a stake in our prosperity*". (Crawford 1995: 52, emphasis mine).

Here, then, we once again find that it makes much more sense to think about Singapore as a corporation, as this allows us to better understand the kind of model that the country actually operates. More than a traditional nation-state, Singapore has the look and feel of a traditional company town: a city set up entirely around the purpose of running a company, "created from nothing through economic necessity" (Porteous 1970: 131), and "brought into being whenever the general poverty of social provision forces the entrepreneur to provide the total urban infrastructure" (ibid: 139), as Porteous describes the traditional company town. Of course, this does not mean that Singapore took its housing strategy or any other of its social strategies directly from the company towns of the US; for all I know, Singaporean politicians may be wholly unaware of the parallel (though I doubt it). Rather, it suggests that the company town, the MM state and the classic middleman minority are all versions of the same basic phenomenon – namely communities organized around the singular project of economic competition and growth – which is why they have all come up with such similar strategies for building loyalty.

The fourth and in my view most important parallel between the classic middleman minority and the Singaporean state is the need to maintain a cultural difference vis-à-vis the larger "host society", while nevertheless benefiting from it

economically. “Middlemen minorities”, Bonacich writes, “[...] keep themselves apart from the societies in which they dwell, engage in liquidable occupations, are thrifty and organized economically. Hence, they come into conflict with the surrounding society yet are bound to it by economic success” (Bonacich 1973: 593, emphasis mine). The reason for this is simple: because they begin from virtually nothing, middleman minorities are only able to outcompete those around them by being culturally different from them – specifically, by being much more hard-working, and much thriftier. “For the overseas Chinese to allow their children to become part of the larger culture around them and absorb their values and behavior patterns”, Sowell observes, “would have been to have the family commit economic suicide”, as it would rid them of their competitive edge. “The same has been true of other middleman minorities around the world” (Sowell 2005a).

In Singapore, likewise, economic integration with and openness to the West has always been coupled with a strong insistence by the political leadership that the country must not become influenced by the West in terms of its cultural and social values – such as individualism, free expression, political pluralism, class conflict, and the like – as these are seen as antithetical to economic competitiveness and success. As Lee Kuan Yew put this point in 1988, when addressing the presence of US media in Singapore: “We allow their newspapers to sell in Singapore so that we can know what foreigners are reading about us. But we cannot allow them to assume a role in Singapore that the American media plays in America – that of invigilator, adversary, and inquisitor of the administration. If allowed to do so, they will radically change the nature of Singapore society” (Lee 1988). To that end, when PAP first took power in 1959, one of their first orders of business was to ban what they called “yellow culture”, a direct translation of the mandarin phrase for “decadent and degenerate behaviour” (Lim 2018: 33), mostly referring to Western culture, including pornography and rock’n’roll music. (Led Zeppelin was famously refused to play in Singapore because they would not adhere to the country’s ban against long hair; pornographic websites are still blocked in the country). In addition, many people will know about the country’s harsh drug laws – communicated to visitors via the words “DEATH TO DRUG TRAFFICERS” on the back of tourist visas – as well as its ban against chewing gum.

In 1991, this authoritarian approach to governance was officially given the name “Capitalism with Asian values”, and PAP released a white paper, entitled “Shared Values”, in which five “core values” of Singapore society were formulated: 1) nation before community and society above self, 2) family as the basic unit of society, 3) community support and respect for the individual, 4) consensus, not conflict, and 5) racial and religious harmony. This came three years after then deputy prime minister (and later prime minister) Goh Chok Tong had first warned that Singapore was becoming increasingly Westernized, and that the values of society were moving away from group cohesion toward what he called a “me first” kind of individualism (Goh 1988: 3). “[W]hy should we be concerned whether our value system is shifting towards individualism and away from group interests or communitarianism”, Goh asked in a speech to the PAP youth wing. “We are concerned because it will determine our national competitiveness, and hence our prosperity and survival as a nation” (ibid: 3). Along the same lines, a year later, then-President Wee Kim Wee spoke to parliament about Singapore’s need to develop “a national ideology”, as the country was becoming increasingly open to the West. He said:

Singapore is wide open to external influences [...] This openness has made us a cosmopolitan people, and put us in close touch with new ideas and technologies from abroad. But it has also exposed us to alien life-styles and values. Under this pressure, in less than a generation, attitudes and outlooks of Singaporeans, especially younger Singaporeans, have shifted. [...] If we are not to lose our bearings, we should preserve the cultural heritage of each of our communities, and uphold certain common values which capture the essence of being a Singaporean.⁶⁰

In this context, the year 1968 again stands out as a particularly important watershed moment in Singapore history. As we saw in the previous chapter, this was the year when Singapore consolidated its class compromise, through the passing of the two labour bills

⁶⁰ Parliamentary Debates (Hansard): Official Report, 9 Jan 1989, President’s Address, Vol. 52, column 13-14.

(the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act, and the Employment Act) together with the CPF bill. Globally, by contrast, 1968 was a year of massive protests, during which students and workers filled the streets of major capitalist countries around the world, challenging precisely the social democratic politics of consensus and compromise that had previously dominated, demanding more radical change – be it feminist, anti-racist, post-colonial, ecological, anti-imperialist, or coming from any other branch of the “New Left” (see Vinen 2018; Bertelsen & Rio 2018). Many of the protestors were inspired by Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse, who in his best-selling work argued that the material affluence of “advanced industrial societies” had brought about a “one-dimensional” culture, in which “people recognize themselves in their commodities”, and where “social control is anchored in the new needs which this has produced” (Marcuse 1964: 11; see also Kellner 1984: ch. 9). To the Singaporean leadership, these events and ideas provided clear evidence that the West could no longer be looked towards for inspiration, but instead had to be viewed as a cautionary tale – especially for a developing society like Singapore, which sought to impose social control over its population *precisely in order to achieve the level of material affluence enjoyed by the West* (see Barr 2000). As Lee said in a 1971 speech:

If they are to develop, people in new countries cannot afford to imitate the fads and fetishes of the contemporary West. The strange behaviour of demonstration and violence-prone young men and women in wealthy America, seen on TV and the newspapers, are not relevant to the social and economic circumstances of new underdeveloped countries. The importance of education, the need of stability and work discipline [...] these are vital factors for progress. (Quoted in Barr 2000: 319).

The most important break with these “fads and fetishes” of the West came in 1976 when PAP left the Socialist International, after the Dutch Labour Party (DLP) had presented a request to have PAP expelled. The request primarily concerned the fact that many of Singapore’s leading labour unionists were still in jail, having been put there during the 1963 “Operation Coldstore”. However, DLP also criticized Singapore for a number of

other issues, including the country's lack of press freedom, its lack of independent labour unions, its anti-labour legislation, and its use of detention without trial against the political opposition. "Singapore's 'wonder economy'", DLP wrote, "has been established by totalitarian policies and methods which have very little affinity with the principles of social democracy" (DLP 1976: 250). Hence, they said, "PAP's continue membership in the Socialist International serves no other purpose than to give the PAP regime international respectability and to give cover to its totalitarian policies" (ibid: 262).

In response to this, then secretary general of the NTUC, Devan Nair (later to become president, in 1981), presented a 73-pages long rebuttal, in which he offered what in his view were clear refutations of each point of criticism (Nair 1976). Most importantly, he drew attention to the fact that many of the writers whose views had been consulted by DLP "belong to the so-called New Left group" (ibid: 19), including Marxist scholars Malcolm Caldwell and Iain Buchanan. "It is important", Nair said, "that social democrats in Western Europe, who we assume, do not desire to be taken in by communist propaganda relating to the Third World, should be made aware of the distinctly pro-communist credentials of this group" (ibid: 19). In particular, he said, while social democratic parties in the West may have revised their position on collaborating with communists and other fellow travellers – "We know", Nair said for instance, "[...] that the social democratic government in Sweden sustains its precarious control of parliament by depending on the votes of some 19 communist deputies" (referring to *Vänsterpartiet Kommunisterna*, who at that time controlled nineteen seats in parliament, and whose support was necessary for the Social Democrats to secure a parliamentary majority) – this was not the case for PAP, who still viewed communism as an existential threat to the project of social democracy. Nair elaborated:

If some West European socialists desire to play poker with their own communists, we sincerely wish them good luck. For we think that they will require lots of luck. But we beg to opt out. [...] We cannot and will not permit the lunatic liberal fringes of West European social democratic parties to make common cause with our communists and fellow-travellers, and to tell us how we ought to run our affairs. We must therefore part

company with the Socialist International, and we propose to do so without so much as a farewell. (ibid: 70-71)

To underline this point, Nair published a book later that year, entitled *Socialism That Works: The Singapore Way*, in which he and a number of Singaporean leaders set out to counter in more detail the arguments that DLP had made (Nair 1976a). Among those contributing to the book was then minister of foreign affairs, S. Rajaratnam, who in his essay argued that the distinction between Singaporean and Western social democracy should not be made in terms of Europe versus Asia, West versus East, but in terms of Old Left versus New Left. “We have high regard for the achievements of Europe”, Rajaratnam wrote. “Our commitment to democratic socialism is a commitment to a European idea” (Rajaratnam 1976: 8). However, he added, “I could enumerate the many symptoms of sickness which today afflicts the West – drugs, sexual promiscuity, dropping out, the rash cults of unreason, and the glorification of violence. These are all manifestations associated with the New Left” (ibid: 9).

Along the same lines, Nair argued in his essay that there is “a fundamental fallacy in judging the third world on the basis of the standards, values and achievements of the advanced industrial nations of the West” (Nair 1976a: 97), since “neither the rulers nor the ruled in a developing society, if that society is to pull itself up by its own bootstraps as it were, can afford the looseness, the permissiveness and the downright licence which increasingly pass for ‘freedom’ in the Western world” (ibid: 98). Most importantly, Nair drew attention to what he saw as a fundamental hypocrisy of many Western critics, who in his view tended to elevate and universalize Western liberal democracy as the only acceptable form of society, while at the same time forgetting about the “mire and the muck from which the rose of Western industrial civilization has arisen”. As Nair saw it, this “mire and muck” included “the cruel exploitation of the labour of men, women and children (and the even more cruel exploitation of the subject peoples of the colonies), [...] which lie behind the material affluence and moral pretensions of the modern West.” He elaborated:

Also conveniently forgotten is the fact that large parts of the developing world still live with the technology of the pre-industrial Age. Nonetheless, they are expected to bypass the mire and the muck in which the modern West had its origins, and to telescope within a decade or two the technological breakthrough which took Western Europe a leisurely two centuries or so of unparalleled mass exploitation, poverty, and squalor, to achieve. (ibid: 98)

For these reasons, Nair thought, Singapore's status as a social democracy should not be evaluated on the basis of what social democracies look like in the contemporary West, but on the basis what the conditions of possibility are for social democracy in a post-colonial society like Singapore. "The brutal truth", Nair wrote, "is that no developing country can hope to overcome the most daunting problems of social and ethnic inequalities, and of mass unemployment, poverty and squalor, and make its way into the technological Age without individual and societal discipline, curbs on population growth, [and] accumulation of savings for investment whether by consent or by enforcement [...]" (ibid: 98, emphasis mine). Hence, he argued, while Western commentators may think that they are standing up for universal values when criticizing Singapore, they are in fact condemning Singapore to an unrealistic choice between survival and (Western) morality, as there is no way for Singapore to do what is necessary economically while at the same time adhering to all the demands of Western critics. "We in Singapore", Nair said, "had thought that the choice for social democrats in our part of the world was clear-cut and unambiguous in the minds of our counterparts in the developed West". However, "there would appear to be elements among Western European social democrats who find us wanting, because we decline to do precisely those things which would facilitate a communist takeover" (ibid: 99). Rajaratnam concurred: Singapore, he wrote, is "punished for being successful" (Rajaratnam 1976: 6) by Westerners who "persist in the belief that as Europeans it is [their] unquestionable responsibility to whip the heathens along the path of righteousness" (ibid: 8)

From this, I contend, we may easily read the notion of "capitalism with Asian values" as the MM state equivalent of the "clannishness" that has typically been ascribed to middleman minorities. Like the classic middleman minority, the concern

that occupied the first generation of Singaporean leaders was to make sure that economic development did not bring with it an adoption of the values and behaviour patterns of the “host society”. Not surprisingly, therefore, while Singapore’s economic success has been met with lots of admiration from Western observers, it has also generated lots of hostility, as Singapore has been criticized for having achieved its economic success in an unacceptable way. As a consequence, like the classic middleman minority, the MM state has found it necessary to not only convince its own population of the need to remain different from the “host society”, but also to convince the “host society” that they have a *right* to be different.

As an example of the latter, when Lee Hsien Loong was asked in an interview by the BBC what he would do “if the government of Britain were to make linkages between a trade deal [with Singapore] and seeking guarantees about human rights, press freedoms, workers’ rights, demonstrators’ rights in this country”, he gave the following response:

You look at the Americans. They don’t lack fervour in moral causes. They promote democracy, freedom of speech, women’s’ rights, gay rights, sometimes even transgender rights, but you don’t see them applying that universally across the world, with all their allies. Yes they do it where the cost is low, and then you can take a high position. But you look at some of the most important oil producing countries in the world. Do they conform? Have they been pressured? You have to do business! The world is a diverse place. Nobody has a monopoly on virtue or wisdom. And unless we can accept that, and we prosper together, and cooperate together, accepting our differences – differences in values, differences in outlooks, differences even in what we see the goals of life to be – I think it becomes difficult. (BBC 2017-03-01)

Like the classic middleman minority, then, the MM state claims the right to be economically integrated with the “host society” while remaining culturally segregated from it. And like the classic middleman minority, the MM state worries that it might be punished for this, as the MM state represents an easy target whenever the majority group

wishes to engage in a cheap act of moral grandstanding. “This is the next challenge for the government and the Party”, Goh concluded his 1988 speech to the PAP youth wing. “We are part of a long Asian civilization and we should be proud of it. We should not be assimilated by the West, and become a pseudo-Western society” (Goh 1988: 5-6).

The fifth and last parallel between the classic middleman minority and the Singaporean state that I will mention – though a few more could surely be imagined⁶¹ – is an often-noticed aspect about both, namely their educational achievements, and in particular their shared dedication to a smaller set of “more difficult and rewarding fields, such as science, medicine, and law” (Sowell 2008: 95). Among middleman minorities, the most obvious example of this is the outstanding academic performance of the Jews, who despite their small numbers have won more Nobel prizes than any other group, and who throughout history have been generally “over-represented among the leading figures in such fields as mathematics, the sciences, and philosophy” (ibid: 109). The Jews, however, are by no means the only middleman minority to have distinguished themselves in this way. For instance, in their work on what they call the “Asian American achievement paradox”, Zhou and Lee describe how children of Asian American immigrants tend to evaluate their academic achievements “on an ‘Asian scale’ in which an A-minus is an ‘Asian F’”, noting how in many areas of the US, “academic achievement has moved beyond the province of White Americans, and is now racially coded as ‘the Asian thing’ or ‘acting Asian’” (Zhou & Lee 2017: 11). Likewise, Sowell describes how Armenian students in the Ottoman empire “were found to perform not only better than students in Turkish schools but even wrote better in the Ottoman Turkish language than their Turkish counterparts” (Sowell 2008: 95). Others have noticed similar patterns among Nigerian-Americans (e.g. Smith; see also Stokes *et al* 2015; Kitano 1974).

According to Sowell, what explains this strong focus on education among middleman minorities is primarily the fact that, as communities, they have always been at risk of being expropriated by the majority groups among whom they live, and/or

⁶¹ Some obvious candidates would be: a strong focus on family values (see Barr 2000); ideology and mythology of upward mobility; patriarchal leadership; and a combination of modernism and traditionalism (see Teo 2005).

forced to flee the land. Due to “centuries of a history of being victims of spoliation and confiscation, as well as being forced by mob violence or official expulsion to flee and leave much of their wealth behind”, Sowell writes, middleman minorities have developed a “tendency to invest in highly mobile capital – intellectual skills being the ultimate in portability – rather than in fixtures that could not move” (Sowell 2008: 107).

Similarly, because Singapore came into being as a nation after having been kicked out of Malaysia, the nation’s most formative experience was literally one of being *expelled from the land* – having to survive on its own, and without any natural resources. Like the classic middleman minority, therefore, the Singaporean leadership was early on forced to understand investments into education as not just a luxury to be paid for by the productive economy, but as a way “to develop Singapore’s only natural resource, its people”, as Lee Kuan Yew put it (quoted in Yiannouka 2015). To that end, the first generation of leaders in Singapore made sure that, as the country industrialized, large parts of the economic surplus was invested in education (Quah 1977: 212-213). And like the classic middleman minority, they prioritized subjects like mathematics, science and engineering, as these were understood to give students “the knowledge and skills needed in an industrialising economy” (Deng & Gopinathan 2016: 454).

This link between lack of resources and educational achievement is confirmed by a 2015 OECD report. It observes that there exists “a significantly negative relationship between the money countries earn from their natural resources and the knowledge and skills of their school population”, speculating that the reason for this might be “that in countries with little in the way of natural resources – such as Finland, Japan and Singapore – education is highly valued, and produces strong outcomes, at least partly because the public at large has understood that the country must live by its knowledge and skills, and that these depend on the quality of education” (Schleicher & Tang 2015: 10).

Today, Singapore’s education system consistently places at the top of international rankings, such as the PISA (not surprisingly scoring the highest in mathematics); and its main university, Singapore National University, has for many years ranked as the top university in Asia, as well as in the top 20 of universities in the

world (QS World University Ranking). In addition to this, the state offers generous scholarships to talented students who wish to study abroad at prestigious universities, who in return have to work a certain number of years for the state (two years for every year of study). Because of this, most politicians and civil servants in Singapore come from highly educated and elite backgrounds, including its three prime ministers: Lee Hsien Loong, who got his BA in mathematics and computer science from Cambridge (graduating at the top of his class in mathematics, becoming the first and to date only Singaporean “senior wrangler”), and who also has a master’s degree in public administration from Harvard; Goh Chok Tong, who got his BA in economics from NUS and also has an MA in developmental economics from Williams College, Massachusetts; and Lee Kuan Yew, who received his law degree from Cambridge University, finishing at the top of his class. As Bellows writes, “Elite in the Singapore context is concerned first with academic excellence and then job accomplishment. [...] All ministers hold university degrees. Two are medical doctors and two lawyers. Eighteen have earned degrees overseas” (Bellows 2009: 27).

Another – less obvious, though in my view just as important – reason why middleman minorities and the MM state have both prioritized education, is because education provides yet another avenue for instilling a sense of shared identity and belonging in the community. “As communities determined to maintain their own values and work ethic without allowing their children to be influenced by the very different values they often found in the societies around them,” Sowell writes (2005: 92), “middleman minorities have often had their own social institutions, including their own private schools”. In Singapore, of course, no analogous need to set up private schools to compete with the schools of the “host society” exists, as Singapore is a sovereign nation-state. Like the middleman minority, however, the Singaporean state understood early on that education was an important tool not just for teaching young people the skills needed to compete in the global economy, but also for teaching them the values of their own community. As Deng and Gopinathan write:

[I]n response to heightened social tensions that accompanied massive socio-economic change, the government introduced civics and citizenship education to help students understand the purpose and importance of nation building, cultivate their civic responsibilities, and teach them to appreciate the desirable elements of both Eastern and Western traditions. The emphasis was on the responsibilities of citizenship – rather than citizen rights – and the promotion of a communitarian mind set. (Deng & Gopinathan 2016: 455)

For newly independent Singapore, this was particularly effective, as the population was at the time very young, and therefore highly susceptible to ideological moulding by the government. As Quah noted in a 1977 paper, “given the fact that more than half the population is below 21 years of age [...] the schools and the teachers have a crucial role to play not only in imparting the necessary skills for an industrializing and modern Singapore but also in inculcating those values among the school children that will ensure their loyalty and commitment to the nation” (Quah 1977: 212). For that reason, schooldays in Singapore always begin with the students gathering in the courtyard to collectively recite the national pledge – “We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people ...” – and to sing the national anthem, *Majulah Singapura* (“Onward, Singapore”). From this perspective, education may be understood as not only an important tool of economic ascension, but as a crucial mechanism for overcoming the main contradiction of the middleman minority position – namely, to remain both integrated into and segregated from the “host society” – as it serves to both integrate the community economically into the “host society”, while at the same time segregating them culturally and socially from it.⁶²

⁶² In her doctoral dissertation, Teo suggests that a similar function is played by PAP’s family policy, which she argues is designed to overcome the contradiction between tradition and modernity that characterizes the Singaporean state – in particular, the contradiction between pursuing developmental policies that undermine tradition, on the one hand, and claiming to preserve and protect traditional values, on the other. Singaporeans, Teo writes, have been conditioned to “see the main problems of development as such: Singapore must continually develop economically because it is the basis of the nation’s existence, but this process brings about certain social problems such as the disintegration of ‘good values.’ Although the state’s family policies are imperfect, it is perceived as the only agent capable of both successfully leading the nation in the quest of economic wealth, and ensuring that ‘good values’ are ‘retained.’ For my respondents, realistic alternatives to the current state’s approach are sorely lacking and what matters is that the state is trying the best it knows how. Hence, despite

Conclusion: Middleman minority and social democracy

The importance of the concept of the MM state that I introduced in this chapter is twofold. First, it provides an account of the Singaporean state that does all the explanatory work of the term “neoliberalism”, while avoiding the mental gymnastics that proponents of the neoliberal interpretation are forced into as they have to explain how an illiberal state that has a hand in almost all aspects of economic and social life is nevertheless to be understood as “neoliberal”. The MM state is built around the same market-ethos as neoliberalism – “all you have is yourself” and “the world does not owe you a living” – but it applies this ethos to society as a whole, rather than to the individuals within it.

Second, the MM state-concept provides a model for understanding Singapore’s form of social democracy, as the MM state represents a hybrid between traditional social democracy and the classic middleman minority – combining the corporatist state-making of traditional social democracy with the values and behaviour patterns of the middleman minority. Since I have already discussed at length the problem of understanding Singapore as a neoliberal society, I will concentrate this concluding section on this second point. After that, in an interlude chapter between this one and the next, I will outline what I see as the main problem of the MM state, which is its over-reliance on trust between people and state. This will provide a segue to the three chapters based on participant observation, which will all deal with the problem of trust in the MM state, particularly as it manifests in the activist call to “Return Our CPF”, and in the ensuing legal battle that they had to fight against the state.

As I argued in the previous chapter, the fundamental logic of social democracy consists in the attempt to overcome the prisoners’ dilemma of capitalism by striking a compromise between capital and labour, whereby zero-sum class conflict is replaced with cooperation in pursuit of positive-sum increases of wealth; and as I noticed, the main problem that traditional social democracy faces in the era of globalization is that,

their ambiguous feelings toward the state, they think the state must continue to intervene to shape the Singaporean family.” (Teo 2005: 37).

as capital becomes increasingly able to relocate production to countries offering better terms and conditions, labour finds it correspondingly more difficult to strike a functional compromise with capital, as the newfound mobility of capital drives the bargaining power of labour towards zero. When we look at middleman minorities, I have argued in this chapter, what we find are communities that have all in various ways managed to solve precisely this problem, only writ small, namely: how to overcome the prisoners dilemma of capitalism *in a situation where you cannot control the economy through political means, but have to do so as a small unit existing within a greater economic whole, over which you have little or no political power.*

Writing in 1993, this was precisely how Swedish labour economist Rudolph Meidner understood the problem, when observing that Swedish social democracy “has fulfilled its purpose well in a singular phase of Swedish history but must step down as a driving force as Sweden becomes just a small part of a large block of capitalist states”. Here, what the middleman minority shows us is that, while globalization may have undermined the ability of traditional social democracy to overcome the prisoners’ dilemma of capitalism, this does not mean that there is *no way* for social democracy to do so, so long as it is willing to adapt to changing circumstances. Specifically, in order for social democracy to survive the transition to a globalized economy, it must learn to ask a new set of questions. No longer its traditional question: what rules should be imposed on the (domestic) market in order that capitalism will generate favourable outcomes for labour? But instead the inverse: what rules should be imposed *on labour* in order that they will be able to achieve favourable outcomes in the (global) market? What norms and behaviours should be encouraged and enforced in order that labour (and the nation as a whole) will be able to survive and thrive in a market that it cannot control or direct? Traditional social democracy largely evolved in response to the first question, and therefore provides few answers to this latter set of questions. By contrast, middleman minorities evolved in response to precisely the latter set of questions, and have as a result developed many ways of answering them in practice.

This, then, is how I propose that we understand the Singaporean state/MM state: as an updated version of the social democratic state – one that *scales up the logic of the*

middleman minority to the level of state-making, and in so doing, adapts social democracy to globalization.

Why however should the MM state be regarded as a form of social democracy, and not simply as an altogether new state formation, called the “MM state”? As I see it, there are two answers to that question. First, this is how the MM state self-identifies. From the very beginning, as the MM state formulated the policies and institutions that scaled up of the logic of middleman minority to the level of state-making, it did so in terms of adapting the project of social democracy to the reality of globalization, and not in terms of building an MM state. As one reads, for instance, in a 1973 policy paper tabled at the PAP party conference, entitled “Singapore’s concept of socialism”:

Democratic socialism in the seventies needs to be redefined. [...] Without mincing words people must be told that initial development can only be brought at the price of some discomfort and the tightening of belts. Development in the long term means sacrifice and restraint in the quest for a better tomorrow. [...] In these circumstances, economic development must have priority over other less urgent problems of nation-building. And even if we appear to be materialistic in the face of those who criticize us for temporarily giving priority to the spiritual aspects of life, we should never be deterred in our goal of meeting the needs of development. (People’s Action Party 1973: 95-96)

On the basis of our understanding of the classic middleman minority, the fact that the MM state does not self-identify as an MM state is only to be expected. As Sowell writes, the reason why middleman minorities exhibit such similar behaviour patterns across the world is not because they have consciously emulated each other, but because the economic niche of middleman minority *selects for certain kinds of people and not others*: those with long time horizons over those with short; those who save over those who spend; hard and disciplined workers over “[b]rawling drunkards and live-for-the-moment individuals” (Sowell 2005: 99); etc.

In the same way, I contend, the reason why the MM state shares so many traits with the classic middleman minority is not primarily because it seeks to scale up the logic of middleman minority to the level of state-making (although Singapore's history as a middleman minority centre certainly did not hurt). Instead, it is because the economic niche that the MM state occupies – of being a social democracy operating in a globalized economy – is structurally similar to that which has traditionally been occupied by the middleman minority, only writ large. To ask whether the MM state is best described as an MM state or as a social democracy is therefore the same as asking whether Jewish or Chinese middleman minorities are best described as Jews or Chinese, or as middleman minorities. Both are true statements, but represent different levels of analysis: in all cases, the underlying pattern is that of the middleman minority; yet that pattern never reveals itself as such, but only in the form of specific communities who do not themselves identify as middleman minorities – such as “the Chinese”, “the Jews”, or, in our case, a social democratic state set up on the basis of the global economy. The term middleman minority is in all cases used to describes the values and behaviour patterns that are shared across these groups, even as they self-describe differently. *They look alike because they all solve the same basic problem.*

The second reason why the MM state is in my view best regarded as a social democracy is that, if we look past the superficial differences that exist between the MM state and traditional social democracy, we find that both are engaged in the same sort of project, only applied to different contexts. Both the MM state and traditional social democracy seek to overcome the prisoners' dilemma of capitalism. And for both, this crucially involves a) convincing labour that it is in their long-term interests to “consent to exploitation” in the short term (i.e. to delay gratification), and b) setting up a centralized system of wage bargaining through which capital and labour are able to compromise on their opposing interests, under the close supervision of the state. Put differently, what ultimately unites the MM state and traditional social democracy is on the one hand a rejection of *laissez-faire* economics (including neoliberalism), and on the other hand an affirmation of the corporatist view that unless a strong state is able to subordinate the factional interests of capital and labour under the “national interest”,

capitalist society will forever be stuck in the prisoners' dilemma of zero-sum conflict between capital and labour.

The difference between the MM state and traditional social democracy is *the situation in which this corporatist compromise is to be struck*: either, a situation in which labour is in a position to use its strength of organized numbers to force capital into compliance with its demands (as in traditional social democracy); or a situation in which capital is in a position to undermine the bargaining position of labour by threatening to move production elsewhere (as in the MM state). Here, my point is simple: if we are to understand social democracy in terms of a commitment to class compromise, then we cannot also define social democracy in terms of the particular class compromise that was struck in the West during the "golden age of social democracy", because if we do, social democracy will no longer be understood in terms of compromise, but as a dogmatic set of policies insisted on *under the guise of class compromise*.

When Singapore left the socialist international in 1976, this was precisely the issue at stake: should Singapore's deviation from the social democratic norm be read as a sign that the country cannot be counted among the coalition of social democracies? Or should it, on the contrary, be read as a sign that Singapore is not only social democratic, but more social democratic than traditional social democracies, as Singapore's deviation from the norm shows its willingness to apply the principle of compromise to novel conditions?

According to DLP, who took the former view, the main reason why the Singaporean state could not be regarded as social democratic was because its form of class compromise was based on curbing the demands of organized labour in favour of the demands of capital, rather than the other way around. In their view, this "disqualifies [the Singaporean state] categorically from being called 'social democratic'". "Singapore's economic growth", they wrote, "is built upon economic disparities and the PAP has done nothing to bring about effective democratic control of the economy by the people. On the contrary the repression perpetrated against independent trade unionism prevents economic democracy from being realized". And so, they concluded,

rather than a social democracy, “PAP presides over something which resembles a corporate state” (ibid: 250).

According to PAP, on the other hand, the main problem with this critique was that, had PAP done all that DLP criticized them for not doing, the end result would not have been a better (more liberal) social democracy, but a complete inability to set up any kind of social democracy at all. Hence, PAP thought, a choice had to be made, not between a better (liberal) and a worse (illiberal) form of social democracy, but between two suboptimal alternatives. Either, to insist that Singaporean social democracy should look exactly like Western social democracy – in which case it would have been impossible to attract the necessary foreign investment. Or, to deviate from the Western script in order to attract foreign investment – in which case Singapore would be denounced by Western social democrats as insufficiently liberal/democratic. There were simply no other alternatives. As one reads, again, in the 1973 policy paper:

It was not well understood by Asian nationalists that the nineteenth century socialism of Europe from which they drew their emotional and intellectual inspiration was designed to cope with societies beginning their first industrial revolution in a vastly different world economic setting. [...] Singapore has invited and continues to invite foreign capital. No apologies are made for this approach even as the PAP holds steadfast to the principles of democratic socialism. The party is not moved by the blandishments of some socialists who interpret this as neo-colonialism. (People’s Action Party 1973: 99)

In this way, what ultimately informed Singapore’s claim to being a social democracy was the notion that, in order to stay true to the social democratic ideal of compromise, it was necessary to not be dogmatic about the exact form of that compromise, but to adapt it to the circumstances at hand. That is, to compromise about the nature of compromise.

To sum up, then, the reason why the Singaporean state is best understood as a hybrid between traditional social democracy and the classic middleman minority is that

while neither of these provide a perfect model for the kind of society that Singapore represents, they do provide partial models that, when put together, provide something of a composite model. On the one hand, the classic middleman minority provides a model for how to overcome the prisoners dilemma of capitalism in a situation where you have to do so as a small unit existing within a greater economic whole, over which you have little or no political power; the problem, however, is that the classic middleman minority only provides a model for how to do so *at the scale of an ethnic minority living within a host society*. On the other hand, traditional social democracy provides a scale-appropriate model for how to overcome the prisoners dilemma of capitalism; the problem is that it only provides a model for how to do so *in a situation where the state is able to exert significant control over the economy*. As a result, what neither is capable of providing on its own, the two are capable of providing together – namely, a model for how the state can overcome the prisoners dilemma of capitalism in a situation where it is no longer capable of controlling the market from without, but has to adapt to it from within.⁶³ Insofar as the Singaporean MM state has been successful, it is because it has been able to do precisely this.

⁶³ For this reason, any attempt to export the “Singapore model” of social democracy to other places will be fraught with difficulty, as it is not possible to export or replicate the socio-cultural foundation on top of which the institutional structure of Singapore’s social democracy is built. However, as PAP pointed out in their policy paper, the “basic principles can be profitably applied elsewhere with modifications” – such as “the premium placed on optimal development”, “the acquisition of skills and the ability to organize”, “[d]iscipline, integrity and hard work”, all of which “are assets which any people can tap if they make up their minds to do so.”

Interlude:

The Problem of Trust in the MM State

“The essential principle of totalitarianism is to make laws that are impossible to obey.”

- Christopher Hitchens,
2007

Two forms of trust

In the previous chapter, I described what the MM state is, and why it might be successful in overcoming the prisoner’s dilemma of capitalism in a situation of globalized capitalism. In this short interlude-chapter, I will ask what the weakness of such a state formation might be. I already said that it has to do with trust; I will now explain what I mean by that.

As we’ve seen, in both traditional social democracy and the MM state, the social contract between people and state is based on a dual transfer of wealth, where money is first transferred from the citizens to the state, and then returned to the citizens in some form. The difference is the terms of those transfers: in what form does the state promise to return the money; when; and how? In traditional social democracy, the promise is that by capturing a portion of national incomes in taxes, the state is able to set up a “de-commodified” sector of the economy in which goods and services are distributed according to citizens’ needs, rather than their ability to pay. In the MM state, by contrast, the promise is primarily that by capturing a large portion of national incomes as

mandatory savings, the state is able to maximize its own competitiveness as a corporation, and to share the wealth that it generates with its share-holding citizens.

Comparing these two models, it is on the one hand clear why the MM state is much more resilient in the face of globalization, compared to traditional social democracy, as there exists no obvious contraction between its model of welfare and an increasingly globalized economy, as the MM state functions as a globally competitive corporation. On the other hand, in order for the MM state's model of corporate welfare to work, it is necessary for the citizens to place an immense amount of trust in the state to invest their money on their behalf.

In one sense, this trust is not altogether different from the trust that citizens in a traditional social democracy have to place in the state to invest their tax-money on behalf of them. The difference is that, in traditional social democracy, this trust does not for the most part extend beyond the fiscal year, during which the state invests the citizens' money in the public sector, where the citizens get their money back in the form of public goods and services. In the MM state, by contrast, the investments that the state makes on behalf of its citizens are made for the long-term benefit of the state as a corporation. Hence, rather than being used to pay for public goods and services that the citizens get to enjoy here and now, the citizens' money is invested into the state's various for-profit operations, which use the money on the promise that this will serve the long term interests of the citizens as share-holders in the national corporation.

Early on, Lee Kuan Yew discussed this issue of trust in terms of avoiding what he called "the temptations of the moment", by which he meant the temptation of politicians to use the power of the state to pursue their own selfish and short-term interests, rather than the higher goals that they were put into power to pursue. As one of his earliest biographers, Alex Josey, summarized his thinking on this topic:

[R]ather than trying to revolutionize the state's economy, the PAP "retained the purity of its ultimate beliefs, and resisted the temptations of the moment" by endeavouring to redistribute the rewards of labour in a capitalist system through social welfare, educational opportunities, housing, and a raising of the standard of living. By

“temptations of the moment” Lee meant corruption, which he considers to be inherent in the capitalist system, and which, in his view, “buys politicians”, and enables “those in authority to establish a paradise for themselves”. This, according to Lee, is what happened in many of the newly independent countries. But not in Singapore. Here, he said, “democratic socialists could be proud of having worked the capitalist system efficiently”. (Josey 1968: 48-49)

Not surprisingly, throughout Singapore’s history, the issue of anti-corruption has come to be very much at the centre of political discourse. Most importantly, and somewhat counterintuitively, PAP has used this issue as the basis for why Singapore must be led by the same “team” uninterrupted, on the argument that the integrity of Singapore’s model of governance lies not so much with its institutions – in checks and balances, say – but with the moral integrity of its leaders, who should not be replaced willy-nilly, as Singapore is simply too small to support competing elites. “Ideally”, Lee Kuan Yew said in a 2005 interview, “we should have Team A, Team B, equally balanced, so that we can have a swap and the system will run”. However, “We have not been able to do this in Singapore because our population is only 4 million, and the people at the top, with proven track records not just in ability, but in character, determination, commitment will not be more than 2,000” (*Time Magazine* 2005-12-12). A decade later, former prime minister Goh Chok Tong drew the logical conclusion of this view. “We are our own check”, he said. “The integrity of our leaders, of our MPs – that’s where the check comes from. Not this seductive line of ‘check and balance’” (Tan 2015). In response to this, oppositional politician Pritam Singh famously summarized PAP’s philosophy of government as “ownself check ownself”.⁶⁴ Along the same lines, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong published an article in 2016, in which he argued that the key to Singapore’s success has been PAP’s staunch commitment to anti-corruption. “In the end”, he wrote,

⁶⁴ Singh made this comment in an election rally speech during the 2015 general elections. It can be viewed online here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4q4_zb6uME. The seemingly strange grammar of the concept, “ownself check ownself”, is Singlish, which Singh uses jokingly.

what decided the issue [of whether or not to seek power] for Mr Lee Kuan Yew, our founding Prime Minister, and his team was the overriding need to prevent the public service from going corrupt. *One term of an incompetent, corrupt government and Humpty Dumpty could never be put together again.* So the PAP fought to win and formed the Government. When they took their oath of office, Mr Lee and his PAP colleagues wore white shirts and white trousers. It symbolised their determination to keep the Government clean and incorruptible. That has set the tone for Singapore ever since. (Lee 2016, emphasis mine)

From this, we get the second aspect of the trust-equation, which is that in order to make sure that the state remains in the hands of the same “self-checking” elite, the government has equipped itself with a set of laws that depart in some important ways from the liberal principle of rule of law, operating instead what some scholars have called a system of rule *by* law (Rajah 2012; Tremewan 1994: 194ff; Jayasuriya 1996: 367ff). As Hayek defined this difference long ago, rule of law does not merely mean that the state rules on the basis of laws, as that would mean that the state could pass a law that says that anything that the state does is legal, thus effectively legalizing “what to all intents and purposes remains arbitrary action” (Hayek 2001: 86). Instead, Hayek says, rule of law must mean “that the government in all its actions is bound by rules fixed and announced beforehand – rules which make it possible to foresee with fair certainty how the authority will use its coercive powers in given circumstances, and to plan one’s individual affairs on the basis of” (ibid: 75).

On this definition, Singapore, like most other systems of government, operates a hybrid system, in which social life is governed partly by rule of law, partly rule by law. Unlike many other systems, however, Singapore’s system is a hybrid that tilts strongly in favour of the latter, as rule by law “has a far deeper legal tradition in Singapore than ‘rule of law’” (Rajah 2012: 52). The clearest example of this, no doubt, is the Internal Security Act (ISA), which the state took over from the colonial government’s emergency legislation, and which grants the government the power to imprison anyone indefinitely without trial if he or she is thought to be a threat to national security. In addition to this catch-all law, however, there are a bunch of smaller laws that are all so

vague and broad in their definition that they would be impossible to enforce universally, unless half the country or so is to be found guilty of a crime. These include a public order act which defines “public assembly” (requiring a special permit) as one person or more; a sedition act which defines seditious as any material “having a seditious tendency”; an internet code of practice which defines “prohibited content” as material that is objectionable “on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by applicable Singapore laws”; a law against “wounding the religious or racial feelings of others” that criminalizes any speech deemed offensive to any religion or race; a film act that criminalizes any “party political film”, defined broadly as any film “which is made by any person and directed towards any political end in Singapore”; and many other laws like that (see Human Rights Watch 2017).

Using Hayek’s definition, these laws all fail to live up to the standard of rule of law, as they do not provide clear “‘rules of the game’ which enable individuals to foresee how the coercive apparatus of the state will be used” (Hayek 2001: 86). On the contrary, they set out rules that are either impossible to follow, or very hard to know if one is in breach of at any given moment. Hence, their effect is not to limit the coercive apparatus of the state, but to free the state from most conventional constraints, as the state can choose to *selectively enforce* any of these vague/broad laws whenever it wishes to clamp down on its citizens. Specifically, because many of these laws deal with actions relating to political activity – such as sedition, public gathering, public speaking, display of flags, etc. – they make it very difficult to organize oppositional politics in Singapore without attracting criminal charges. As a result, much of oppositional politics consists in having to fight legal battles, where activists have to both try to win the legal argument *and* make the political argument that the decision to enforce the law was politically rather than legally motivated (a dynamic we will encounter in the following chapters).

In this, trust again becomes a highly important variable. In a system that operates strictly according to the principle of rule of law, trust should ideally play little or no role in the relation between people and state, as the law limits state action just as much as it

limits individual action (or at least does so in principle). The further one moves away from this liberal principle and towards the authoritarian principle of rule by law, however, the more will the law become a matter of trusting the government not to misuse its powers, as there will now always be some law that the state can decide to selectively enforce, should a particular citizen become an inconvenience. (This is of course a continuum; no state is at either extreme, but more or less towards either side.)

For the individual citizen in Singapore, this means that if she wishes to avoid being prosecuted by the state, it is not enough to simply “follow the law”. Instead, she will have to navigate a vague and ambiguous landscape of unwritten rules which regulate *whether or not the law will actually be enforced*. Žižek uses the term “metarules” to talk about such unwritten rules, noting how “[o]ne of the strategies of totalitarian regimes is to have legal regulations (criminal laws) so severe that, if taken literally, everyone is guilty of something and then to withdraw from their full enforcement” (Žižek 2008: 675). In Singapore, the term most commonly used for this type of unwritten rules is “out-of-bounds markers” – or “OB markers”, for short – referring to “areas where civil society activists [and others] dare not venture because they are deemed too politically sensitive and thus ‘out-of-bounds’” (Lyons & Gomez 2005: 128; see also Cheong 2012). For people in the political arena, these OB-markers are in many ways the real laws, as they set out the real parameters for what is and is not allowed. In contrast to formal laws, however, the OB markers operate strictly on the basis of trust, as they are not specified in any legal documents, nor possible to challenge in a court of law. Instead, they embody *an informal promise by the government that the law will only be enforced against those who in some general sense “deserve it”* – meaning, those whose political opinions and actions constitute a threat to the “national interest”, as defined by the government – *and withdrawn in all other cases*.

The sixth parallel

In this, we come upon what I view as the sixth and last important parallel between the classic middleman minority and the MM state, which is that both tend to organize themselves internally on the basis of trust, while relying on the formal legal system only

when dealing with outsiders. As Sowell observes, one of the most important competitive advantages that middleman minorities have typically enjoyed vis-à-vis their host societies is the fact that strong ingroup trust has enabled middleman minorities “to conduct business with one another at lower costs because of less need to resort to precautions before making transactions or to the formal legal system afterwards, both of which can be costly and time-consuming” (Sowell 2005: 89). Similarly, in the MM state, while rule of law is strongly insisted on as far as interactions with foreign investors are concerned – as foreign investors will only invest their money in Singapore if they can be sure that their investments will not all of a sudden be seized by the state, or otherwise affected by sudden changes in the law (see Silverstein 2008; Lee 2007; Shanmugam 2012: 358) – rule of law is equally much suspended in the political relation between people and state, as this gives the state much greater flexibility in terms of how to govern.

To capture this Janus-faced nature of Singapore’s legal system, Rajah uses the term “dual state legality”. By this, she means that the Singaporean state “matches the ‘law’ of the liberal ‘West’ in the commercial arena while repressing civil and political individual rights” in the political arena. “The bifurcation of Singapore’s legal system”, she writes, “is so distinct that the Canadian courts have recently specified that Singapore courts have parity with Canadian courts in commercial matters, a specification that might be seen as implicit acknowledgement of different standards in other realms of ‘law’” (Rajah 2012: 23). Similarly, Jayasuriya observes that although Singapore’s leaders often claim that rule of law “is one of the defining features of the Singapore state”, this claim “applies selectively to the economic or commercial sphere”, whereas the political arena “is regulated by executive prerogative power” (Jayasuriya 2001: 121).

Translated into my terms, this is precisely the middleman minority tactic scaled up to the level of state. The MM state operates within the “host society” (the global market) according to its rules as far as trade is concerned, but operates internally according to much more flexible and informal rules. And like the classic middleman minority, the MM state benefits from the fact that ingroup flexibility and informality

provides a great competitive advantage when operating in a rules-based market populated mostly by rules-based organizations (in the case of the MM state, other liberal-democratic nation states). For this reason, it is not surprising that when Deng Xiaoping embarked on his “open door policy” in 1978, his main inspiration came from Singapore. Previously, Singapore had been referred to as “the running dog of imperialism” in CCP propaganda (see Lim & Horesh 2016). As China was opening up to the West, however, Singapore’s model appeared a suitable replacement for Marxism-Leninism, as it allowed China to maintain political authoritarianism while opening up to free market capitalism. “I went to Singapore to understand aspects of how they utilized foreign capital”, Deng said in a statement. “Foreigners established factories in Singapore and Singaporeans reaped several benefits [...] We must develop this resolve, weigh and be clear about the pros and cons, and do it even if it means suffering some minor losses” (quoted in *ibid*: 998; see also Chen 2019). The difference, of course, is that China is not a middleman state, but an aspiring superpower; hence, China will be much more likely to use political means to control the global economy (“host society”), whereas the MM state is defined (in part) by its inability to do so.

In this, however, we also come across the greatest weakness of the MM state, which is that trust in the state is very much a double-edged sword. Insofar as the state is in a position to know what the national interest is, and can be trusted to act on its behalf, giving the state the legal power to do more or less anything that serves that interest is clearly a strength, as it allows the state to pursue the national interest unimpeded by any “rules announced beforehand” – thus allowing the state to stake out a properly long-term course of action. The problem, however, is that such a system will equally – and over time, it seems, more likely – serve the interests of a state that has become entirely self-serving, at which point *the very thing that was previously a strength will reveal itself to be a great weakness*, as the state will now be able to pursue its own self-interest unencumbered by most of the legal constraints that would otherwise protect the people from a tyrant (e.g. checks and balances, rule of law, etc.).

According to the activists we will meet in the following chapters, this latter possibility is not a hypothetical risk-scenario, but the reality of Singapore today. And

according to them, the CPF has been the main vehicle through which the state has pursued its self-interested agenda of profits over people. We turn to them now.

Chapter 5:

“Something Bears an Uncanny Resemblance...”

Roy Ngerng, and the Case Against the CPF

“They took your money, they took your life. It’s no joke. And if you are still sitting down and if you still think you can choose to turn a blind eye, then my friend, you have lost it. [...] They cannot rob us and get away with it.”

- Roy Ngerng, 2013

Introduction

In his seminal essay *The Gift*, anthropologist Marcel Mauss introduced the term “total social fact” to describe social phenomena that are “at the same time juridical, economic, religious, and even aesthetic and morphological, etc.” (Mauss 2002: 101), and in which “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time” (ibid: 3). For Mauss, this referred specifically to the gift-exchanges found in so-called “archaic societies”, which in his view represented not just institutions among other, but rather *meta-institutions* – institutions gathering various social institutions and practices within them, and bringing to life their interconnection in concrete form. For instance, Mauss argued, in order to understand the institution of the *potlach* found among American Indians, one cannot look at it as an exclusively religious, economic, or political affair. Instead, one has to look at it as an instance of social life during which the boundaries between such social categories are broken down and experienced “as they are” –

namely, as parts of a greater societal whole which can ultimately only be understood in terms of itself. “It is by considering the whole entity”, Mauss wrote, “that we could perceive what is essential, the way everything moves, the living aspect, the fleeting moment when society, or men, become sentimentally aware of themselves and of their situation in relation to others” (ibid: 102). The problem, of course, is that one cannot study “the whole entity” – society as a whole – in any direct way. However, Mauss suggested, by studying total social facts, the researcher is given a unique opportunity to study “the general functioning of society”, as total social facts represent moments during which society becomes, as it were, self-aware – visible in its totality (or at least approximately so) to both its members and to the anthropologist, and therefore possible to study through participant observation. “Thus one succeeds in seeing the social ‘things’ themselves,” Mauss said, “in concrete form and as they are” (ibid: 102).

In the previous two chapters, I have sought to provide the reader with a sense of how the CPF might be understood as just such a total social fact. This is why I have organized this thesis in a rather unconventional way – frontloading it with two historical and theoretical chapters, and only now getting to the fieldwork material – as I believe that it is important for the reader to have a full sense of the way in which the CPF is a total social fact, before discussing how citizens engage with it.

Like the gift exchanges studied by Mauss, the CPF is an institution in which “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time”, as the CPF sits at the centre of the social contract. As such, it is equally much an economic, political, and social institution. For this reason, as I have sought to show, it cannot be properly understood if reduced to any of these different function – say, *just* a pension fund – but must be studied as the centrepiece of the social contract. More specifically, like the gift exchanges studied by Mauss, the CPF is organized around the three obligations *to give, to receive, and to reciprocate*, as it is organized around the citizens’ obligation to give parts of their salary to the state, and the state’s obligation to receive and reciprocate these “gifts” by investing the money in such a way as to increase the overall wealth of society. For this reason, the ultimate function of the CPF is not to finance a specific set of public services, such as healthcare or schooling. Rather, its ultimate function is to

provide the citizens with an incentive to participate in the general making of society – meaning, most importantly, to delay gratification: to substitute zero-sum struggle between capital and labour over current output (the Marxist approach) for class compromise and cooperation towards a positive-sum future (the social democratic approach). Consequently, like the gifts studied by Mauss, the CPF is not really meant to be “returned”. Rather, it is meant to commit people to *a long-term and open-ended relation of mutual interest and solidarity with the state*, in which present sacrifices are redeemed as future increases in prosperity and well-being for the population as a whole.

In the following two chapters, we will look at the CPF as it appears for people on the ground. Has the promise been fulfilled? Has the state reciprocated appropriately? According to the activists we will meet, the answer to these questions is a resounding “no”. According to them, the CPF has not provided the citizens with “a stake in the country and its future” – all it has done, instead, is provide the state with a means of transforming public wealth into private wealth, for the purpose of maximizing the profits of the state as a corporation, as well as the profits of its multinational partners. “What is really happening”, as blogger Roy Ngerng, the main subject of this chapter, writes in one of his many posts, “is that Singaporeans are made to part with the largest chunk of our wages in the world to CPF while the government gives the lowest interest rates anywhere in the world. Singaporeans are made to give the most and the PAP allows themselves to give the least”.⁶⁵ As a result, he argues, Singapore has become a society in which the economy is at the level of the First World, while “everything else” remains at the level of the Third World. He writes:

Singapore is now a First World economy – Singapore is the 4th leading financial centre in the world. [...] But this is where it all ends – Singapore has a “First World economy” and “First World costs” but everything else is “Third World”. The Singapore government is only willing to give Singaporeans Third World subsidies for healthcare – the Singapore government gives even lower subsidies for health than China,

⁶⁵ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia and Vietnam. The Singapore government is only willing to give Singaporeans Third World subsidies for education – the spending on education is on par with other developing countries. Singaporeans are also made to earn Third World wages – Singaporeans earn the lowest wages among the high-income countries. Thus forcing Singaporeans to have Third World purchasing powers – our purchasing power is even lower than Malaysia and on par with India. And Singapore thus have Third World income inequality – we are the most unequal country among the developed countries. Singapore also has Third World poverty – our poverty rate is higher than the other developed countries and many developing Asian countries. And because of the Third World inequality and poverty rate in Singapore, this has resulted in a Third World prisoner rate. It has also resulted in Third World levels of trust. And Third World levels of happiness in Singapore.⁶⁶

From this, a lot follows. First, if the state is concerned only with maximizing its own financial wealth, without regards to the wellbeing of the population as a whole, then the idealism contained in the notion that the CPF has given the citizens “a stake in the country and its future” is really just a cover story of a great theft, hiding the fact that the CPF has functioned as a massive wealth transfer from the population to the state. If this is true, second, then the whole process of transforming the population from kampong dwellers to a surplus-producing industrial proletariat – including the various forms of biopolitical interventions that went along with this (such as the Graduate Mothers’ Scheme) – must be critically re-evaluated, as having represented a forceful destruction of one form of life (that of the majority) for the benefit of the elite, and not an unproblematically positive project of “development”. And if both of those things are true, thirdly, then there would seem to be little to recommend the notion that the “national interest” requires the state to make exceptions to the rule of law, since what the state calls the “national interest” is really just the special interest of the ruling elite. “By now”, Roy writes, “you better be aroused enough. They took your money, they took your life. It’s no joke. And if you are still sitting down and if you still think you

⁶⁶ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Singapore: First World Economy, First World Costs, Third World Everything Else”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/05/06/singapore-first-world-economy-first-world-costs-third-world-everything-else/>

can choose to turn a blind eye, then my friend, you have lost it. [...] They cannot rob us and get away with it”.⁶⁷

In the following two chapters, my aim is to take these protests as an opportunity to study the social contract as a living thing – meaning, as a concrete and real-life entity that individuals engage with, and that can therefore be studied through fieldwork and participant observation. As I see it, regardless of whether or not the activists are correct in their claims, their critique of the CPF identifies the failure-mode of the MM state. That is to say, if it could be shown that the state has been using the citizens’ money to increase its own financial wealth, without regards to the broader wellbeing of the population as a whole, then what’s at stake is not just the CPF, but the entire social contract – “the story we tell ourselves about ourselves”, as Singaporean sociologist Youyenn Teo puts it, according to which “[w]e were poor and now we are rich” (Youyenn 2018: 5). By critically engaging the CPF, the activists are challenging the social contract as such. Most importantly, by so doing, they are making the social contract visible as *a living and ongoing negotiation*, thereby discovering what Graeber calls “the ultimate, hidden truth of the world”, namely that “it is something that we make, and could just as easily make differently” (Graeber 2015: 89).⁶⁸ To that end, many of the individuals who initially came to the CPF as single-issue activists – believing, say, that their pension was not good enough – have over time become radicalized in a more general direction, as their engagement with the CPF has demonstrated to them not just the illegitimacy of the CPF, but the illegitimacy of the entire social contract.

As a result, these activists have forced into the public sphere a reckoning with the social contract as it exists as *a concrete social relation* – a fifty-or-so years long process of gifting and reciprocating that, in the activists’ view, must now be critically re-evaluated. Has the government failed the people? If so, why? How does one go about determining this? What exactly is the promise that the government has made to the

⁶⁷ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

⁶⁸ I would rather call this the activist approach to the world, not the “ultimate, hidden truth” of it, as it is not obvious that we could “just as easily” make the world differently.

people, and in what sense could the government be said to have lived up to, or broken, this promise? What constitutes legitimate public discourse on these matters – according to the activists, and according to the state? What should the people do if they find out that the government has betrayed their trust? How does the government respond to claims of failure and betrayal? And – for our purposes most importantly – what does all this tell us about the ability of the MM state to solve the prisoners’ dilemma of capitalism in the context of globalization?

Roy Ngerng

You gave them your vote election after election and they’ve walked all over you for the past elections. So, they’ve treated themselves like kings because no one, no one dares smack them in the face and tell them to get back in their place. So they ran amok and they ran you down, and you sit there wondering how it all happened. They had 50 years, god damn it. They had 50 years to tear you apart, limb by limb. And there you are, thinking and hoping that one day they will turn around. It’s too late for them to turn around now. 50 years of entrapment, you think they will let it all go so easily?⁶⁹

The first time I met Roy Ngerng – who wrote these words – was in late 2015, a few months after Singapore had celebrated its fiftieth anniversary as an independent nation. At that time, Singapore was in the middle of a period of grief and celebration. The celebration was due to the “golden jubilee”, the fiftieth anniversary of independence. Everywhere you went, you saw people wearing pins and t-shirts displaying the “SG50” logo that had been developed especially for the anniversary – a little red dot inside of which were written in white letters, “SG50” – which was also displayed on flags, in store windows, and just about anywhere else you could think. For several months

⁶⁹ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

leading up to the national day, on August 9, you would see fighter jets flying in formation across the sky, spelling out the number “50”, in preparation for the big national day parade, during which this would be one of the highlights, as the planes soared in formation across the iconic Marina Bay Sands building, to the delight of onlookers. As part of the anniversary celebrations, each household (including permanent residents) was sent a special goody bag from the government – called an “SG50 funpack” – containing a booklet on Lee Kuan Yew’s contribution to the nation; a flag; a figurine of “Singa the Lion”, a mascot for the Singapore kindness movement that was started in the late ‘90’s; an “SG50” tote bag; a red-and-white scarf with “Singapore” written on it; among other things. A new \$530 million national gallery was opened in November, containing the world’s largest collection of Southeast Asian art, as well as much contemporary Singaporean art. The “pioneer generation” of Singaporeans (those aged 65 and above) were offered an “SG50 Senior package” containing “more than 200 discounts and freebies given by over 100 organisations” (*Straits Times* 2015-05-22). In September, elections were held, returning PAP to power with 69.9% of the votes – a return to strength after a dip in 2011, when the ruling party received “only” 60.1% of the votes.

The entire year, Singapore celebrated itself and the progress that the country had achieved during its short history as an independent nation. “Today the whole nation celebrates”, prime minister Lee Hsien Loong wrote on his Facebook page on national day. “Glad so many are joining in at all the events. We celebrate as One People, One Nation, One Singapore.”

The grief, on the other hand, was due to the fact that Lee Kuan Yew had passed away just a few months earlier, in March, after a period of illness. In scenes that would later become iconic, thousands of Singaporeans gathered in the rain to follow Lee’s funeral procession, as it went from the Istana (the presidential palace) to parliament building. “It’s a test of our spirit and determination”, one onlooker told the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*. “Why should we be afraid of rain when Mr Lee Kuan Yew has gone through a lot more storms?” (*Straits Times* 2015-03-29). Immediately following Lee’s death, his son and prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong, announced a 7-

day national mourning period. During this period, most entertainment outlets – such as bars, restaurants, theatres and nightclubs – either closed down completely or operated under reduced hours, and most TV-channels replaced much of their programming with montages and films about Lee’s life, some even switching entirely to grey-scale. Like the “SG50” logo commemorating the “golden jubilee”, a stylized silhouette of Lee Kuan Yew’s face enveloped in a ribbon was produced, and posted just about everywhere, to commemorate the legacy of Lee. People changed their profile pictures on Facebook to this image, put it on their cars as bumper stickers, used it as their profile picture on the popular dating site *Tinder*, and even tattooed it on their bodies. As news of Lee’s death reached the world, leader’s from around the globe issued statements offering their condolences and words of praise. “Lee was a great man”, wrote Henry Kissinger, a long-time friend and confidant. “A world needing to distil order from incipient chaos will miss his leadership” (Kissinger 2015). Similar statements were made by many others, who variously described Lee as “one of the greatest leaders of modern times that Asia has ever produced” (Shinzō Abe), “a legendary figure in Asia” (Ban-Ki Moon), and “a lion among leaders” (Narendra Modi).

My first contact with Roy was during this period. It took place over Twitter, where he went under the flamboyant handle “sexiespider”. I wrote to him after having learned about his blog through some acquaintances, who had suggested to me that I look into his writing, and especially his writings about the CPF, for which he had already been sued by the prime minister for defamation. I asked if he was interested to meet up for coffee to talk about his work and activism. He said yes, and we decided to meet at a hawker centre in Holland Village, a neighbourhood in the southwestern parts of Singapore, close to where I lived at the time.

As we met up, I was not sure what to expect. When I had mentioned to Singaporean friends that I would meet up with Roy Ngerng, they had made it clear to me that Roy was considered to be quite a controversial figure, and that getting in contact with him might attract some unwanted attention from the authorities. It therefore felt like I was meeting up with a dangerous individual – someone who you should not talk openly about, much less be seen with. Because of this somewhat exaggerated

impression, I was initially surprised by how *normal* Roy seemed to me. Little about him gave me the sense of a dissident. Admittedly, this was partly because I had spent some time with political activists in the West, who, in my view, often tended to project a certain dissident image about themselves in terms of how they dress and how they speak. By contrast, Roy looked very much like any other Singaporean: short sleeved shirt, shorts, sneakers, short haircut and smart glasses. Nothing about him signalled that he was a dangerous dissident, at least not in my stereotypical view of things. He seemed, in short, like an *ordinary guy*. Later, I would realize that this is a typical feature of Singaporean dissidents: very few of them present themselves as culturally “alternative”, but tend to look like any other citizen.

As we spoke, however, I quickly realized that Roy is not your typical Singaporean. He speaks with passion about Singapore society – about how unfair, unjust, and inhumane it is in his view, and how sorely it needs to change. During our first meeting, I was in fact constantly ready to comfort him, as I was sure that he was about to burst into tears at any moment. Later, I learned that this is just his style of speaking: he is passionate about the issues that he speaks about, and tends to speak about them with a certain tremble in his voice, which to the unfamiliar listener may give the impression that he is about to start crying.

I told Roy that Singapore has achieved great economic success during its short history as a nation, but that this success seems to have come at the expense of many of the civil liberties that you find in comparably wealthy countries, especially in the West. Roy responded as if talking to a very naïve person. In his view, this view is a mirage: typical of Western tourists, but not very sophisticated. According to him, the “economic miracle” of Singapore is no miracle at all, as it has only benefitted the few. For the majority, he claims, the promise of upward mobility has not materialized. What is more, he argues, most people know this, yet are either too afraid to say so, or have been brainwashed into believing otherwise. This, he claims, has led to great unhappiness in the population, as fear has taught them to never think critically: to repress feelings of disappointment, and to only focus their attention on a narrow and socially acceptable set of objectives in life. People are shallow, he said – caring only about grades, careers,

material pleasures, and the like – because deep down they know that if they were to speak up against injustice, they would lose everything. So they make sure never to think deeply about society, and to remain in a state of wilful ignorance, as the alternative is worse. “There is a lot of fear”, he said. “People focus on their job and on their family. They are afraid to think about anything else”. This, he said, goes back all the way to Operation Coldstore, the covert security operation during which more than a hundred left-wing activists were detained indefinitely without trial. “Most people know someone who was at some point picked up by the state, in the middle of the night”, Roy said. “This has had profound effects on the psychology of the people”.

I asked how it was for someone like him to grow up in Singapore. How come he is not like the rest of his fellow Singaporeans? He said that he never felt like he fitted in at school, as people here are very closed-minded. Roy is gay, which early on gave him a sense of what it is like to be different in a conformist society. Most importantly, it put him on collision course with the state long before ever getting involved with the CPF or any other oppositional activity, as male homosexuality is illegal in Singapore under the infamous bill 377A. Roy himself does not make much of his sexual identity in political terms, though before starting *The Heart Truths*, he had a blog called *My Right to Love: A Gay Singaporean Man’s Journey towards Self Discovery & Self Love*, in which he wrote about his experiences of being a gay man in Singapore (not least the 377A legislation, which he believes should be repealed). He also told me that being gay made him aware of injustice at an early age, and thus more likely to spot it elsewhere.

We talked for more than two hours during our first meeting, and would meet up fairly regularly before he eventually left Singapore for Taiwan, after having found that he was unable to make a living in Singapore after getting sued by the prime minister. Our last meeting was at an Indian restaurant called Annalakshmi, a so-called “pay-what-you-want” restaurant where patrons pay whatever they think is fair (a very stressful concept to the anthropologist, I must admit, as I did not want to seem stingy, but not too flashy either). The meal was had together with a few other activist, both older and younger, who all wished to say goodbye to Roy. During dinner, Roy was sad but mostly relieved that he would finally get to leave Singapore. He said that he had given up on

changing Singapore, and that he did not plan to return. “Singapore is a lost cause”, he said, whereas Taiwan is “much more democratic”. Shortly after settling in his new country, however, he once again began writing about Singapore, this time under pseudonym, and also began posting about Singapore on his private Facebook page.

After our first meeting, I remember feeling distinctly unnerved. I felt like Roy had given me the proverbial “red pill”, allowing me to see through the matrix of the seemingly perfect, if illiberal, society. Is everyone really carrying around a repressed knowledge that something is deeply wrong? Is that why Singapore feels so ... *Stepford Wives*-like? Lynchian? As novelist David Foster Wallace has defined the latter term, “it refers to a particular kind of irony where the very macabre and the very mundane combine in such a way as to reveal the former’s perpetual containment within the latter” (Foster Wallace 1996). I began to wonder whether I was only seeing the mundane aspects of the “economic miracle”, missing how it contains a more macabre reality of oppression and fear.

When I first moved to Singapore, I kept a notebook in which I wrote down any questions that came into my head as I walked around the city. I had decided that these questions could be anything I wondered, that they did not have to be obviously related to my research question – just anything that stood out to me about the society I was getting to know. One of these questions was: “Why does everyone act as if there is a policeman watching them, even though I see much fewer actual policemen in Singapore than in just about any other country?” (Another question was: “Why do all men have such similar haircuts?”). Roy seemed to offer an explanation to this question: people have internalized the policeman. Through decades of intimidation, people have learned to keep their head down, to never question anything, and to do what is required to lead a decently stable life. “Singapore may have one of the highest GDP in the world”, Roy said, “but it has some of the most unhappy people. What’s the point in that?”

For days, I walked around Singapore looking at the people I passed on the street, trying to catch a glimpse of this “other” Singapore that Roy had told me about. Was I looking at a successful modern city-state, or a Potemkin village?

The Heart Truths

It was out of concern for these issues that Roy started his blog, *The Heart Truths To Keep Singaporeans Thinking*, in 2012. The name of the blog refers to a 2011 interview book with Lee Kuan Yew, entitled *Hard Truths to Keep Singapore Going* (Chan *et al.* 2011). According to Roy, Lee Kuan Yew's incessant focus on "hard truths" has resulted in a one-sided policy of economic growth above everything else, to the detriment of other, "softer" values, such as the mental and psychic wellbeing of the people, as well as things like human rights and civil liberties. In this, Roy positioned himself as a latter-day heir to the radical labour leader Lim Chin Siong, who at the dawn of industrialization similarly argued that "it is not right to split freedom and democracy with improving life quality or to consider both as two opposite things". When Roy was sued for defamation by prime minister Lee Hsien Loong, he prepared an 88 pages long closing statement, in which he explained his motivations for starting his blog. "I decided to start writing about what I observed in our Singaporean society", he wrote,

so that we can advocate for better policies to improve our lives, and so that people can become happier. To me, coming into this life is about learning about what life is about, to go through experiences that help us learn to become better people, and to develop ourselves spiritually to reach our fullest potential as beings. At the end of the day, life is not about struggling to grow the economy. Life is about fulfilling our inner needs, to become connected to the truth within and to have the clarity to uplift our people and our society. This is life. As much as it is a cliché, when we die, we are not going to take with us the money that we have made. What we will bring with us are the lessons we have learnt and the soul that we have become.⁷⁰

Roy comes from a working-class family. His mother is a retired factory worker, and his father runs a hawker stall where he sells fried carrot cake (*chai tow kwai*), a very popular

⁷⁰ "Defendants Closing Statement", page 7. Available at: <https://thehearttruths.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/roy-ngerngs-closing-statement-in-defamation-suit-with-lee-hsien-loong-1.pdf>

local dish of Teochew origin made of eggs and radishes fried into an omelette and eaten with chili. Roy's full name is Roy Ngerng Yi Ling. "Yi" (義) means "justice", a name that Roy took to heart early in life. "Indeed, my whole life", he wrote in his closing statement, "I have aspired to live as honestly as I can, and to live my life with integrity [...] This belief in justice, in right and wrong, and in being true and genuine has been what has always guided me in life".⁷¹ He grew up in a two-bedroom HDB flat with his parents and sister, and later moved with his family to a four-bedroom HDB flat. A good student, he did well in primary school and went on to major in sociology at the National University of Singapore, where his primary interest was in questions of social justice: race, gender, and inequality. Later in life, he worked with AIDS patients, and as an assistant to autistic kids. "[I]n the jobs I take," he wrote, "it has always been guided by this belief that I want to help, and to make our society a better place".⁷² As he was sued by the prime minister for defamation, he lost his job as a patient coordinator at Tan Tock Seng Hospital, where he had worked for two years. The hospital released a press statement explaining their reasons for letting Roy go. On the one hand, it was "because of conduct incompatible with the values and standards expected of employees". On the other hand, it was "for misusing working time, hospital computers and facilities for personal pursuits". "While our staff are free to pursue their personal interests outside work," the hospital wrote, "they must conduct themselves properly, honourably and with integrity. In particular, they cannot defame someone else without basis, which essentially means knowingly stating a falsehood to the public" (Tan Tock Song Hospital 2014), referencing Roy's alleged defamation of Lee Hsien Loong. In Roy's view, this was politically motivated, as the hospital, in his view, did not want the trouble of employing a political dissident. (After that, the job market was closed to him; Roy could not even find employment at the clothing store *Uniqlo*, where he applied for a job as a sales clerk.)

⁷¹ "Defendants Closing Statement", page 5. Available at: <https://thehearttruths.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/roy-ngerngs-closing-statement-in-defamation-suit-with-lee-hsien-loong-1.pdf>

⁷² Ibid: page 5.

He wrote about numerous subjects on *The Heart Truths*, such as wages, jobs, healthcare, education, housing and transport. Yet it was his writings on the CPF that caught the attention of most readers, and which provided him with a large audience. By the time that he was sued, his blog had received over two million unique views. *Yahoo Singapore* had named him the number one newsmaker in the country, and he was generally known as the CPF-blogger by Singaporeans. Throughout his writings, his focus was consistently on “heart truths” rather than “hard truths” – on the wellbeing and happiness of the population in a holistic sense, rather than on sacrifices to be made at the altar of economic growth. “At the end of the day”, he wrote in his closing statement, “my aim has always been to advocate for a government that will implement policies to take care of and protect Singaporeans, so that Singapore will be a more equal place, and where our people will be happier, and where our society will grow and become a better place for all to live in, and where the people here will be able to grow to their fullest potential. This is all that I believe in”.⁷³

Roy vs the CPF

Roy came to be interested in the CPF in 2012. “At that time”, he wrote in a Facebook post, “there were already many elderly Singaporeans who were working as cleaners at food courts and hawker centres. I had attended overseas conferences in Europe and Australia at that time, as part of my work at the Health Promotion Board (a government agency), and I had seen how the elderly in these countries did not have to toil as hard as our elderly in Singapore, even in South Korea.” One of the countries that he visited in his travels to Europe was Norway. Upon learning that I work at a Norwegian University, he told me that “Norway is the best country in the world, in my view”. If Roy had his way, Singapore would be much more like Norway, though most European countries would do.

⁷³ “Defendants Closing Statement”, page 87. Available at: <https://thehearttruths.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/roy-ngerngs-closing-statement-in-defamation-suit-with-lee-hsien-loong-1.pdf>

The basis for Roy's critique of the CPF system is his observation that Singaporean pay some of the large sums of money in the world into their social security system – which the Singaporean government has used to become one of the richest countries in the world – but that the population still enjoys one of the least adequate pensions in the developed world. This apparent contradiction, Roy attributes to four factors. First, he argues, the returns that Singaporeans are given on their money is way below what it should be – a guaranteed return of around 3.5%. Not only is this lower than what is given by pension funds in many other, similarly wealthy countries, he claims. More significantly, it is *way below the returns claimed by Singapore's two sovereign wealth funds*, Temasek and GIC, who have been investing the CPF money, and who have since their inception reported annual returns on investment of 17% and 7%, respectively (see Balding 2013). According to Roy, the question is: if the CPF is invested in these funds, why is the population only seeing an average return on investment of 3.5%? Depending on which of these two funds manage the lion's share of the CPF, there is a gap between the actual return on investment (i.e. what is earned by GIC and Temasek) and what is given back to the citizens at somewhere between 4.5% to 10.5%. "This means", Roy writes, "that the interest that is not returned to us is actually an implicit tax",⁷⁴ as the difference between what is earned on the CPF and what is earned by the wealth funds represents "free" money for the state.

Worse yet, Roy points out, these two sovereign wealth funds are headed by none other than the prime minister (GIC) and his wife, Ho Ching (who headed Temasek at the time of Roy's writing). Hence, he argues, the same person who decides how much should be given back to the citizens on their savings (the prime minister) is also in a position to benefit from the fact that there is a large difference between the CPF's rate of return and what the wealth funds earn. "Meanwhile", Roy writes:

the GIC claims that the "GIC manages the Government's reserves, but as to how the funds from CPF monies flow into reserves which could then be managed by

⁷⁴ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: "Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans". Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

either MAS [Monetary Authority of Singapore], GIC or Temasek, this is not made explicit to us.” The GIC also claims that, “The Government, which is represented by the Ministry of Finance in its dealings with GIC, neither directs nor interferes in the company’s investment decisions. It holds the board accountable for the overall portfolio performance.” However, the PAP prime minister, the two deputy prime ministers and the ministers for Trade and Industry and Education also sit on the board of directors. Lee Hsien Loong is the Chairman and Lee Kuan Yew is the Senior Advisor.

What does it mean, then, to say that the government “neither directs nor interferes in [GIC’s] investment decisions”, when the head of the government is also the head of GIC? “Since they are using our CPF and earning such high interest but we are only getting back 2.5% to 4%,” Roy writes, “this means that what we are receiving is very low – we are not getting back the returns on our CPF that we should from these investments.”

The second important factor contributing to Singaporeans’ low pensions, according to Roy, has to do with the role of the CPF in financing homeownership. According to Roy, the system is set up in such a way that if a working class person wishes to buy a HDB flat – a virtual necessity, as HDB flats make up the majority of housing stock in Singapore, the rest being made up of mostly costlier alternatives (condominiums and landed property) – she will have to use so much of her CPF that when she eventually reaches retirement age, there will not be enough money to sustain her throughout retirement. As a result, it is very common to see old people in Singapore doing simple manual labour in their senior age, such as being a McDonald’s clerk, trolley pusher at the airport, or, very often, tray cleaner at hawker centres, as they are unable to retire. “The ‘mortgage’ never ends!”, Roy comments in one blog post. “The PAP has devised an insidious scheme to make you keep paying (without you knowing) so that your CPF keeps dwindling (for their use)”.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

On a similar note, economist Mukul Asher has observed that the “fundamental dilemma in this case is that too many objectives [...] are sought to be achieved through a single CPF instrument.” According to him, this “is inconsistent with the theory of economic policy which suggests that a policy targeted at more than one objective will result in sub-optimal outcome” (Asher 2004: 2115). The problem, in other words, is that the CPF is used to pay for more things than it can possibly afford, which leads to it falling short of its primary obligation, which is to provide the citizens with enough savings to sustain them through retirement. At the same time, Roy points out, many of the services that the citizens have been made to use their CPF to pay for – such as housing and healthcare – are operated as for-profit businesses by the government. Hence, while the provision of these services has left the population without enough savings to retire, it has simultaneously allowed the government to make profits from those very same transactions. “Now do you know why most Singaporeans would never be able to retire?”, Roy asks.⁷⁶

Third, Roy points to the so-called “minimum sum”. This is the sum of money that citizens must have in their CPF account if they wish to start taking it out. According to Singaporean economist Linda Low, the minimum sum was introduced as a “soft” way of increasing the retirement age, as the country’s retirement age – set low at 55 – would not be possible to maintain as the population grew older Low (1996). In 1984, the government had tried to increase the retirement age from 55 to 60; however, this “was very poorly received, as people viewed the government as having broken a promise” (ibid). Hence, a minimum sum was introduced, which demanded that citizens would have a certain minimum amount of money in their CPF if they wanted to start to take it out, effectively forcing those without enough savings to postpone retirement beyond the 55-year mark without the government having to actually change the retirement age. “As an economist,” Low writes, “I would say that to raise the withdrawal age is actually sensible, since life expectancy is now longer, due to better health and nutrition. Thus, people should work longer” (ibid). From Roy’s point of view, however,

⁷⁶ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

the effect of this policy has been to squeeze many Singaporeans out of retirement, as they find it hard to ever reach the minimum sum – while the government, once again, is able to invest the funds in order to earn greater returns than has been given back to the citizens. “Now,” Roy writes, “you can imagine why there are so many Singaporeans who are forced to continue to work today – because they simply cannot meet the CPF Minimum Sum even today”.⁷⁷

Fourth, Roy argues that investing the CPF into HDB apartments might turn out to have been an entirely losing proposition for the population, as the HDBs are bought as 99-year leases. Hence, he argues, the apartments that people have invested their money in may well end up losing all their value at the time that the leases run out, as the property will then revert back to the state. Roy consequently refers to the CPF/HDB scheme as a “dirty [...] scheme to trick Singaporeans”.⁷⁸ How could it be, he wonders, that the population has been made to invest their pensions into assets that might ultimately have zero value? Understood from the point of view of the population, Roy argues, this makes no sense, as no one would freely pour their money into a resource that will ultimately be taken away from them, and that will most likely depreciate in value as the lease reaches its expiry date. Understood from the point of view of the state, however, it makes a lot of sense, Roy says, as this set up has allowed the state to trick the citizens into investing their money in a form of property which ultimately belongs to the state, thereby transferring their wealth to the state under the guise of investing in their own future. “Then what the hell are we even paying for?”, Roy exclaims in one blog post. “So, your flat is supposed to increase in value but after the end of the lease, this value suddenly disappears”.⁷⁹

Underlying these four points of critique is a more fundamental criticism of the CPF as a system. According to Roy, the purpose of the CPF was never to allow the population to retire. Instead, he argues, its primary purpose was always to provide the state with funds that it can use for its own benefit as a corporation, and in particular, to

⁷⁷ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

allow the ruling Lee family to make money and grow rich. Here, the promise of retirement was just a bait – a way for the state to justify taking the citizens’ money – but never a real plan or priority. Roy therefore repeatedly uses the term “entrapment” to describe the CPF system. In his view, the reason why so many citizens cannot retire has nothing to do with them not having saved enough. They have saved *plenty!* Instead, it has to do with the fact that the system is designed in such a way as to make this the only possible outcome. “But do you know why the PAP does this?”, Roy asks his readers, providing his interpretation:

They have already made you pay such a massive chunk of your wages into the CPF – all this money is precious money that they want to use for their own investments. If you are allowed to take it out, it means money that they have to lose, which they cannot use. So they have to find ways to extract more out from your CPF, to give to themselves, rather than to you.⁸⁰

Another way to put this critique, it seems to me, is that the Singaporean state operates as a *mercantilist entity*, for which the wealth of the nation is not a matter of increasing the living standards for the population as a whole, but of producing and exporting more in total than you import and consume, in order to end up with a financial surplus (or gold, as was the case for the original mercantilists) (see Sowell 2011: 619-620).

Roy does not put it in these terms himself. Nevertheless, his critique of the Singaporean state is strikingly similar to that made by classical economists, like Adam Smith, against mercantilism, as it is centred on the two claims: a) that what the state views as the wealth of the nation (a financial surplus) is from the standpoint of the population as a whole really a cost, as it is achieved by keeping down the purchasing power of the population in order to increase the wealth of the state; and b) that what the state views as the “national interest” is therefore not the same as the interest of the

⁸⁰ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

population as a whole, but on the contrary, the interest of the state *against the interests of the population*. “Mercantilists”, as Sowell writes, “were by no means focused on the average standard of living of the population as a whole. Thus the repression of wages by imposing government control was considered by them to be a way of lowering the costs of exports, creating a surplus of exports over imports, which would bring in gold” (ibid: 620; see also Krugman 1996). Similarly, during one of the “Return Our CPF” rallies, Roy said:

Singaporeans are a hardworking people. We will work hard if we know that for the sake of our country, our family and our children, we will have better lives. We will do it. But when we work so hard but we realise that our hard work is being taken for granted, then how can we still have faith that our government has our interests at heart and will protect us? Today, many Singaporeans cannot retire. Today, Singaporeans work very hard but we cannot see our CPF grow. Today, we fear that we might never be able to feel safe in our own country.⁸¹

The similarity between Roy’s critique of the CPF, and classical economists critique of mercantilism, is no coincidence. As shown in the previous chapters, the Singaporean state is set up as a corporation, which runs most of its operations on a for-profit basis, and collects most of its money from the citizens in the form of interest-bearing investments. According to the government, this is a win-win proposition, as the citizens are given a chance to see their money grow, while the state gets to use the citizens’ money to run efficient and profitable companies in sectors that are important to the national economy. According to Roy, however, the difference is that in contrast to a typical corporation, the Singaporean state gets to decide both sides of the equation, thereby making the win-win much less obvious. Most importantly, Roy argues, the Singaporean state is in a position to decide the terms of withdrawal – meaning when, and under what conditions citizens are allowed to cash out. And unsurprisingly, he says,

⁸¹ ”Roy Ngerng’s speech at #returnourcpf: I believe in a new, united Singapore”. Online resource: <https://www.sammyboy.com/threads/roy-ngerng%E2%80%99s-speech-at-returnourcpf-i-believe-in-a-new-united-singapore.183539/>

the government has decided that large parts of the citizens' savings will be used to purchase the state's own products – like housing and healthcare – which are sold to the citizens at a profit for the state. According to Roy, this is a proposition that would be unacceptable to any normal investor. “Where can you see a bank which unilaterally sets the rules and tell you, you either give in or you get out”, he asks, adding: “Oh, wait. You can't even get out because guess what, it is already mandated that your CPF has to be extracted for them”. He elaborates:

Which bank is so undemocratic that it makes all the decisions and forces you to abide by them? Well, the PAP Bank. You voted for them, you gave them your vote and they ran amok with it. They knew no one was going to stop them. And they told you it's for you own good, found a way to make you believe them and give your money to them anyway. They gave you a bone and told you it's gold and they've made you pray to them and thank them for it. And so they took over the companies, they monopolised basic services and they took over your CPF, your homes and monopolised them.⁸²

In this, we get to the core of the issue. According to Roy, the inability of Singaporeans to retire is not a bug but a feature, as the entire system is set up around the “bottom line” of allowing the state to maximize its profits – something that is best achieved if the citizens are not allowed to take out their money ever, but perpetually made to “pay and pay”. The problem (or from the point of view of the state, the benefit) is that as long as most people remain in working age, the CPF money exists in a *superposition* of belonging to both the state and the citizens at the same time, thereby allowing the state to present the conflict of interest as a mutually beneficial partnership. The more that citizens reach retirement age, however, the more will this superposition collapse, as citizens will increasingly want to take out the money that they have saved. And at that point, Roy argues, it will become clear that the money never truly belonged to the citizens, as the state will then start to introduce endless ad-hoc qualifications to make it

⁸² Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

impossible for regular people to ever see their money. “Some people would call this a Ponzi scheme”, Roy writes. “Some people would call this the CPF-HDB sham-deal. I don’t think they are wrong either way”, adding: “What the hell are they doing with YOUR RETIREMENT FUNDS? This is your money, for goodness sake! Not their banks!”⁸³

Sued for defamation

On May 19, 2014, Roy made a post on his blog with the headline, “I Have Just Been Sued by the Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong”. In the first paragraph, he wrote:

Hello everyone, I am Roy Ngerng. I am an ordinary citizen in Singapore who believes in speaking up for my country and my fellow citizens. Over the past 2 years, I have written nearly 400 articles about what is happening in Singapore. I have advocated for a fairer and more equal Singapore where every Singaporean and every person in Singapore can be taken care of and protected by our country. As of today, there have been nearly 2 million views on my blog. Today, I received an email from Lee Hsien Loong’s lawyer. I am being sued for defamation. I have tried my best to speak up for my country. I have tried my best to advocate for my fellow citizens. However, today, I am sued by the very government which should be protecting its citizens, such as me. This is disappointing.⁸⁴

The defamation suit, brought to him by famous Singaporean lawyer Navinder Singh on behalf of the prime minister, primarily concerned a sentence that Roy had written in an article published on his blog a few months earlier, entitled “Where Your CPF Money is

⁸³ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans”. Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

⁸⁴ Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: “I Have Just Been Sued By The Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.” Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/05/19/i-have-just-been-sued-by-the-singapore-prime-minister-lee-hsien-loong/>

Going: Learning from the City Harvest Trial” (henceforth referred to as “the Article”).⁸⁵ At the time that Roy published the Article, a huge scandal was erupting in Singapore involving the leadership of one of the country’s mega churches, City Harvest Church, who stood accused of having channelled S\$24 millions of their church members’ money into a number of fake companies, in order to boost the music career of Sun Ho, the wife of one of the church’s pastors – money that they had then covered up by “misappropriating” another S\$26 millions of church members’ donations. They used the money to promote Sun Ho’s career in the US: among other things, they rented a house in Hollywood that cost USD \$28,000 a month; paid an entire entourage of people to support Sun Ho; promote her music even as it failed; and, most conspicuously, paid Haitian-American sing Wyclef Jean to produce and perform in a music video for their joint song, “China Wine” (Jean was cut a check of USD \$1.9 million). In the comments section under the YouTube video for “China Wine”, top comments include: “Millions dedicated to all this? I’m baffled”; “imma dance my funds away”; “I can’t think of how this can spread Christianity”; and, “After watching this video I wanna go church and cleanse my soul”. The case against the City Harvest leadership is the biggest case of misuse of charitable funds in Singapore’s history. Sun Ho’s career in the US never took off. She and her pastor-husband, Kong Hee, were both found guilty in court.

When Roy read about this case, it reminded him of the way that CPF money is being invested by the government through Singapore’s two sovereign wealth funds. “Temasek and GIC have used our CPF to become the 8th and 9th largest sovereign wealth funds in the world”, he writes in the Article. “Yet why do Singaporeans have the least adequate retirement funds in the world?” The parallel was further strengthened, he thought, by the fact that the bulk of the CPF money ends up as investments in Singapore’s many government-linked companies (GLCs). Hence, like the leadership of City Harvest – who channelled their members’ money through various outside companies in order to boost the music career of one of the pastors’ wife – the Singaporean government channels its citizens’ money through GIC and Temasek in

⁸⁵ Roy was ordered to take down the blog post, but it is still available at: <https://blog.barbayellow.com/2014/07/17/streisand-where-your-cpf-money-is-going-learning-from-the-city-harvest-trial/>

order to boost its own private businesses. Furthermore, the two wealth funds that handle the citizens' money are headed by the prime minister and his wife (or were so at the time of Roy's writing). Hence, Roy thought, in both the City Harvest case and in the case of the CPF, money that should have been used for the benefit of the contributors – church members and citizens – had been used to boost the private careers of the leader and his wife, to the detriment of the people who should really be served.

To illustrate this point, Roy reproduced a chart from *Channel New Asia*, one of Singapore's main news sites, which showed the various players in the City Harvest trial, connected by various money trails. Underneath this chart, Roy wrote: "Meanwhile, something bears an uncanny resemblance to how the money is being misappropriated". This sentence was then followed by a copy of the first chart, where instead of City Harvest leadership, Roy had inserted pictures of the prime minister and his wife, alongside deputy prime minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam (who at that point was the head of MAS). Additionally, the second chart included the logotype of the CPF plus a number of other GLCs. Like in the City Harvest chart, all images were connected by money trails.

It was these two charts, and especially the one sentence connecting them – "something bears an uncanny resemblance to how money is being misappropriated" (henceforth "the defamatory sentence") – that formed the basis for the defamation charge against Roy. The claim was that Roy had "cynically defamed" the prime minister by having "conveyed the meaning that the plaintiff was guilty of criminal misappropriation of the monies paid by Singaporeans to the Central Providence Fund." Roy, on his part, claimed to have never intended to say that the prime minister was guilty of any criminal activity whatsoever. Instead, he said, the comparison between the CPF and the City Harvest case had been made on the basis that there was an "uncanny" resemblance between what the City Harvest church stood accused of, on the one hand, and what the government was doing with the CPF, on the other hand, *regardless of the legal status of the two cases*. As Roy told me in one of our conversations on the topic:

I don't quite remember what I was thinking during that time [when I wrote the article], especially with how things went for the two years thereafter [during the trial], but when I saw how money was being routed in City Harvest, it seemed to me that was how the CPF was being routed by the government. I don't think I've ever meant to suggest that [Lee Hsien Loong] was misappropriating. But it was clear to me that the way in which the government was using the CPF was, and is, not quite right. I suppose I'm not in a position to know who [...] created that funnelling loop – but at least I know it is wrong the way the government was doing it.

Similarly, in court, Roy said that when he had written the defamatory sentence, “the word ‘misappropriated’ was used in reference to the context in which the Channel NewsAsia article had used it, to the City Harvest Church case. It was not used in reference to the government's management of the CPF monies, and definitely not in reference to Mr Lee, at all.” His intention, he maintained, was simply to offer a different angle on his general critique of the CPF, which he thought bore a moral resemblance to the City Harvest case. In his view, both the Singaporean government and the City Harvest leadership have neglected the interests of those they are meant to serve, in favour of private ends. In this way, he said, his intention had not been to discuss whether or not the prime minister had himself broken any laws in his dual role as head of both GIC and government. Instead, he had wanted to point out that what was considered “criminal misappropriation” in the case of City Harvest, was fully legal in the case of the CPF, even though the difference seemed technical rather than substantial in Roy's view. Nevertheless, he added, it was utterly against his nature to want to embarrass or “defame” anyone, be it the prime minister or anyone else, as he had himself suffered from discrimination all his life due to his sexual orientation. He wrote:

You see, I understand how it feels to be distressed and embarrassed. And thus I would never want to wish it on anyone. I would not want the Plaintiff Mr Lee Hsien Loong to go through it as well. As such, I do sincerely apologise for the distress and embarrassment that he felt. My many years of being discriminated

showed me the pain and anguish of how it feels and I cannot possibly want for someone else to have to go through it. No person should have to go through what I did.⁸⁶

Thus, he maintained, the defamation charge completely missed the point, as he had not intended to say what he was accused of having said. What he wished to do was to discuss the moral similarity between the two cases, and to point out that it was strange – and indeed wrong – that what was illegal in the case of City Harvest was legal in the case of the CPF.

The blog post in its entirety

Like most of the articles that Roy published on his blog, the article that he was sued for is very long and full of graphs, statistics and other images. Overall, it pushes a very different line of argument to the one that the prosecution sought to pin on him, which is why it was probably no coincidence that the prosecution focused solely on the two charts comparing City Harvest to the CPF, including the defamatory sentence connecting them.

Rather than making a claim about “misappropriation”, most of the article is spent pursuing a critique of the CPF that draws heavily on the work of economist Christopher Balding (referenced in the previous chapter). Balding’s argument, in essence, is that the CPF system has really functioned as a way for the government and the GLCs to “privatize profits and socialize risks”. The bulk of Roy’s blog post is a long quote from Balding’s own blog. Roy begins by asking his readers two questions: first, “do you know that apparently the CPF is now the 8th largest pension fund in the world?”, and second, “do you know that the GIC and Temasek have used our CPF to become the 8th and 9th largest sovereign wealth funds in the world?”. This leads to his standard query:

⁸⁶ “Defendants closing statement”, page 4. Available at: <https://thehearttruths.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/roy-ngerngs-closing-statement-in-defamation-suit-with-lee-hsien-loong-1.pdf>

“Yet why do Singaporeans have the least adequate retirement funds in the world?”⁸⁷ Roy then introduces two figures, which are important for the reader to keep in memory. The first is S\$253 billion, which is the total amount of money that Singaporeans had put into the CPF at that time. The second is S\$1 trillion, which according to Roy is the approximate total amount of money sitting in the GIC, Temasek and MAS taken together (also known as “the reserves”). Both of these figures are taken directly from Balding’s work. “How”, Roy asks, “did the government make us set aside \$253 billion in the CPF to let them earn \$1 trillion for the reserves?”⁸⁸

The answer that Roy provides – which is really Balding’s answer – is the following one. A lot of the CPF money that the citizens give to the state ends up as investments in Singapore’s many GLCs, all of which are held by Temasek. The money is mostly used for capital investments: for example, CPF money might end up as investment in new trains for SMRT, or airplanes for Singapore Airlines. This, Roy argues, means that for a company like SMRT, their capital investment in trains is heavily subsidized by the citizens through CPF; nevertheless, they get to privatize the profits. Because of this implicit subsidy, their profits are much higher than they would have otherwise been; and as a result, Temasek’s portfolio appears to perform very well. According to Balding, however, the reason for this is largely because the companies that Temasek owns are allowed to privatize CPF money as corporate profits. Hence, he argues, *one cannot expect the CPF to grow at the same rate as the returns reported by Temasek*. In fact, he says, the relation is the inverse: the reason why Temasek’s portfolio performs so well is because CPF money is allowed to be taken out as private profit, meaning a net loss for the citizens. Roy quotes Balding:

Singapore operates a one sided model where the tax payer assumes the risk but the government gets the benefit. If the investments do well, the government keeps everything above the 2.5-4% CPF interest payment; if the investments do poorly, and let’s assume, the CPF collapses, the tax payer will guarantee the payment to

⁸⁷ Available at: <https://blog.barbayellow.com/2014/07/17/streisand-where-your-cpf-money-is-going-learning-from-the-city-harvest-trial/>

⁸⁸ Ibid.

CPF holders. In other words, risks are socialized while benefits are privatized. The assets of Temasek, GIC, and the CPF are the assets of the people of Singapore. Only in certain people's imagination are Temasek and GIC assets private and separate from the people of Singapore.

It is [...] morally reprehensible to pretend that a company is making money and use tax payer money to create profits.⁸⁹

In this way, the overall argument of Roy's article has little or nothing to do with challenging the legality of the CPF system, but a lot with challenging its legitimacy as a social institution. As Roy told me in conversation, "How do you change a system which has been legalized and therefore legal?" That was really his main point: while everything that the CPF does is probably legal, it is nevertheless illegitimate, as the government has been able to legalize action that should not be legal. Hence, to the extent that Roy actually meant that the government or the PM had "misappropriated" money, what he had in mind was not a *criminal misappropriation* but an *illegitimate appropriation* that was nevertheless legal. Hence, he thought, the problem was one to be settled in the court of public opinion, rather than in the court of law, as it has nothing to do with the law.

It was on that note that Roy ended the Article with a call for citizens to gather at the Speaker's Corner in Hong Lim Park – the only space in Singapore where citizens are allowed to hold a demonstration without a special permit – on the 7th of June, 2014, for a first demonstration under the slogan "Return Our CPF". The slogan was chosen for two reasons. First, it referred to the argument presented above: that the citizens of Singapore have a claim on the total return on investment on their CPF money, and not simply the 3.5% that they have received. Second, it referred to the newly increased "minimum sum" of the CPF, which demands that citizens have a certain (high) amount in their accounts if they want to start withdrawing. We will turn to these demonstrations in the next chapter.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

“Mickey Mouse accounting”

Before discussing detail the trial against Roy in further, let us stay a little longer with the intricacies of Balding’s argument, as it is important for understanding where Roy is coming from. The first important aspect of Balding’s argument is his observation that when people make their CPF payments, their money is taken up as public debt by the state, through so-called Special Singapore Government Securities (SSGS), which are managed by the GIC and invested partly through Temasek. Balding’s argument is that there are troubling inconsistencies regarding what the government claims about its finances. Specifically, he argues, the trouble concerns the relation between what the state claims about (1) the return on investment gained by GIC and Temasek, (2) the amount of public debt and government surpluses that have been accumulated since the establishment of the GIC and Temasek, and (3) the total amount of assets that the state holds. According to Balding, these are the facts (as of 2012, when he published his research):

1. GIC and Temasek have throughout their existence claimed annual returns on investment of 7% and 17%, respectively.
2. The official government balance sheet lists S\$834 billion in assets, with an additional S\$123 billion in cash. The Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) manages the cash reserves (\$123 billion). Temasek lists S\$223 billion in assets. GIC has no official balance sheet, but since there is no other government body that could manage the remaining S\$611 billion (i.e. the total sum of S\$834 billion minus the S\$223 billion managed by Temasek), this is how much assets are likely controlled by GIC. This is also confirmed by what outside agencies, such as the US State Department, estimate the size of GIC to be.
3. Since 1974, when Temasek was founded (GIC was founded 1981), “the Singapore government has realized total free cash flow of \$822 billion SGD.” Most of this (around S\$400 billion) is public debt that the state has taken on, mainly through the CPF. The rest consists of budget surpluses. If all is in order, these monies should have been invested through GIC and/or Temasek.

This means, in other words, that GIC and Temasek claim to have grown at annual rates of 7% and 17%; they together hold assets amounting to S\$834 billion; and they have together received S\$822 billion in free cash flow since 1974. As the reader will notice, there is no way to square these different statements, as \$822 billion cannot grow at annual rates between 7-17% for forty-plus-years to become \$834 billion. As Balding writes:

[T]he simple laws of mathematics dictate that significant discrepancies exist within the Singaporean public financial systems. \$822 billion SGD of free cash flow from 1974 to 2014 does not produce \$834 billion SGD of financial assets while earning 7% in USD and 17% in SGD between two primary investment vehicles. Even after accounting for a variety of factors like currency losses, debt costs, and non-interest earning cash accrual that would match current cash holdings, there is no way to reconcile existing claims. Furthermore, there is no evidence that these funds have been consumed. (Balding 2015: 20-21)

Notice, Balding also says, another strange feature of these figures: government debt has been steadily rising even as the government has been operating large surpluses. “Singapore is the only country to have managed to average a large surplus fiscal position and increase its overall indebtedness [...]”, Blading writes. “All other countries with similarly high levels of debt [...] have long term public finance deficits which adds to total public indebtedness” (Balding 2015: 12). How to account for all this?

The first possible interpretation, Balding suggests, is to accept that GIC and Temasek really have earned the 7% and 17% returns on investment that they claim. Given the performance of similar portfolios over the same time period, Balding says, this is not very likely. But if it is nevertheless assumed, then the consequence must be that Singapore’s two sovereign wealth funds are way bigger than is typically assumed. Even starting from the most conservative assumption – namely, that the S\$822 billion in government debt and operational surpluses have grown at *only* 7% annually (i.e. what GIC claims for itself) – then Singapore would still sit on sovereign wealth funds that

are substantially bigger than any other in the world. If this scenario is true, it would no doubt make Roy's case stronger, as he already argues that Singaporeans are being deprived of a substantial amount of money. If the amount of money that should have grown at minimally 7% annually is as big as S\$822 billion, this does not make the situation any less in need of explanation.

The second possible interpretation, Balding says, is to accept both the normal assumption about how much money is in GIC and Temasek – again, S\$611 and S\$223 billion, respectively (or S\$834 billion together) – and their claimed returns of 7% and 16%, in order to then count backwards to figure out how much money they must have started out with. If this is done, Balding says, the numbers add up in relation to how much Temasek officially claims to have started out with, S\$357 million (once again there are no official figures for GIC), but then there is on the other hand no way of accounting for most of the S\$822 billion in government debt and surpluses that have accumulated since 1974. In this scenario, then, most of it must have ended up *somewhere else* than in GIC and Temasek. But where? The exact location of that “somewhere else”, Balding says, is pretty much anyone's guess, as there is no other known government agency in Singapore that could hold it, except the two sovereign wealth funds.

The third option, Balding says, is to once again assume the normal estimations of how much assets are controlled by GIC and Temasek, but assume that the S\$822 billion in government debt and surpluses have indeed been invested through GIC and Temasek. “This implies”, Balding writes, “that their publicly declared \$834 billion SGD in financial assets earned only an annualized 0.1% since 1974 based upon \$822 billion SGD in free cash flow between operational surpluses and increased indebtedness” (Balding 2015: 1). This would imply, in other words, that the taxpayers of Singapore have been subsidizing the profits that these funds claim to have produced – profits that have then been largely privatized through the different government-linked corporations and multinational corporations that GIC and Temasek have invested their money in.

Specifically, Balding argues, the only way to explain Temasek's claimed returns of 17% is to take into account the fact that Temasek was given the companies that it

manages for free by the government. As a result of this, Temasek has been able to privatize enormous amounts of value at no cost, and then claim the value of these companies as increases in the value of its assets, by taking them public after having been given them for free by the government. Balding calls this “Mickey Mouse accounting”, writing:

By transferring the assets at “zero or nominal cost” [...] this significantly increases Temasek’s accounting returns but lowers the actual returns. Let’s take a simple example. If the government of Singapore spends \$100 million SGD to create Acme Manufacturing, transfers it to Temasek at “zero or nominal cost” of say \$50 million SGD, and Temasek then takes it public after which the market capitalization is let’s say \$100 million. Temasek enjoys a \$50 million SGD profit and declares a return of 100%. If Temasek receives the asset for \$1 million SGD its profit is \$99 million SGD and it declares a return of 9,900%! The Singapore taxpayer however, suffers an offsetting loss of \$50 million SGD (or \$99 million) to subsidize Temasek “returns”. (Balding 2013)

This last alternative is the one that Roy referenced in the Article. It is also the one that Balding thinks is most likely, although he stresses that it is difficult, not to say impossible, to conclude with any certainty what has actually happened to the S\$822 billion in government debt and surpluses that have been accumulated since 1974. The above scenarios, Balding says, simply represent the various conclusions that one must draw *if assuming that no laws have been broken* with regards to these monies – including the laws of math!

For our purposes, it is not necessary to come to any conclusion regarding which of these options is the right one, or even to accept that it has to be one of them. The important thing, instead, is to understand what Roy had in mind when he compared the CPF to City Harvest, saying that “something bears an uncanny resemblance to how money is being misappropriated”. Take Balding’s third interpretation, in which CPF money has been being channelled through Temasek into government-linked companies

to cover up the fact that these are not nearly as profitable as they claim, all the while allowing these companies (and the private individuals who run them) to profit off of public funds. If true, this indeed “bears an uncanny resemblance” to the City Harvest case. That, of course, is to say nothing about whether this is actually how the CPF money is being used, or if such a usage would be a form of “criminal misappropriation”. But that was also precisely Roy’s point. “[A]s I have maintained,” he said in his closing statement, “the criticism has always been on how the ‘government’ has not been transparent and accountable on its management of the CPF monies of Singaporeans. It has never and was never meant to be a critique about the prime minister”.⁹⁰ The issue, in other words, was not that Roy had somehow found out the truth of the matter – let’s say Balding’s scenario three – which he then publicized. Instead, Roy’s point was that available government data are internally inconsistent, and that there is no way to square the numbers without ending up with some troubling conclusion or other. “Mr. Lee is not disputing facts presented by Mr. Ngerng”, Balding writes, “but rather that his feelings were hurt. The problem the son of the first prime minister faces is that he cannot argue facts with Mr. Ngerng” (Balding 2015a).

When I talked to Balding over the phone, he told me that he has been trying to get journalists to look into this issue, to no avail. “This is probably one of the biggest cases of fraudulent government accounting in history”, he said. However, because there is no smoking gun, but all based on indirect evidence and inference, it is hard to get any journalist to risk exploring it, let alone write about it. He therefore argued for the need to have greater transparency, however adding that this is unlikely to happen, as openness about the wealth funds could only expose fraud and not provide satisfying answers. As he writes in one blog post, “Temasek and Singapore have created an enormous problem for themselves. If they try to tell the truth in one area, the enormity of the deception increases in other areas”. Hence, they are unlikely to respond substantively to any criticism, “because if they provide any evidence or data it will only expose other flaws in their carefully constructed edifice”:

⁹⁰ “Defendant’s Closing Statement”, page 20. Available online: <https://thehearttruths.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/roy-ngerngs-closing-statement-in-defamation-suit-with-lee-hsien-loong-1.pdf>

For instance, even if Temasek returns are actually 17% (which they are not), this only creates a larger discrepancy given the many years of operational government surpluses which should yield a much larger total number of financial assets. In other words, providing any information will only further reveal the enormous inconsistencies of Temasek and Singaporean financial data. (Balding 2013a)

For these reason, Balding reasoned, the only way that the government can respond to challenges is by either ignoring them, or discrediting anyone who dares to pursue this line of argument in public. “I am not Singaporean”, he wrote. “I do not live in Singapore. I have no family in Singapore.” Therefore, “The government of Singapore cannot control me and they definitely cannot intimidate me” (Balding 2013a). The same thing could not be said about Roy, however, who made the same allegations as a Singaporean citizen, and therefore had to face the consequences.

Roy versus the prosecution

When Roy was taken to court, the charge was that he had “cynically defamed” the prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong. The reason for the added word “cynically” was because the prosecution claimed that Roy had committed the offence in order to boost the readership of his blog, and not out of genuine concern for the issue. The prosecution’s argument was that, because the City Harvest trial had gained a lot of attention in the media, Roy had sought to tie the CPF issue to this case in order to share in some of the media hype. Roy, on his part, claimed that while his readership had indeed gone up, “most of the interest was clearly focused on the demand letter (59% of the total viewership) and the corresponding increase in the views for the Article was due to interest in the demand letter and not in the Article itself.” By comparison, he said, “the Article only had 3.6%

of the total viewership on that day” (when it was published).⁹¹ So if anything gave him attention, it was not the article but the lawsuit.

Besides this, the prosecution’s main case was that Roy had compared the CPF to City Harvest in terms of the criminal allegation levelled against the latter, and specifically, that he had pinned the allegation of “criminal misappropriation” directly onto Lee Hsien Loong. The prosecution advanced two main argument to support this charge. First, they pointed to the defamatory sentence connecting the two charts. The word “misappropriated”, they argued, clearly referred to both charts and not, as Roy claimed, simply “to the context in which the Channel NewsAsia article had used it, to the City Harvest Church case”. This impression, they claimed secondly, was further strengthened by the fact that Roy had inserted an image of Lee in place of one of the accused City Harvest leaders in the Channel News Asia chart, thereby suggesting that Lee was guilty of the same crime as the City Harvest leaders. This, the prosecution argued, was a very serious allegation, not only because it concerns large-scale fraud, but because it was directed against the prime minister – someone for whom reputation is more important for most other people. The judge agreed, and wrote in the ruling:

The accusation that one has criminally misappropriated monies paid by citizens to a state-administered pension fund is one of the gravest that can be made against any individual, let alone a head of government. Such accusations, striking at the heart of one’s personal integrity, can severely undermine the credibility of the target. For these reasons and in particular, the criminal nature of the act allegedly committed by the plaintiff, I am of the view that this was a grave defamation that a fair-minded person would react with indignation to.⁹²

⁹¹ ”Defendant’s Closing Statement”, page 42. Available online: <https://thehearttruths.files.wordpress.com/2020/10/roy-ngerngs-closing-statement-in-defamation-suit-with-lee-hsien-loong-1.pdf>

⁹² This quote is taken from a document given to me by Roy, who received it as part of the court process. It is not, as far as I know, publicly available. Whenever I do not provide a reference for a quote taken from a court case, it is because it is taken from such a document, provided to me by an informant.

According to the prosecution, therefore, the fact that Roy had made these comments about none other than the prime minister should warrant a particularly hefty punishment. As the judge related approvingly from a different defamation case involving the prime minister, “the reputation of public leaders in Singapore can [...] be considered to be their ‘whole life’. *Without a clean or credible reputation, their moral authority to lead the people is compromised.*” Hence, what made Roy’s crime particularly heinous, the prosecution and judge thought, was the fact that his comments had threatened to undermine the moral authority of the prime minister, whose reputation is more important than that of anyone else.

This, it should be noted, is a quite unique Singaporean take on the common law principle of defamation. As Rajah notes, “In contrast to the standard common law parameters for damages, in which public figures are expected to be able to deal with a degree of public criticism, Singapore courts have adopted the state’s reasoning in holding that the reputations of political leaders are especially vulnerable to public opinion and thus warrant a higher accounting of damages than when calculating damages for ordinary people” (Rajah 2012: 18). As a consequence, criticising political leaders in Singapore has become something of a high-wire act for citizens, as they have to make sure not to say anything that might be construed as defamatory, unless they are to end up with grave fines. According to critics, therefore, this has led to a climate of fear among critically-minded citizens, who find themselves living under a *de facto* censorship on criticizing their political leaders.

In defending himself, Roy’s central claim was that he had “no intention whatsoever to want to defame the prime minister”, because “it did not even cross my mind to think that he had misappropriated the CPF monies of Singaporeans”.⁹³ He advanced several arguments to support this claim. First, he said, when reproducing Channel News Asia’s chart, he had removed the words “accused of channelling” and “accused of misappropriating” from the two boxes that, in the original chart, contained the different sums of money that the City Harvest leaders were accused of channelling and misappropriating. In Roy’s replicated chart, these boxes contained, in one of them,

⁹³ Ibid: 16

the total amount of money held in the reserves (S\$1 trillion), and in the other, the total amount of money paid into the CPF (S\$253 billion). “The reason why I removed these phrases”, Roy said, “was because I did not believe that the prime minister, the deputy prime minister or the prime minister's wife and CEO of Temasek Holdings had misappropriated the CPF monies of Singaporeans. As I have repeatedly affirmed, my criticism has consistently been directly at the government and I believe that it is the government that should be transparent and accountable to Singaporeans on the management of Singaporeans' CPF monies”.⁹⁴ In Roy’s view, this was evidence that when he wrote the defamatory sentence, the word “misappropriated” had only referred to the City Harvest case, and not to any criminal wrongdoings on Lee’s part. And so, he maintained, the comparison between the CPF and City Harvest was not made in term of the illegality of City Harvest’s dealings, but simply in term of their dishonesty, which Roy thought bore “an uncanny resemblance” to the government’s CPF dealings.

Second, Roy argued that almost all of the words and images in the Article were either statements of fact, or reproductions of other people’s words and images – among them the Channel News Asia Chart; quotes from the article in which this chart first appeared; quotes from the CPF website; factual statements about who is the chairman of the sovereign wealth funds, as well as the government position held by that person; and so on. “Therefore”, Roy said, “the only statement in the Offending Words and Images which I had included as an opinion is the sentence, ‘Meanwhile, something bears an uncanny resemblance to how the money is being misappropriated’”.⁹⁵ On this point, Roy was not contradicted, seemingly confirming the fact that the defamation suit was based solely on that sentence.

Following this, and third, Roy said that at the time of writing the Article, he had not been fully aware of the legal seriousness of the term “misappropriated”, and therefore hadn’t been all that concerned by the fact that his way of using it could be read as referring also to Lee. “On the same note that it shows my lack of knowledge on the legal terminology,” Roy said, “it is also a reflection that I have never intended to

⁹⁴ Ibid: 16

⁹⁵ Ibid: 18

say that the prime minister has misappropriated the CPF funds”.⁹⁶ The judge did not buy this at all, but wrote in his concluding remarks that Roy “knew of the defamatory imputation that the Article carried and that it was false, but still went ahead to publish it.”

In addition to these legal/technical points of defence, Roy also advanced a number of moral/political points of defence. Two of these in particular are of interest. The first concerned the stated aim of Lee in taking Roy to court in the first place. Here, Roy referred to an interview with Lee that had appeared in *Time Magazine* a few months earlier, in which the defamation suit against Roy was brought up. Here, the prime minister had said:

If you make a defamatory allegation that the Prime Minister is guilty of criminal misappropriation of pension funds of Singaporeans, that’s a very serious matter. If it’s true, the Prime Minister should be charged and jailed. If it’s not true, the matter must be clarified and the best way to do that is by settling in Court. If it’s untrue, it will be shown so. If it’s true, the Prime Minister will be destroyed. (*Time Magazine* 2015-07-23)

In response, Roy said:

If I may humbly submit, the prime minister might have also understood the procedures wrongly. If the prime minister deems that misappropriation has occurred, then he should task the AGC to investigate on this matter. I do not think that a defamation suit is the best way to “clarify” on the facts of the “matter”, as it is understood that the defamation suit is intended to protect the reputation of individuals and not be used to “clarify” on any alleged misappropriation, as the prime minister seems to want to use the defamation suit to do. [...] If the prime minister believes that “the matter must be clarified”, the best way for him to do it would be to ask the CPF Board, GIC and Temasek Holdings to be fully transparent and to publish full reports, so that clarification

⁹⁶ Ibid: 20

can be made with resolute. In fact, if the prime minister had done so without taking out a defamation suit against me, this would also put him in better stead.⁹⁷

Indeed, rather than clarifying on the substantive issues brought up by Roy in the Article – or any other critique that Roy had put forward regarding the CPF, Temasek and GIC, for that matter – the defamation suit ended up “clarifying” only a) that Roy had made an allegation that he himself denied ever having made, or at least intended to make, and b) that Roy was not able to provide evidence to support this allegation, which he claimed never having intended to make.

The second of Roy’s political points of defence concerned the issue of freedom of speech, and its relation to democracy. Specifically, Roy pointed to the “chilling effect” that awarding such high damages (S\$150,000) to someone like him – a blogger and an “ordinary citizen” – would have on Singaporean democracy. This was especially true, Roy argued, first because the charge came from a public official such as the prime minister, who would have much greater resources at his disposal in pursuing the case; and second, because the charge was for defamation, which has a very vague and broad legal definition. Roy wrote:

It is precisely because the defamation suit confers such wide-ranging abilities for any plaintiff, and where public officials are given such free rein to use the law, and the defamation suit, that in its lack of definition and clarity, that it could be so easily used by any such plaintiff, that can put the defendant in a highly unfair situation, and especially where the case is one which is brought by a public official against a Singaporean citizen, such inherent and built-in unfairness simply does not bode well for the functioning of a democracy, where the resultant effects are that the citizen would choose to self-censor and silence him or herself.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Ibid: 67

⁹⁸ Ibid: 79

Once again, however, the judge did not accept Roy's argument. Instead, he offered a long exposition on the philosophical underpinnings of "freedom of speech" as a civil value. According to the judge, there are three main schools of thought on the matter: "the argument from truth", "the argument from democracy", and "the argument from human dignity". The first two, he gave extensive treatment.

The argument from truth, the judge said, traces back to classical thinkers like John Milton and John Stuart, and consists in the idea that a free exchange of ideas is the best way to reach the truth. The judge noted that the original formulation of this idea was "premised on an assumption that the absolute truth will eventually emerge", but that "[i]n more recent times, the argument from truth has been conceptualised in an alternative manner, which considers truth to be relative." Nowadays, the judge said, the meaning of the term "is simply what emerges from open discussion and argument to be accurate and/or rational", which is why the value of freedom of speech is to allow such a *relative* "truth" to emerge in society. In principle, the judge believed that this argument has merit. However, he noted, while a free exchange of ideas might be rationalized on the basis of finding truth – be it relative or absolute – this also means that "there is no benefit in permitting the free dissemination of false assertions of fact that destroy a person's reputation." In his view, this was where Roy's speech belonged, which was why the argument from truth was irrelevant to his case.

The second argument – the argument from democracy – the judge found to be most relevant to Roy's case, as all of Roy's arguments "appear to be based on the argument from democracy." Again, the judge offered his principled agreement with the argument as such. This time, however, he also agreed with the general applicability of the argument to Roy's case. In particular, he noted that in other common law countries, such as Australia and England, the legal professions have introduced a notion of "qualified privilege" in order "to curtail the chilling effect defamation actions had by allowing greater scope for the operation of a defence that does not require proof of truth." This does not mean, the judge pointed out, that freedom of speech should be understood as an absolute right. Instead, "freedom of speech takes precedence over the

protection of reputation only when certain conditions are met.” These conditions are “reasonable conduct in publishing the defamatory statement.”

Now, what does this mean, “reasonable conduct”? The judge sought a definition by way of legal precedent, going through a number of similar cases in which the defendants had been able to show “reasonable conduct”, and others in which they had not. Based on this, he concluded that the requirement of “reasonable conduct” is “not an easy hurdle to cross”, pointing out that “there are limits to unrestricted communication in matters of public interest holding primacy in a democratic society.” This was the end of hope for Roy, because in his case, the judge said:

There was no indication despite the defendant’s purported commitment to fact-checking, [...] that he had any evidence to support this allegation, let alone that he had taken steps to verify such information. He had, to put it simply, called the plaintiff a thief when what he had wanted to do was to criticise the CPF policy of the government headed by the plaintiff. He had no basis to call the plaintiff a thief and it was totally unnecessary for the purpose of his criticism of the CPF policy.

The judge therefore concluded that Roy did not pass this test of “reasonable conduct”. Despite the fact that he had written about a subject of public interest, his right to freedom of speech did not take precedence over the protection of Lee’s reputation.

Here, I will ask the reader to notice two things. The first is that the judge was essentially fair in his treatment of the two arguments for freedom of speech, as well as how they relate to Roy’s case. The second thing to notice, however, is that this fairness is conditional on having already accepted that Roy did, in fact, intend to say that the prime minister had “criminally misappropriated” CPF money. Assuming that Roy had intentionally lied in public about such matters, the judge’s dismissal of “freedom of speech” as providing legal protection for that lie appears fully reasonable. Indeed, Roy himself admits that this is an unfounded allegation. If so, how could he possibly have presented any evidence to back it up?

For this reason, it is important to remember that the charge against Roy was essentially based on one sentence. All in all, the prosecution did include some additional material in the “Offending Words and Images”, but as Roy pointed out – and to which no one objected – this consisted of either facts, quotes, or borrowed images. Nevertheless, when reading the ruling, the impression one gets is that Roy had at length and emphatically pursued the “totally unnecessary” allegation that Lee is a thief. That, I submit, is nowhere near the case. Instead, Roy had written one sentence that can be interpreted in that direction, while spending the rest of the article laying out what he meant by it, in an analysis that does not suggested criminal behaviour on part of the prime minister. The predicament that Roy thus found himself in was that he had to defend himself in a court of law against one the best lawyers of the country, regarding a single sentence written quite long ago, and which he claimed to have not put much thought into in the first place. “With the claims they heaped on me at that time,” he told me during one of our conversations, “I had to psychoanalyse what I could have thought as I wrote that article, in order to make a compelling argument, and it was a deeper analysis of my mind than how it would have run at that time, and I was really trying to carve out a story of what was meant to be said with a simpler meaning – if the government was playing with the money of Singaporeans, they should be aware of it. And then vote for a new government.”

Communists and community guidelines – two parallels

In order to better understand the trial against Roy, it may be helpful to place it in a broader context – or rather, two very specific contexts. The first is found in Singaporean history; the second in contemporary social media. We’ll discuss them one at a time.

Throughout Singapore history, PAP has preferred to deal with its political opponents through legal rather than political means. The most famous example of this is Operation Coldstore, the 1963 covert security operation during which most of Singapore’s left-wing opposition were detained indefinitely without trial under the

Internal Security Act.⁹⁹ Leading up to Operation Coldstore, PAP and the British Special Branch had for some time sought to come up with a way to justify action against Barisan Sosialis. In the view of both PAP and the British, such action was justified on the basis of national security, as Barisan were believed to be communists, whose “ultimate goal” was to institute “the communist dictatorship of the proletariat” in Singapore. For Lee and the British, however, the worry was that if it could not be shown that Barisan was actually engaged in violent or otherwise non-constitutional activity, action against them would be seen as illegitimate, both by the local population and by world opinion. “Although on purely professional security grounds a general case might be made for the arrest of the Barisan Sosialis leaders”, one Special Branch report put it, “they have so far [...] given no excuse for action against them at this juncture. Their arrest now would be construed both in Singapore and the world at large as an attempt to silence legitimate opposition to the Malaysia policy” (Moore to Nik Daud 1962). In order to make sure that action against them did not look like outright political repression, therefore, a two-stage plan was devised, aimed at pushing Barisan into non-constitutional action. During the first stage of the plan, there would be “a general tightening up against the more aggressive forms of united front activity, particularly the Trade Unions. The communist united front will be harassed in as many fields as possible” (Aide Memoire 1962), including through the removal of publishing rights for left-wing newspapers and magazines. If successful, this would be followed by a second stage, during which large scale arrests would be carried out in response to whatever non-constitutional action that Barisan had been provoked into during stage one. Another Special Branch report stated that, “If this were successful [...] a number of our objections to repressive action would fall away” (Snelling to Secretary of State 1962: 244).

Unfortunately for PAP and the British, the plan did not work out as planned, as Barisan refused to turn to violent and/or non-constitutional action, most likely because

⁹⁹ In the following discussion, I will draw mostly on archival material provided to me by Singaporean historian PJ Thum, who has done incredible work unearthing previously unpublished files from the UK National Archives, relating to the independence movement of Singapore. I owe him a debt of gratitude for sharing this material with me.

they were at that point more popular with the electorate than PAP, and therefore had no reason to do so (in addition, perhaps, to actually being committed to constitutional democracy; see Thum 2013). When a violent uprising broke out in Brunei on December 8, 1962, and the Barisan came out in support of it – describing it as a “popular nationalist movement for national independence and freedom from British Colonial domination” – Lee therefore described it as “a heaven-sent opportunity of justifying action against them” (Selkirk to Kuala Lumpur 1962-12-10), as it provided him and the British with the necessary evidence that Barisan is “a party whose adherence to constitutional action is prompted only by expedience”. “It may therefore be argued that this is a party which is essentially subversive”, wrote UK High Commissioner Lord Selkirk, “and whose threat to the security of Singapore can no longer be ignored”, adding: “Our arguments against direct action have always been subject to the proviso that the case for it would be very different if the Barisan Socialis made a mistake and gave us sufficient excuse. I believe that they have now done just this” (Selkirk to Kuala Lumpur 1962-12-11). With this in hand, Lee and the British felt confident to begin the secret negotiations that lead to Operation Coldstore, during which most of the leadership of Barisan, as well as many journalists and trade unionists, were put under indefinite detention without trial, some remaining in jail for decades.

Reading the British archives, it is clear that Barisan’s statement in support of the Brunei Revolt was not the reason for their arrest, but rather, a convenient *justification* for it, as Lee and the British had long wanted to get rid of them on political grounds. Comparing this to the trial against Roy, there is no way of knowing for sure whether the case against him was preceded by similar discussions, or whether it was in fact motivated by a pure ambition to enforce the law. We simply do not have access to the behind-the-scenes discussions, the way we do with Operation Coldstore. That being said, there are good reasons to suspect that Roy’s case was similarly motivated by politics rather than a pure concern with upholding the law, as PAP has a long tradition of using vague and broad legislation to go after its critics. Operation Coldstore is the most famous and consequential example of this – for which we have access to the behind-the-scenes discussion – but Singaporean history is literally packed with these kinds of events. Indeed, if there is any constant in the life of oppositional politics in the

city-state, it is the fact of having to constantly deal with various lawsuits coming from the government (see Lydgate 2003).

As one illustration of this, in 2017, Lee Hsien Loong's nephew, Li Shengwu (son of Lee Hsien Yang), made a Facebook post in which he wrote that the government of Singapore is "very litigious", and that the court system is "pliant". For this, he was taken to court for having "scandalized the judiciary", and was charged to pay a \$15,000 fine. "It is clear", the judge wrote in his ruling, "that the post conveys the meaning that the judiciary is not independent and impartial, and is susceptible to influence or pressure from the Government when legal proceedings are brought by its leaders", adding that: "It is axiomatic that this undermines confidence in the administration of justice" (Tang 2020). Li was far from the first person to go through exactly this ordeal; in fact, as Rajah notes, the Singapore government has many times before "brought cases in defamation and scandalising the judiciary against parties who have explicitly or implicitly suggested that the courts are not independent of political pressure" (Rajah 2012: 47). Rajah cites seventeen such cases, fifteen of which were brought by the sitting prime minister against notable political dissidents, like JB Jeyaretnam, Chee Soon Juan, and British journalist Alan Shadrake (Rajah 2012: 47).

What should one make of a legal system that time and again goes after political dissidents for suggesting that the judiciary is not independent of political pressure? Do such lawsuits not, in fact, provide support for the very arguments they seek to refute? As Rajah further points out, when we look at the history of how Singapore's broad and vague laws were originally enacted, we find that they all came about

in response to moments of contestation in the public domain. More importantly, these 'laws' have been instrumental in silencing critique emanating from non-state actors and institutions while sustaining the government's standing as a 'rule of law' regime. In this way, legislation has been central to effecting illiberalism. [...] Put differently, these Acts have silenced non-state actors that, in conditions of political liberalism, would enable advocates for 'law' (such as the legal professions and civil society) to moderate

state power. In brief, the legislation I study illustrates that ‘law’ has been the state’s instrument for silencing critique.¹⁰⁰ (Rajah 2012: 13)

For these reasons, it seems plausible to assume that, just as in the case with Barisan, Roy’s primary offence was not to have broken any law, but to have ventured outside the societal OB markers that regulate which forms of speech are politically permitted. Because most of what he wrote did not constitute a crime, however – at least not in any plausible sense – some other way of justifying action against him had to be found. Hence, when he wrote the defamatory sentence, this must have provided a “heaven-sent” opportunity of justifying action against him.

The second parallel to Roy’s case is less obvious, though in my view no less significant. This is the parallel between Singapore’s broad and vague laws – which Roy fell afoul of – and the similarly broad and vague community guidelines that govern many social media platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook and YouTube, which have in recent times been similarly accused of shutting down politically inconvenient voices. Such accusations have come from both the political left and the political right, who have variously complained about being removed, “shadowbanned” – meaning that the user is blocked from platforms without knowing it themselves – and of having their channels demonetized, after having violated some broad and/or vaguely formulated community guideline set by the platform in question.

One highly publicized example of this came in January 2021, when then US president Donald Trump was “indefinitely suspended” from Twitter, following the January 6 attacks on the US Capitol, which according to many had been spurred on or even instigated by his constant tweeting following the election, which he lost but claimed to have won. “We faced an extraordinary and untenable circumstance, forcing us to focus all of our actions on public safety”, wrote Twitter CEO and founder, Jack Dorsey, in response to the decision. “Offline harm as a result of online speech is

¹⁰⁰ As a note, I should point out that Rajah writes “law” in quotation marks not to suggest that these are not “real” laws, but to signal that all laws are, in her view, social constructs.

demonstrably real, and what drives our policy and enforcement above all”.¹⁰¹ As part of his suspension, Trump’s entire Twitter history was scrubbed, such that users could no longer read even his old tweets.

On the political right, the decision was met by harsh criticism, with many arguing that it was politically motivated rather than based on principle. To prove their point, critics pointed to what they saw as the liberal bias of Twitter as an organization, citing among other things the fact that several Twitter executives had donated money to the Biden campaign, while none had donated to the Trump campaign (see Singman & Hasson 2020). More significantly, they pointed out that other, arguably worse actors – such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Nicolás Maduro, and Xi Jinping – have not been removed from Twitter, despite being guilty of exactly the same offenses as Trump, only worse (Khomeini, for instance, has repeatedly called for terror attacks and the murder of Israelis, as well as the destruction of Israel) (see Wulfsohn 2021). Hence, they argued, the decision to remove Trump had nothing to do with a principled stance regarding what kind of speech should be allowed on Twitter, but everything to do with the company’s desire to silence a sitting president that they did not like. Moderate publication *The Economist* agreed. “The tech industry’s concentration means that a few unelected and unaccountable executives are in control”, they wrote. “Perhaps their intent really is to protect democracy, but they may also have other, less elevated motives” (*The Economist* 2021)

Another, less publicized example – though in many ways more typical – came in 2019, when conservative YouTuber Steven Crowder had his channel (“Louder with Crowder”) demonetized for having repeatedly mocked the sexual orientation of journalist Carlos Maza (who is gay), with whom Crowder had long been involved in a mutual back-and-forth. In response to the incident, another YouTuber – evolutionary biologist and self-proclaimed “left-wing radical”, Bret Weinstein – posted a video in which he offered his analysis of what had happened. “Many have pointed out that others have done far worse on YouTube and not had their channels demonetized”, Weinstein

¹⁰¹ This was said in a tweet: <https://twitter.com/jack/status/1349510769268850690?lang=en>

said. So why was Crowder being removed? “The key concept”, Weinstein suggested, “is *selective enforcement*, or what I call ‘the principle of the low-posted speed limit’”:

You can imagine a town in which the speed limit was posted so low that people routinely violated it as they passed through town, and the enforcement authorities can decide if it wants to pull over black people, gay people, Jews, hippies, or whatever it doesn’t like. The law itself isn’t biased but the enforcement makes it as if it were. So, in one sense, because Crowder is such a big target, he is facing enforcement that may not be seen elsewhere. (Weinstein 2019)

On the left, Canadian journalist Meghan Murphy – founder of the online magazine *Feminist Current* – was permanently banned from Twitter in 2018, after having referred to a transgender woman, Jessica Yaniv, as “him”, stating that “men aren’t women”. Murphy’s comments were made in the context of a Twitter argument between her and Yaniv about whether or not transwomen should be allowed into (biological) women’s spaces. The argument was prompted by the fact that Yaniv had filed a series of discrimination complaints with the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal after having been refused service at a number of waxing salons, the reason being that Yaniv has male genitalia, which the staff at the salons felt uncomfortable working with. According to Murphy, referring to Yaniv as “him” was stating a relevant biological fact. According to Twitter, however, Murphy’s comments were in violation of the platform’s guideline against misgendering. “Twitter is quite literally enforcing a 1984-style version of newspeak, wherein we may not speak or name material reality”, Murphy said in response to the ban. “The fact that it is so-called progressives, by and large, is appalling” (Hasson 2019).

Commenting on the issue of big tech censorship more generally, left-wing journalist Glenn Greenwald cautioned that while it tends to begin with banning “the person everyone agrees is detestable and offers nothing positive to the discourse” – mentioning right-wing provocateur Milo Yiannopoulos as an example – this establishes a precedent “that there are now lines being drawn by tech companies, and very

predictably that line starts to move inward towards the mainstream”. “I know a lot of people in Silicon Valley”, Greenwald said:

Some of them are very skilful at a very narrow set of human capabilities, like computer code, or marketing, or envisioning how new websites might function. How in any way does that make them in a position of some sort of philosopher king, to be able to sit in judgement as overlords of our discourse and decree not only what is permissible or impermissible, but also what is true and false when it comes to very highly complex questions? (Greenwald 2020)

Along the same lines, Weinstein argued that tech platforms’ censorship of speech should not be seen as a left-right issue, but one concerning both sides of the political spectrum. Is it really in the public interest, Weinstein wondered, to give large, unaccountable corporations the power to singlehandedly decide who gets to speak and who does not, on the basis of vague and broadly formulated community guidelines that are only selectively enforced, and against which there is little recourse once the platforms decide to enforce them? “The reason [the first amendment] is very specifically limited to governmental interference”, Weinstein said, “is that the [American] founders, in particular, feared governmental tyranny”. However, “my guess is the very same logic that led them to build multiple protections into the US constitution against government overreach, would have caused them [...] to protect us also from these tech platforms and their disproportionate power” (Weinstein 2019). Later, in September 2020, Weinstein found himself on the receiving end of a Twitter ban, as his account “ArticlesOfUnity” – belonging to the presidential ticket that he proposed for the 2020 US presidential election, in which a governing team of one Democrat (Tulsi Gabbard) and one Republican (Dan Crenshaw) would be fielded in an attempt to break the “duopoly” of Democrats and Republicans – was temporarily suspended, including a ban on any links to the website ArticlesOfUnity.org. “To date, Twitter has offered no public explanation for these actions despite a large outcry against this apparently flagrant act of censorship”, the Unity 2020 group wrote on their website. However,

“Twitter has given millions of dollars in donations to political causes and is routinely accused of censoring messages for political reasons, particularly views that challenge the political establishment”.¹⁰²

In relating these cases (of which there are doubtlessly many more) my aim is not to argue for or against any particular side. Instead, my aim is to point out how similar these cases are to the ones that we’ve seen in Singapore, in that the complaint is about vague and broad rules being selectively enforced, and on the basis of political calculation. Most importantly, I contend, although the tech platforms are private corporations, while Singapore is a state, this distinction should matter less than the fact that in both cases we are seeing a blurring of corporate and state power as it relates to governing speech, and by extension, governing society as a whole. On the one hand, as we’ve discussed, Singapore is a state that is organized largely as a corporation. On the other hand, Twitter, Facebook and Google are all corporation that are increasingly taking on roles and responsibilities previously held in monopoly by states, most importantly governing speech, but also as it relates to things like verifying identities and, lately, issuing currency. Taken together, we may therefore say that both Singapore and the tech platforms represent *new corporate/state formations that have set up structures of governance which cannot be well understood as either private or public, but must be understood as new syntheses which break down the previous dichotomy between private and public, as well as that between corporation and state* (see Kapferer 2010).

In this context, it should come as no surprise that one of the areas in which there has been most innovation – or subversion, depending on one’s view – is the area of law. As Hayek pointed out long ago, one of the most important differences between “free societies” and “planned societies” – by which he meant liberal, free-market capitalist societies, on the one hand, and communist and fascist societies, on the other – is that rule of law, in the sense of formal “rules of the game” set out beforehand, is only possible in the former, as rule of law cannot be used to direct society towards any

¹⁰² Press release published on Unity 2020’s website: <https://articlesofunity.org/2020/09/press-release-for-our-twitter-ban/>

particular outcome. “Formal principles”, Hayek wrote (2001: 77), “are intended to be merely instrumental in the pursuit of people’s various individual ends. And they are, or ought to be, intended for such long periods that it is impossible to know whether they will assist particular people more than others.” Hence, he argued, rule of law cannot exist in planned societies, as such societies must be able to bring about particular outcomes across time and across large groups of people, all of whom have to be coordinated in that direction. “The planning authority”, Hayek wrote,

cannot confine itself to providing opportunities for unknown people to make whatever use of them they like. It cannot tie itself down in advance to general and formal rules which prevent arbitrariness. It must provide for the actual needs of people as they arise and then choose deliberately between them. It must constantly decide questions which cannot be answered by formal principles only, and in making these decisions it must set up distinctions of merit between the needs of different people. (ibid: 77)

To be sure, Singapore and tech platforms like Twitter, Facebook and YouTube are in most ways very different from the “planned societies” of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union, which were what Hayek had in mind. Nevertheless, what makes the former similar to the latter – but entirely different from liberal states – is that both are fundamentally *corporatist* in nature, meaning that they seek to organize society “as the human body, with each organ performing its individual function but working in harmony with the whole” (as Oswald Mosley, leader of the British League of Fascists, put it). That is, after all, ultimately what a corporation is – an organization arranging individuals and groups into one “body” (*corpus*) for the purpose of reaching some particular outcome – whereas a liberal state, by contrast, is (or is supposed to be) a collection of individuals pursuing their own goals within the general framework provided to them by rule of law.

The difference, on the other hand, between Hayek’s “planned societies” and these new corporate/state formations that we are concerned with, is that while the former were self-enclosed, “total” systems – in which everything is “within the state,

nothing outside the state, nothing against the state”, as Benito Mussolini famously formulated it – the new corporate/state formations are open systems, which like any corporation have to operate within the framework of the liberal free-market order, and largely adapt to its rules. Hence, while the totalitarian states could more or less openly reject rule of law in favour of arbitrary state rule, these new corporate/state formations must present their departures from the rule of law *in the form of rule of law itself* – something they do, as we’ve seen, by applying “the principle of the low-posted speed limit” to more and more areas of social life. “In Singapore”, Rajah writes, rule of law “occupies resonant public and declaratory spaces”, while rule by law “is contained within the tedious detail of legal text and practice” (Rajah 2012: 50). Similarly, in the case of the tech platforms, arbitrary rule has come about not in the form of giving absolute power to executives, but in the form of introducing an increasing amount of rules that are harder and harder to follow, and/or to apply universally.

Fundamentally, however, in both Hayek’s “planned societies” and in the new corporate/state formations, the basic contradiction between planning and rule of law remains the same, namely that you cannot both govern society on the basis of clear rules announced beforehand, *and* direct society towards a particular outcome over time, because the more you do of one, the less you can do of the other.

One of the clearest examples of the ways in which the corporation and the state are evolving into one another, is the fight against so-called “fake news”, which both Singapore and the tech platforms have recently engaged in. Here, the Singaporean government has emerged as something of a global leader, through its controversial Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), a first-of-its-kind law that gives the government broad powers to flag or remove any online statement that it deems to be false or misleading. In the law, which came into effect in October 2019, “false statement” is broadly defined to mean any statement that “is false or misleading, whether wholly or in part, and whether on its own or in the context in which it appears” – a tautology which, as critics have pointed out, leaves much to ministerial discretion (see Thum 2020). Besides this, the only further qualification provided in the law as to which false statements may be removed or flagged is that such statements must be

contrary to the “public interest” – meaning that statements like “2 plus 2 equals 5” or “Polar bears are brown”, while false, will most likely not be taken down, as they are not contrary to the public interest. However, “public interest” is also very broadly defined in the law, as the law states that “it is in the public interest to do anything if the doing of that thing is necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of Singapore or any part of Singapore” – another tautology which leaves most of the real work of definition to ministerial discretion.

When the law was first proposed, many came out against it, arguing that it gives the government far too wide powers of deciding what is and is not true. Among them was Singaporean historian and noted government critic PJ Thum, who wrote that “the extremely broad definitions of falsehoods and public interest in POFMA allows, in theory, any criticism of the Singapore Government to be considered false” (Thum 2020). More controversially, he argued that fake news has not “had much of an impact in Singapore, with one major exception” – the ruling PAP. “The major examples of this”, Thum wrote, “are the numerous detentions under the Internal Security Act”, continuing:

Beginning with Operation Coldstore in 1963, politicians have told Singaporeans that people were being detained without trial on national security grounds due to involvement with radical communist conspiracies to subvert the state. Declassified documents have proven this to be a lie. [...] It is clear that politicians have abused their power by using the ISA to detain political opponents and cripple opposing political movements. The official statements that these were national security detentions designed to stop communist conspiracies is “fake news”: a major falsehood, for major political gain, which has destroyed the lives of many honest Singaporeans. Yet no politician has ever faced sanction for any of these falsehoods. (Thum 2018: 4)

Others chipped in. Opposition politician Lim Tean from People’s Voice said that “it is clear to me that POFMA is being used by this government ahead of the upcoming GE (general election) to silence its opponents and chill public discussion of unpopular

government policies” (Aravindan 2019). Reporters Without Borders called the law “totalitarian” (ibid). And journalist Kirsten Han said that it is “such a broad law that it’s hard to predict how it’s going to be applied”, but that “[w]hat’s of immediate concern is the chilling effect and the further entrenchment of self-censorship” (*Guardian* 2019-10-02).

In response to these criticisms, the government issued several statements in which they pointed out that it “is false that ‘politicians in power get to decide what is truth’ under POFMA”, as the law “applies only to factual statements that are false”.¹⁰³ To underline this point, the government issued several POFMA-directions against statements claiming otherwise, including one video by Thum, in which he argued that POFMA effectively makes criticism of the government illegal. “Contrary to what Mr Thum suggests”, the correction stated, “people are free to criticise and disagree with the Government”.¹⁰⁴ Nevertheless, within a month of the law being passed, *Reuters* reported that “three figures linked to the opposition and an opposition party have been told their online posts must carry a banner stating that they contain false information”, including one person who accused the government of influencing investment decisions by GIC, and another who claimed that white-collar unemployment was rising (Aravindan 2019). According to the government, all these statements represented instances of “factual statements that are false”, and that there was therefore no political motivation behind their removal. However, according to many critics, the fact that the law had been used so quickly against several oppositional figures suggested that the motivations behind the law, and its usage, might not be so pure.

Among those voicing such concern was Facebook itself, who already before the law had been passed said that they were “concerned the law grants broad powers to the government” (Aravindan 2019). With the documented use of the law against several oppositional voices, Facebook now added that such orders “are disproportionate and contradict the government’s claim that POFMA would not be used as a censorship tool” (*BBC* 2020-02-19). Nevertheless, soon after Singapore introduced POFMA, both

¹⁰³ Online government statement: <https://www.gov.sg/article/factually270520>

¹⁰⁴ Online government statement: <https://www.gov.sg/article/factually-corrections-on-falsehoods-about-pofma-by-thum-ping-tjin>

Facebook and Twitter began to roll out their own “fake news” policies at scale, first to deal with fake news relating to the SARS-CoV-2 epidemic, and then to do the same thing during the 2020 US presidential election. In this, the tech platforms faced some of the same criticisms that PAP faced for its fake news law, especially from Trump supporters who claimed that the label “fake news” was disproportionately attached to Trump’s tweets, as well as to conservative accounts more generally. Trump spokeswoman, Samantha Zager, said that “across social media platforms, it’s clear the Silicon Valley Mafia creates arbitrary rules that do not apply equally to every account and instead are used to silence any views in opposition to those held by the liberal Big Tech coastal elites” (Culliford 2020).

Trump supporters were not the only ones to voice such concern, however. Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg himself said that he did not “think that Facebook or internet platforms in general should be arbiters of truth”, adding that political speech in particular “is one of the most sensitive parts in a democracy, and people should be able to see what politicians say” (Rodriquez 2020). To many observers, these comments were clearly aimed at Twitter, who had taken a much more active – and according to some, censorious – approach to flagging and removing content for being “fake news”. Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey responded that, contrary to Zuckerberg’s claim, Twitter’s fake news policy “does not make us an ‘arbiter of truth’”, as their intention is only “to connect the dots of conflicting statements and show the information in dispute so people can judge for themselves”.¹⁰⁵

In discussing this, my aim is once again not to take sides. Instead, it is to point out that in all these fights against “fake news”, we are seeing a process through which previous forms of governance are being replaced by a new form of governance, in which the state and the corporation are evolving into one another. Clearly, this co-evolution looks different depending on one’s vantage point. The tech platforms, on their part, have moved from a largely libertarian position of viewing information-sharing as a good in itself – in 2012, for instance, Twitter described themselves as “the free speech wing of the free speech party” (Halliday 2012) – to a position of being much more concerned

¹⁰⁵ This was said in a tweet: <https://twitter.com/jack/status/1265837139360485376?lang=en>

with curating the kind of speech that is allowed on the platforms, in order to bring about certain favoured community outcomes. For Singapore, on the other hand, the fight against fake news represents a continuation of a longer history of using vague and broad legislation to selectively persecute political dissidents, which the government has done on the argument that the Western model of “the market-place of ideas” does not work in a society like Singapore.

More important than these differences, however, is the deep homology that exists between the two. While Singapore and the tech platforms do not share the same ideological starting points, they both appear to have largely abandoned the idea that society can and should be governed on the basis of clear rules announced beforehand, which they have replaced with the contrary idea that society must be governed on the basis of an increasing amount of “community guidelines” – all of which embody today’s notions of what is true, false and safe, but few of which provide generalizable principles for action that can be universally applied. Specifically, while Singapore and the tech platforms maintain different ideological stances on the value of freedom of speech as a principle, they both have largely abandoned the liberal idea that the decentralized process of free speech itself should be trusted to guide society towards greater and greater truth. This, they have replaced with the contrary idea that trust must be placed some centralized, third-party authority – acting in the name of “society” or “the community” – to guide the process of free speech away from dangerous falsehoods, which are said to “spread faster than the truth” (see McArdle 2018).

And indeed, they may well be right about this! The point, however, is that this represents a clear departure in terms of how societies are governed, away from a liberal model in which society is governed on the basis of clear rules announced beforehand, and towards a corporate model in which society is governed on the basis of *a particular vision of how citizens/users should interact with and treat one another, in order to bring about a particular outcome.*

A second “great transformation”? Kapferer and Wolin

In this context, we may turn to the work of anthropologist Bruce Kapferer, who has argued that we are currently living through a second “great transformation”, brought about by “the emergence of the corporate state” (Kapferer 2010).

During the first great transformation, which Polanyi described in his book of the same name (Polanyi 2001), the economy was disembedded from society, and became an increasingly autonomous sphere of human activity governed by abstract and universal principles that could be understood without reference to the cultural or social environments in which they took place. In this sphere, things not only had a qualitative value based on their essence (say, the value of an apple being its “appleness”) but also a quantitative value that could be understood as a fraction of everything else (say, the value of an apple being equal to five strawberries, or one orange). In this new sphere, it also became possible to formulate laws that applied to the abstract individual, rather than to specific individuals living in specific communities, as the “free” market made it possible for individuals to organize most of their lives on the basis of economic exchange with strangers. As a result of this, an entirely new form society became possible, in which people could organize their dealings with one another in terms of only their rights and their property – to the point that, in the 1980’s, a certain British politician could plausibly claim that “there is no such thing as society, only individuals and their families”, all other relations being organized by the market. To some, this brought freedom; to others, alienation – yet to most observers, from Adam Smith to Karl Marx, it provided the foundations for the modern world as we know it.

According to Kapferer, this is now about to come to an end, as the emergence of the corporate state brings about (and is brought about by) a reversal of the great transformation described by Polanyi. According to Kapferer, however, rather than a simple reversal – where the economy is once again embedded in society and social institutions – the logic goes the other way around, such that society itself is becoming embedded in the economy. According to Kapferer, this leads to “a sociologizing of the *idea* of the economy and the market” whereby the market “becomes the principle of social processes”. “The idea of the corporate state”, he writes,

[...] suggests that the market and the conceptualization of the economic are not so much resubmerged in the social and the political but become their very constitution and form. The political and the social—society itself—are not founded in the economic, as many arguments dubbed as economicist might assert; instead, they are, in themselves, shapes of the economic and of the market or the various guises of the economic. [...] In this, the economic inhabits all modes of existence so that even if they are not conceived as overtly economic actions or institutions (e.g., love, friendship, family interaction, political practice, etc.), they teleologically exemplify an economic logic or principle. (Kapferer 2010: 127)

As a result of this, many of the concepts that the modern world was built around, such as rule of law, have to be renegotiated and transformed. In the liberal conception, rule of law depended crucially on the separation of market and society, as this was what allowed society – or more realistically, the state – to formulate laws that applied to all citizens equally, as the state was not captured by any particular economic interests. The autonomous market also allowed the autonomous individual, for whom liberal laws are made, to emerge as a historical possibility, as the market was free from political dictation. Conversely, therefore, the more that the distinction between market and society is blurred, the less will it be possible for something like the liberal conception of rule of law to exist, as there will no longer exist a free market in which people can constitute themselves as autonomous individuals, nor a state capable of governing such autonomous individuals from a position outside of the market.

Historically, the way that this blurring of society and the market has happened is in the form of the totalitarian state, which sought to eliminate the distinction by putting the government completely in charge of the economy (which is why Hayek wrote about totalitarianism as the main threat to rule of law). Today, Kapferer says however, we are seeing a different logic establish itself. In this new landscape, individuals are not governed by a state that seeks to control and subordinate the market to itself. Instead, they are increasingly governed by a state that is itself fully constituted by the market. At the same time as this is happening – and as a consequence – the market no longer

constitutes an autonomous zone with respect to “society”, as it increasingly contains these corporate/state entities that are concerned not only with market competition – like typical corporations – but also with societal governance. Hence, *while the state is no longer able to govern the market from a place external to it, the market, on its part, is no longer able to provide individuals with a space in which they can organize their lives free from corporate/state control*. “What had been isolated and conceptualized as distinct and given heightened autonomy”, Kapferer writes, “has in fact been reconceived as the essence of the social.”

Observing the same trend in the US context, political philosopher Sheldon Wolin describes how the state has undergone a process of gradual corporatization since the end of World War II, the outcome of which he brands a system of “inverted totalitarianism”. This, he opposes to “classical totalitarianism” – such as Stalinism and Nazism – noting “a crucial difference between classical and inverted totalitarianism”, namely that “in the former economics was subordinate to politics”, whereas in the latter “the reverse is true: economics dominates politics – and with that domination come different forms of ruthlessness” (Wolin 2008: 58). Inverted totalitarianism, Wolin writes,

while exploiting the authority and resources of the state, gains its dynamic by combining with other forms of power [...] most notably by encouraging a symbiotic relationship between traditional government and the system of “private” governance represented by the modern business corporation. The result is not a system of codetermination by equal partners who retain their distinctive identities but rather a system that represents the political coming-of-age of corporate power (ibid: xiii).

While neither Kapferer nor Wolin would probably put it in these terms, the central point that we get from both, I would say, is that liberalism is not uniquely undermined by either the state or the market. Instead, liberalism is undermined *whenever the distinction between state and market is blurred* – which is why you get such similar outcomes from what at first glance appears to be contrary developments: when the state seeks to fully

control the market, on the one hand, and when the state becomes a market actor in its own right, on the other. Singapore and the tech platforms represent examples of the latter, Hayek's "planned societies" examples of the former.

"Where do we draw the line?" Liberalism and its opposite

Back to Roy's case. Here, the conflict between liberalism and its opposite was seen most clearly in Roy's attempt to defend his right to freedom of speech on the basis that he had sought to engage in a societal process of discovery, through which the truth about the government's handling of the citizens' money could be brought to light. In this, he presented himself as a classical liberal, in that he argued that the interest of society was to engage in this process of discovery, no matter what the outcome might be, *not* to protect the government against uncomfortable speech by citizens like himself! Against this, the judge argued that Roy's speech should not be protected, as he had had not engaged in a societal process of discovery, but made the "totally unnecessary" accusation that the prime minister is a thief "when what he had wanted to do was to criticise the CPF policy of the government". Hence, the judge argued, there was no reason for society – or the court – to grant Roy his right to freedom of speech in this case, as the prime minister, like everyone else, has a right to be protected against defamatory claims, especially since "the reputation of public leaders in Singapore can [...] be considered to be their 'whole life'".

At one level of analysis, this could be read as simply a formal disagreement about the law, and how to interpret the facts of the case in light of it. Had Roy implied that the prime minister was guilty of stealing the citizens' money, and should such an accusation be tolerated under freedom of speech? The judge's answer was "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second, while Roy, on the other hand, maintained that he had not meant to say that the prime minister was guilty of theft – at least not in sense of the term "misappropriation" – and that he could therefore not be found guilty of having "cynically defamed" the prime minister.

At another level, Roy's case brought to life a much more fundamental conflict between liberalism and corporatism as representing *different relations between the*

rulers and the ruled – a conflict that was simultaneously hidden in and expressed through the formal/legal disagreement between Roy and the judge. For the purposes of the courtroom, the question of Roy’s guilt was a matter of whether or not he had broken the law, and nothing else. The point, however, is that that would also have been true if Roy had been on trial for, say, breathing the air. Then, too, the only question for the courtroom would have been to determine whether or not Roy had in fact committed the crime of breathing the air (which he would no doubt be found guilty of), and nothing else.

Of course, the law against defamation is not nearly as ridiculous as a law against breathing the air, the only conceivable function of which could be to allow the government to selectively prosecute whoever they wished to prosecute. Still, the line between rule of law as providing citizens with “clear rules of the game announced beforehand”, on the one hand, and rule by law as providing the government with vague and broad rules that they can selectively enforced, on the other, is not drawn at a law against breathing the air – it is drawn much earlier than that! Specifically, Roy argued, it is drawn much earlier than Singapore’s defamation laws, which in his view make it virtually impossible for “ordinary citizens” to speak truth to power. Hence, Roy argued, the net effect of such laws is to protect the state against unwanted speech by its citizens, rather than to protect the citizens against abuse by the government – and in particular, to protect the “reputation” and “moral authority” of the prime minister against the very process through which the citizens may determine for themselves whether or not the prime minister deserves his “reputation” and “moral authority” in the first place. “Where then do we draw the line?”, Roy asked in his closing statement, continuing:

Where public officials may find it too convenient to use the law, and to allow individuals to use the law to settle even matters which have an element of public interest to them, yet where the government would then not partake in its corresponding responsibility to respond to matters of public interest, then the court has to take a firm stand on this and not allow the law to be so easily slighted and misused. In the balance of the freedom of speech and the resultant chilling effect and social degeneration, the court has to take an earnest look at reforming the law and especially its use by public

officials, so that we do not allow the law to be made a mockery of while the lives of Singaporeans become systematically compromised by the lax application of the law.

This, I suspect, is a debate from the future. As I have argued, what unites the corporate state with the “planned societies” of fascism and communism is that they all seek to undermine the rule of law in favour of arbitrary government; what makes the corporate state unique is that it masks this undermining of rule of law in the form of rule of law. From a research perspective, this means that when we look for concrete examples of how rule of law is being undermined by the corporate state – and more generally, how rule of law is being undermined in today’s global economy, given the increasing prominence of the corporate state in that economy – we should not look for the kind of blatant examples that we know from history, such as Stalinist show trials, nightly “disappearances” of dissidents (though the latter have taken place in Singapore under the internal security act), or concentration camps. Instead, we must look at how arbitrary government is being increasingly inscribed into the very framework of rule of law – undermining it from within rather than without. In the conclusion, I will discuss this point further, introducing a concept that will be central to the next chapter: “The paradox of the foreign investor”.

Conclusion: totalitarianism, liberalism – and a new social democracy

I opened this chapter by relating Mauss’ concept of “total social fact”, and I said that the CPF can well be understood as a total social fact, as it is not just an institution among many, but rather a meta-institution: an institution that provides *the foundation for the social contract between people and state*.

Central to this social contract, as I pointed out in chapter four, are two forms of trust. First, the citizens have to trust the state to invest their money in a way that proves mutually beneficial over time. Second, the citizens have to trust the state to use its vague and broad laws only against those who in some general sense “deserve it”. These two forms of trust, I further pointed out, are closely related to one another, as the state claims that it will only be able to invest the citizens’ money on a properly long-term basis if it

is also in possession of laws that allow it to make sure that power does not easily slip into the hands of a less scrupulous government, which will use the money for short-term populist goals of redistribution and other forms of social spending.

According to Roy, the problem with this argument is that it is backwards. In his view, it is not because the state is in charge of the citizens' money that it has to be "trusted" to wield arbitrary power over the citizens. Instead, the logic goes the other way around. PAP secured its monopolistic hold on state power by using the Internal Security Act – the broadest possible of laws – against the political opposition. Then, they set up an economic and political system in which the citizens were forced to hand over their money to the state every month, in order to finance the state's various government-owned corporations, all of which earn private profits. *And once this system was in place*, the state used its broad and vague laws against any citizen who spoke up against the government, thereby making it virtually impossible for the citizens to opt out of the social contract, should they find it less than beneficial. As a result, the state has been getting the best of both worlds – on the one hand, the private profits of a corporation; on the other hand, the power of a state to extract public wealth – while the citizens have been getting the worst of both worlds, as they are both economically exploited and politically oppressed by the same corporate state entity.

Noam Chomsky once remarked that the worst kind of tyranny is to be ruled by a corporation, as such rule implies "tyranny by unaccountable, private concentrations of wealth [...] which is what corporations are" (Chomsky 2014). This, in essence, is also what Roy thinks about the Singaporean state. Not only does it use many of the same tactics as the typical tyrant or totalitarian state, albeit wearing different makeup. Its basic modus operandi is exactly the same as that of the totalitarian state – namely, to make the entire population work for the state, to exercise arbitrary power to that end, and to claim that *all of this is in the national interest*, even though in reality it serves only the interests of the ruling elite.

What I have sought to show is that, while there are clear similarities between the Singaporean version of the corporate state – what I have called the MM state – and the totalitarian state, there are also important differences, which make comparisons between

the two less straightforward. In chapters three and four, I laid out the case for the MM state being a form of social democracy adapted to global capitalism. In this chapter, we have looked at how the social contract of this state formation behaves when it is challenged. In his writings about the CPF, Roy Ngerng challenged the legitimacy of the social contract by pointing to what he saw as its fatal flaw, which is that the government has earned much higher rates of returns from the CPF than it has given back to the citizens, at the same time as many Singaporeans do not have enough savings in their CPF to retire.

As far as Roy is concerned, this is legalized theft, as the citizens would have been in a much better financial shape had they earned the “real” rate of return on their money. As a consequence of making these claims, Roy came into contact with the social contract in its legal form, which is the country’s many vague and broad laws that the government uses against dissidents. In this, Roy most importantly encountered an important aspect of the MM state, which is that the flip-side of “trust” as the foundation of the social contract is a state of *lawlessness* for anyone who does not trust the state – a lawlessness that is activated whenever a citizen makes it known that he or she does not trust the state, and wishes to opt-out of the social contract.

This lawlessness, I propose, is akin to the “state of exception” described by Agamben, in which the sovereign strips off its veneer of legality and shows its *true face*. According to Agamben, this state of exception is always there, just beneath the surface of legality, as there cannot be such a thing as a legal order without a sovereign power that transcends that legal order. As a result, Agamben argues, the paradigmatic expression of sovereignty is not to be found in the routinely functional legal order – rule of law – but in a place like the Nazi concentration camp, since this is where the ultimate foundation of rule of law shows itself to be also its point of contradiction, as citizens are stripped of their rights and reduced to a state of “bare life” (Agamben 1998: 166ff), facing sovereignty in its pure form as “he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt 2005: 5).

Most importantly, Agamben describes how the totalitarian states of the 20th century operated *dual legal systems*, in which the exception to the rule of law coexisted

with the normal legal order. “As is well known”, Agamben writes, “what characterizes both the Fascist and Nazi regimes is that they allowed the existing constitutions (the Albertine Statute and the Weimar Constitution, respectively) to subsist, and [...] they placed beside the legal constitution a second structure, often not legally formalized, that could exist alongside the other because of the state of exception.” (Agamben 2005: 48). The important difference between these dual legal systems and the one we’ve seen in Singapore, I will say, is that in Singapore there is not just the paradox of sovereignty, but also what I call “the paradox of foreign investors”. This latter paradox consists in the fact that foreign investors want both rule of law and its suspension, as they want their dealings with the MM state to be governed strictly by rule of law, *and* to have the benefits that come from suspending the rule of law in the relation between the state and the population. Significantly, this latter paradox simultaneously relies on, and changes the meaning of, the paradox of sovereignty. On the one hand, it relies on the fact that the sovereign both upholds the law and is able to decide on its exception (or rather, its selective enforcement). On the other hand, it changes the meaning of that exception, as most foreign investors would not be interested in dealing with a sovereign state that suspended the rule of law in the form of concentration camps and other similarly conspicuous forms of exception, as that would both undermine their trust that the state will uphold the rule of law in the commercial arena, as well as upset their (and their customers’) liberal sensibilities. Hence, in the MM state, the state of exception has to be much more covert – hidden in the “tedious detail of legal text and practice”, as Rajah puts it, rather than openly enacted – in order to satisfy the contradictory wishes of foreign investors to get the benefits of both liberalism (free market capitalism and rule of law) and totalitarianism (social control and discipline), without the costs of either.

When we look for what Agamben calls “paradigms of governance” (2005: 1) in the global economy, therefore, we should not be looking to the past – to the concentration camp – but rather to the kinds of trials that we’ve discussed in this chapter, both as they are orchestrated by states (as in the case of Roy vs. Lee) and as they are orchestrated by corporations (as in the case of the social media platforms). In my view, this is where the state of exception lives in the corporate state, and in the global economy more generally: not in overt acts of stripping entire groups of people

of all their rights (as in the case of the concentration camp and the gulag), but in covert acts of stripping “problematic” individuals of their rights one by one, through the use of broad and vague legislation which achieves this outcome without making investors doubt the state’s general commitment to rule of law. Make no mistake: for the individuals who face this new state of exception, the experience is equally one of lawlessness. Yet in contrast to the concentration camp, this form of lawlessness presents itself in *an exceedingly legal form*, as it is brought about through an exceptional application of the law, rather than an exception from it. As such it is less brutal, but for the same reason more ubiquitous and potentially all-encompassing.

This is why, at the start of this chapter, I suggested that the CPF system, and the protests against it, should be understood as “total social facts”. By studying the CPF as an institution, we are able to study the social contract in its concrete form, as the CPF makes the social contract possible. And by studying the protests against the CPF, in turn, we are able to study this social contract *at the margin* – where we find that “trust” as the foundation for the legal order is equal to a state of lawlessness for those who do not trust the state.

In the next chapter, we will delve deeper into the mechanics of this lawlessness, by looking at it from the point of view of some more citizens who decided to speak up against the government. What is their experience of the lawlessness that they have entered into? How does it affect their relation to the state? What did they do and say? How do they act in this space of lawlessness? And what novel modes of resistance are found here?

Chapter 6:

“Return Our CPF!”

Lawlessness in the Court of Law

“The ISA is not a law; it is lawlessness.”

- Tee Seng, Singaporean
activist¹⁰⁶

A Yellow Sit-in

On November 16, 2016, a small protest was organized in Hong Lim Park in Singapore. The protest was in solidarity with a bigger protest that was happening at that time in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, called “Bersih” (meaning “clean” in Bahasa) – a protest movement that called for “genuine democracy” and electoral reform in Malaysia, and that would later play an important role in ousting the ruling government there. The Hong Lim Park solidarity sit-in was organized by a Singaporean civil society group called Community Action Network (CAN), one of Singapore’s most active and notable civil society groups. They called it a “Yellow sit-in”, due to the fact that the Bersih movement encouraged all its participants to wear yellow t-shirts. So too at the Singapore sit-in: most participants were wearing yellow, and CAN also sold yellow t-shirts with the Bersih logo on them.

¹⁰⁶ Personal communication.

The Singapore event was very small: only around fifteen people attended, in sharp contrast to the massive Bersih protest in Kuala Lumpur, which gathered somewhere between twenty and hundred thousand people, depending on the estimation. The Singapore organizers had put up a small table in Hong Lim Park, covered with a yellow cloth, on which was painted the Bersih logo. On the ground were placed two flags, one Singaporean and one Malaysian. There was also a small sign on which the five demands of the Bersih movement were reproduced: 1. Ensure clean elections, 2. Uphold a clean government, 3. Strengthen parliamentary democracy, 4. Respect the right to dissent, 5. Empower Sabah and Sarawak.

I went to the sit-in together with two journalist friends of mine, James and Fatima. Because of the small size of the event, the atmosphere was very relaxed. More or less everyone knew each other, making it feel more like a meet-and-greet than a genuine protest. There was only one speaker, Jolovan Wham, a prominent figure in Singapore civil society, known mostly for his work with foreign workers, but also an outspoken critic of the government. He spoke briefly about the need for solidarity between Singapore and Malaysia, saying that “the things they are fighting for are things we are also fighting for”. The demonstration went on for only one hour, from five to six pm. As the clock turned six, Jolovan picked up the microphone to inform the participants that the protest was over. “We have booked this space from five to six”, he said, “and so now the sit-in is officially over”.

This last remark was tactically important, as any breaking of rules can easily result in fines or even jail for protestors when organizing an event in Hong Lim Park, as the government does not typically look through their fingers if the smallest rule is not followed. Even for a small protest like this one, there will be Internal Security Department (ISD) officers present, dressed in plain clothes, hanging around the park, taking photos and making notes. Or at least, so most activists are convinced: if you actually engage one of these plain-clothes people hanging around at protests, they will deny that they are from the ISD. At six pm, therefore, we all left; me and my two friends went to grab some food in China Town, which is just a couple of minutes’ walk from Hong Lim Park.

Having gotten just a few hundred meters away from the park, however, three policemen came chasing after us, asking if we had been to the event at the Speakers Corner. “Yes we have”, we replied. “In that case you need to come with us to the police station”, one of the policemen informed us. “It is just a routine thing. All we need to do is to take your statement.” As we walked over to the police station, I struck up a conversation with one of the officers. I asked him again why we were being taken to the police station. He repeated the answer: this was just a routine thing, nothing to worry about. I told him that, in his eyes, I must be a weird presence. “What’s an *angmoh* [white guy] like me doing at a protest in Singapore?”, I said. “Yeah, I was actually wondering that”, he laughed. “Well, you see, I’m a social scientist,” I said, “and part of my work is looking at Singapore politics. That’s why I came here.” He asked me if I knew that foreigners are not allowed to participate in demonstrations in Hong Lim Park. I said that I was aware of that, but that the law also makes a distinction between participation and observation. “As a foreigner”, I said, “I’m not allowed to participate, but I am allowed to observe, right? I didn’t speak, I didn’t organize, I didn’t clap. I was just there – observing”.

When we arrived at the police station, we found that most if not all of the fifteen people who had participated at the demonstration had been rounded up, and squeezed into the tiny police station that is (fittingly enough) located on the edge of the park. I was asked to sit down on a chair next to a young police officer – a guy in his early twenties by the look of it – who began to interrogate me. “Why did you come to Hong Lim Park today?”, he asked. I told him that I am a social anthropologist (“it’s sort of like sociology”) and that part of my research is looking into activism in Singapore. He asked me what today’s protest was about. I told him the story: it is in solidarity with the Bersih movement. Apparently, he did not know what Bersih was, so I explained that it is a movement against the perceived corruption of the Malaysian government. This remark made him visibly uncomfortable. “Corruption, you say?” Clearly, this was a bad word, one that I should not have used – a trigger word, it seemed, that would cause big problems if he had to write it down in his file. I got the impression that he wanted me to rephrase. “Well,” I said, “what Bersih is really about is election reform. They feel that elections aren’t fully fair, and they therefore want their country to be more

democratic. So you could say that it's a pro-democracy movement." That was apparently a better answer, so he wrote it down.

Next, he asked me if I knew that foreigners are not allowed to participate in demonstrations in Singapore. This appeared to be his main line of questioning. I repeated the answer that I had given his colleague. "I was only observing", I said. "It is part of my job to observe different parts of Singapore society, and to me, protests like these, being a rarity, are very interesting." I also remarked that the distinction between observation and participation is fairly ambiguous, in the context of a protest. "Most participants do nothing other than observe", I said. I also delved into a somewhat long – and fairly stupid, given the context – explanation about how anthropologists have a research method called "participant observation", which indeed shares some of this ambiguity. Nevertheless, I said, while engaging in participant observation, "I did my best to only observe."

An hour or so after we had arrived, we were told we could leave the police station. I then debriefed with my journalist friends. I was specifically interested to hear if James, who is also a foreigner (he's from Malaysia), had been asked the same questions about foreign participation. He had. And he had given a similar answer to mine: he is a journalist; he was not a participant, but an observer. These explanations on our part seemed to have been successful enough, as the headline in the national newspaper three days later read: "The police are investigating the use of Singapore and Malaysian flags by participants of an event at Hong Lim Park on Sunday (Nov 13) that was held in support of the upcoming Bersih 5 rally in Malaysia" (Lee 2016a). The story, we learned, was this. While the protest in Hong Lim Park had applied for a general license – and had indeed kept within the allotted time that it was given – the organizers had not applied for a specific license to display flags. This was apparently in violation of the so-called "National Emblem (Control of Display) Act", a law that, among other things, regulates when and where someone is allowed to display flags. I had not been asked any questions about the use of flags at the police station, nor did anyone else mention having been asked about it when some of us talked outside of the police station after the interrogation.

As part of the investigation into the alleged flag-offence, police officers had however gone home to veteran activist Tan Tee Seng (quoted at the start of this chapter), who had been part of organizing the event, but had left early. At 8.30pm on the day of the protest, four police officers had showed up at his door to ask him some questions about the protest, and in particular its display of a Malaysian and a Singaporean flag. As the officers had left Tee Seng's apartment, he made a Facebook post where he recounted the conversation:

Police officer: Are you aware that holding in public Malaysian flag is an offence?

Me: No (looking incredulous)

Police officer: Under National Emblems Act Chapter 196, shall I read it to you.

Me: no need, I trust Google more

After a while,

Me: Looks like a stupid law to me. Got to change it.

Police officer: we are just investigating accordingly.

Me: I was hoping MPs and Ministers got the chance to read police reports and the statement. Anyway why are athletes allow to display the country flags and run round the stadium when they win?

Police officer: Those are sanctioned events.

Me: You mean events at Hong Lim park is not sanction by the law?

Police officer: we are just investigating

Me: Law must have basis, right? To disallow the display of state flags maybe is to prevent abusing the symbol of the country. We were very respectful of the flags, I was holding it gingerly.

(Finally, the statement go something like this. Not aware of the offence but treated the flags respectfully)

In the comment section of Tee Seng's post, many others made similar observations: this was not really about flags, but a matter of "harassment" and "intimidation" of a peaceful protest. To that end, some pointed out that there are many other occasions when citizens display flags in public, without this ever resulting in a police investigation. Another

veteran activist, Teo Soh Lung – who, in 1987, was arrested by the ISD together with Tee Seng during Operation Spectrum (see chapter three) – remarked that, “A lot of vehicles carry little flags throughout the year. Was yours a paper flag or the national flag of the size fit for the country?” Another person wrote, “What else can we do but to hold the flag? Wear it around the waist like a sarong is it?” Another: “I remembered one MP even allowed his grassroots supporters to place many Singapore flags on the floor, making big patterns [...] Why was he not investigated?” And another: “They didn’t arrest the Filipinos of putting up the Philippines flags during their public celebration of their country’s Independence Day in Singapore’s public space but now, they are bothered by you holding the Malaysian flag in protest?” Clearly, all of them thought, investigating the protest for unlawful use of flags was an example of rule by law, not rule of law.

I begin with this short anecdote, as it illustrates the general problem facing activists and political dissidents in Singapore, which is that there is *always some law that they are at risk of violating*.

For tourists, this aspect about Singapore is often experienced as a somewhat amusing and quite quirky feature of the authoritarian city-state. Indeed, it is in many ways an openly advertised self-image, as many tourist shops in Singapore sell t-shirts with the print, “Singapore is a fine city”, with “fine” being used in the double sense of both “nice” and “monetary penalty”. Most people will no doubt have heard about Singapore’s ban against chewing gum and spitting; some might even remember the story of American teenager Michael Fay, who in 1994 was sentenced to four strokes of the cane after having been found guilty of vandalism (primarily spraying and slashing tires of cars). Lee Kuan Yew commented on this image of Singapore, noting how foreigners “don’t know where Singapore is, they are not interested. They think only of Michael Fay [...], then maybe caning, chewing gum ... strange odd place this Singapore” (quoted in Plate 2013: 41). For activists and people in the political opposition, by contrast, this aspect of Singapore comes at them in terms of *an excess of legal means* that the state has at its disposal, and that it will routinely use against them.

This chapter will be focused specifically on the experience of going to court, and trying to defend oneself against these types of laws. For citizens who face this challenge, there is a particular problem that they must deal with: should they accept defeat, as they most certainly did break the law? Or should they seek to challenge the legitimacy of the laws themselves?

The activists: Hui Hui, Janet and Ivan

In this chapter, we will meet three activists: Janet Low, Ivan Koh and Han Hui Hui. The first two, Janet and Ivan, are largely unknown to the public, and got into activism late in life. The third of them, Hui Hui, got into activism very early in life, while she was still in middle school. She is quite well-known among Singaporeans, and considered to be a controversial figure by many.

Janet got into activism through another, more famous Singaporean activist, Gilbert Goh. Goh is most famous for having come up with the slogan “Singapore for Singaporeans”, and for having organized a very well-attended protest in 2013, in response to a government White Paper which suggested that Singapore’s population should increase to 6.9 million in 2033 – mostly on the basis of immigration – in order to deal with the ageing population of the country (see chapter two). Janet attended this protest, which sparked her anti-government sentiments. Most of her own activism, however, has centred around the issue of the CPF, where her main grievance has had to do with the issue of the “minimum sum”, which the government decided to increase just as Janet was reaching 55, making it difficult – not to say impossible – for her to take out her money. To Janet, this was a great betrayal, and she therefore decided to speak at the “Return Our CPF” protests. “This is my first time speaking to the public in my whole life, so I’m very nervous”, she said as she took the stage in 2014. “My name is Janet, if you don’t know my name – never mind. Just know that I’m an auntie, a Singaporean auntie; I don’t speak English [...] I speak Singlish”. After having introduced herself, she asked the audience a series of rhetorical questions:

What type of government do we want? Do you want tyrants as our leaders? Do we want to be oppressed? No! Do we want to live in fear and feeling insecure? No! Do we want justice and fairness? Yes! Do we want to misuse our funds? No, right? Do we want abuse of power? No! Do we want your CPF to return to you? Yes everybody! So, can we still trust the present party to run our country? Do they really look after our welfare? No! Then we have to ask: Why Singaporeans are you so stupid to pay millions of dollars to people to screw our own lives while we ourselves suffer?¹⁰⁷

Ivan is a retiree. He did not speak at any of the Return Our CPF protests – partly, I suspect, due to his poor English skills, though there are usually some Chinese speakers at protests in Singapore – but he attended with great enthusiasm. Most notably, he brought with him a placard which said “PAP = Murderers”, a phrase he also chanted loudly and repeatedly during the protests. This was in reference to the Graduate Mother’s Scheme, which in Ivan’s view was a genocidal project through which thousands if not millions of unborn Singaporeans were “killed”, meaning aborted or never conceived in the first place.

In 2017, Ivan and Janet returned to Hong Lim Park, after having been banned from organizing anything there for three years following the lawsuit against. As they returned to the park, they had both prepared speeches offering their side of the story, which they recorded and put on YouTube. It was a rainy day as they spoke, and there were very few people present – just me, Hui Hui, a filmmaker called Jason, and a few others. Ivan spoke about his grievance against the PAP government. “Three years ago,” he said in broken English, “I was being charged for public nuisance, for protesting [in] Hong Lim Park, Speaker’s Corner”:

I protest against the despicable abortion “stop at two” [policy] [...] by the evil and despicable PAP regime. They have created total grievances towards parents – abortions and sterilizations, and also forced the mother to abort her own child. Today, this system

¹⁰⁷ Available online: “#Return Our CPF 3 - HDB Protest Rally - Janet Low”.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UtD4QySj24o>

[is] the mother of all problems facing all sectors in our society. The court charged me for holding placard and chanting, “PAP is a murderer”. I have to defend myself in court. [...] It’s so scary. People get frightened. People pledge guilty and run out of the country, afraid of political persecution and entrapment. This “stop at two” policy has “genocided” millions of defenceless babies; one of my siblings have been “genocided” during the “stop at two”. [...] I hope there will be justice, for police interrogations, to our court trial.¹⁰⁸

Han Hui Hui is more well-known among Singaporeans, and indeed quite infamous. Roy introduced me to her, and before he did, he sought to manage my expectations a bit. “She’s really not that strange”, he said, assuming that what I had heard was precisely the opposite. We met up at a Hawker Centre in the western parts of Singapore, together with Hui Hui’s partner. Hui Hui told me about how she got into activism at a very young age, when she was still in secondary school. She began her activism by blogging about Singapore’s school system, criticizing the country’s system of “streaming”, according to which different students are put on different educational paths early in life depending on their tests scores. Hui Hui found this system to be unjust, as it prejudices people and sets some up for failure while propelling others to success. Later in life, she began writing about the CPF system, an issue she became interested in after having worked in finance. In 2015, she ran as an independent candidate in the general election for Radin Mas, a single-seat constituency. Originally, her plan had been to run as a candidate for the Reform Party. However, the head of the party, Kenneth Jeyaretnam (son of J.B. Jeyaretnam, Singapore’s first oppositional MP), removed her from the party ballot due to what he described as her “create approach to truth”. As she ran as an independent, her election slogan was “Return Our CPF”. She did not win.

¹⁰⁸ Available online: Return Our CPF - Ivan Koh Yew Beng (21 Jan 2017).
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FdMM439iQ7s>

The public nuisance

The “Return Our CPF” protests were a series of four protests organized during 2014 by Han Hui Hui and Roy Ngerng, starting with a first protest in June and ending with the last protest in November. The four events had different themes: the first one focused on the minimum sum; the second focused on the use of the CPF to pay for medical needs; the third focused on the use of the CPF in paying for public housing; and the fourth concluded the whole thing with a march.

On the morning of 26 November, 2014, the day before the fourth and final protest, Hui Hui went to Hong Lim Park to set up her equipment in the Speaker’s Corner. When she arrived, she was surprised to see that the park was already occupied by big tents belonging to the YMCA, who, it turned out, had also booked the park for the next day, for an event called “Proms @ the Park”, a social outreach event organized by the YMCA every year in a different park in Singapore. A standing feature during the YMCA events is a performance by a group called the “Y Stars”. On their website, they describe themselves as “a group of teenagers and young adults with Down’s Syndrome and other intellectual challenges, who share a common passion for visual and performing arts. Through public dance performances and art exposure, they create better awareness and understanding of persons with special needs.” This year, the Y Stars had prepared a dance performance to the music of Elvis Presley, called “Let’s Rock”. They had spent around 15 months in preparation for this event, which was supposed to be the highlight of the year for them.

When the CPF demonstrators were taken to court on the charge of having committed a “public nuisance”, a central aspect of the prosecution’s case was that the protestors had “traumatized” the Y Stars. The first days in court were spent ploughing through a long number of testimonies from parents of the Y Stars, who recounted how their day had been ruined by the CPF protestors. Such testimonies in fact made up the lion’s share of the prosecution’s witnesses. To give the reader a sense of what was said, here are some snippets:

I was at first angry then disappointed because I suppose I believe in the goodness of people. I thought, "Okay, whatever your cause is---" I---I didn't understand the cause, I was not aware of the cause and I feel that you have---you---you may want to speak up your cause but whatever your cause is you should not---it is not right to interrupt another person's activity. Moreover, you are interrupting a performance by people with special needs. [...] So, you know, maybe I was just too---too much faith in human nature to think that they could at least stop for 3½ minutes for us to perform.

Another:

Usually in [...] the past, [the Y Stars] are usually very ecstatic after a performance. They will be high fiving and they will be smiling, and they will like very proud of themselves. But this time around they were all pretty quiet, you know, when they came down from the stage they were quieter than usual. So I--I tried to tell them, you know, like tell them that they did a good job and the other parents took the cue and the volunteers also took the cue and we all tried to praise them for what they had done and distract them.

And another:

[D]owns Syndrome, you know, I mean tend to internalise their feelings. They may not express, they may not be in a position to vocally express because they may not have the vocal skills to express, so they may not even tell you how they feel. So they will just keep it inside them. That evening he was still very quiet, so I asked him, I said, "Benjamin, how are you? Are you okay?" He did look up to me and say, "Mum, why they do that?" So it was, I would say, difficult for me. I felt he---he---he was pain in a way, so I just said, "Oh, you know, that was not a nice thing, but forget about it, okay, and it wouldn't happen again." And I thought they would actually all forget about it in time [...] I was very, very much surprised because a few months back the YMCA was going to organize this year's Y Proms

and they said they wanted to do a video---a video interview with the Y Stars to ask them about the Y Proms [...] so we---I picked Michelle, because Michelle is very high functioning and she speaks very well. So before the cameras started I asked---told her, I said, “Michelle, I am going to ask you why you like the Y Proms, so after you answer the cameraman”. And when I asked her that, she said, “I don’t like the Y Proms” and she started crying, which shocked me, because I thought this is one year ago, how come you still talk about it. So I was shocked.

And another:

[...] If you’re asking my feelings, I think I was very annoyed that I mean we were actually spending the whole day just to doll them up and to get a nice performance, which YMCA Y Proms is always once a year only, and then I mean we had such disruptions, and I---personally is that it is a big place, if another group wants to have a rally also, they should have respect for another party that is also holding another event over there, and they should not cross that territory.

And another:

So normally the kids are quite cheerful I should say after every performance, because I have been with them for 4 years already. So although that I don’t know them very well, but at least more or less I can feel that whether they are happy or they are a bit slightly---their mood is slightly off, you know, that kind of thing. So some of them were quite---I mean quite toned down, they---they not like talking much. As for my sister-in-law [...] she don’t talk, because she have not been talking for a long time, so she only use hand signals, so her hand signals was to her ears and say it’s very loud, very loud. So I just say, “it’s okay, it’s okay, it’s over already, you know, it’s over and done with.

And another:

Actually my concerns, I won't say fear for the kids, because there---I don't see any danger, but I would say it had dampened the mood because this is the one time that they are there to perform and have a fun time. Because Y Proms is the time where they have fun and they can show off their wonderful year of work that they have done, you know, including I myself, even though my sister-in-law is not performing, but I am standing behind her like a puppeteer.

And another:

I do not feel that the protestors are going to come on stage and attack us. So, I do not think the safety is the main issue, but more for their well-beings. And I also feel that the protestors---we caregivers and parent feel that once the special needs children, they go on to the stage to perform, it is possible that the protestors they may just walk past by and lower down their tones, because they---they know that, oh, this group of people [...] they are special needs children, so they will just give way a bit, you see. But, we did not expect in the end that the protestors, they became louder and louder.

And another:

[M]y daughter does not know how to express with words. I could only say that she was not as excited as before. She was more quiet than usual. But because she's not able to express herself, and so, I do not know whether---I do not know what she was really feeling inside [...] Base on my opinion on the stage, I feel that we are very disturbed. I was confused. Because my daughter is not a good dancer and so, my responsibility on the stage is to ensure that she can keep up with the rest of the dancers. And also try to be on pace with the others. And so, when I was on the stage, I was affected.

[F]rom past experiences, after every performance, she will smile going off stage, and you can tell by her body language that she is very happy. However, I could tell on that day, she was very quiet. She was very quiet. It is abnormal that my daughter is very quiet, which is why I have to take special care of her.

This was the prosecution's first point: that the protestors "had acted in furtherance of the common intention" to disturb and traumatize the special needs kids without any consideration of their well-being. More generally, the prosecution argued, the protestors had "intended to disrupt the YMCA event, and spoil the enjoyment of the persons gathered to enjoy the event." To that effect, during his examination of Janet, the prosecutor said that "[y]ou and your fellow protestors had no regard for the fact that your actions were directly interfering with the performers and the enjoyment of this performance". Throughout the trial, the prosecution showed videos from the protest, coupled with questions like, "did you just see this poor helpless volunteer here who had to move to her right to shield or block the beneficiaries from your shouting?", and "See this poor woman here terrorised and terrified by the marches you led into the tent?". This point was driven home over and over again, such that it was hard not to read it as an attempt at character assassination. Who were these people, who did not care about the wellbeing of special needs kids? What possible legitimacy could such people have as political actors? While the prosecution never made that point explicit, they did their best to convey the image of the protestors as having been cold-hearted and inconsiderate in their blatant disregard for the autistic kids, whose day was ruined by the protestors' loud screaming and aggressive behaviour.

From the parents' point of view, it is easy to see why this would be upsetting. Having kids with special needs is surely a challenge, and to have their day ruined by a group of activists, whose cause they did not know about or cared for, must have been very disappointing. From the protestors point of view, however, this was understood as a staged problem, as they suspected that the clash between the two groups had been planned by the government in order to make the protestors look bad. They called this "political entrapment", which they put forth as one of their main lines of defence; though, as we shall see, it was not accepted by the judge.

“Common intention”

The second point that the prosecution made against the protestors concerned the “purpose” behind the “common intention” to disrupt the YMCA. As it happened, one of the guests of honour at the YMCA event was then minister of state at the ministry of trade and industry, Teo Ser Luck. Part of the YMCA program was that Teo would give a short address to the YMCA participants. When he took the stage, this created some excitement among the protestors, who all of a sudden found themselves with a rare opportunity of demonstrating in front of a minister. Usually, in Singapore, ministers are strikingly absent from anything like demonstrations. Roy therefore told to the crowd that this represented a “historic moment”, as it was “the first time since 1965 that Singaporeans will get to protest in front of a minister”. Soon after Teo took the stage, the protestors began marching towards him, shouting, “Return Our CPF!”. According to the prosecution, “the purpose behind the common intention was to bring the protest message to the guest of honour of the YMCA event, Mr Teo Ser Luck.” And according to them, the protestors did not care whether or not this resulted in the autistic kids being “traumatized”.

Together, these two points – that the protestors had “traumatized” the Y-Stars, and that they had acted under a “common intention” to disrupt the YMCA event – made up the gist of the prosecution’s case against the demonstrators. In addition, the prosecution brought up a few minor additional points to further strengthen their case. For example, they argued that during the days leading up to the protest, Hui Hui had “rallied her Facebook followers” to confront Teo Ser Luck. They also suggested that the three protestors had been “key participants” in the march, “leading” the rest of the demonstrators.

In addition, Hui Hui faced the separate charge of having organized the demonstration “illegally”. Before the event, Hui Hui had successfully applied for a permit to hold the CPF event in Hong Lim Park through the National Parks website, which is the Government agency in charge of the Speakers Corner. When Hui Hui had applied, however, she had ticked only the box for “Speech” from the three available

alternatives, “Speech”, “Demonstration” and “Performance”. Apparently, this meant that she could legally speak, but that any actions that fell under the category of “demonstration” – like marching, shouting, blowing whistles, waving flags, holding placards, etc. – would be considered illegal. She was therefore informed that, if she wanted to both speak and demonstrate, she should have applied twice.

Hui Hui, in response, claimed that an NParks official had told her to always choose the “Speech” category and never “Demonstration”. According to Hui Hui, “When I was at the [NParks] office, they told me always just click ‘speech’. And if let’s say you want to have music, then you click ‘performance’. So I asked them, ‘then what is “demonstration”?’ They said, ‘Oh, never ever click that’. That is what they told me back then.” When the public prosecutor heard this, he responded: “I put it to you that your evidence is inherently incredible and you have just made up this entire account of what some alleged officer from NParks told you.” Hui Hui claimed to have recorded evidence of the encounter, but the prosecutor was not interested and the matter never got resolved – except that Hui Hui was found guilty.

Regarding the main charge of having “committed a public nuisance in furtherance of a common intention to disrupt an event organized by the YMCA”, I will say straight away that the case was lost for the protestors as soon as they put their foot in the court room. Legally speaking, they really did not have much of a case. They did march into the YMCA area, and there were numerous accounts of how this had indeed disrupted that YMCA event, as we could see from the testimonies above. In this way, they had committed a public nuisance, in the legal definition of that term. Furthermore, while the claim that this had been done under a “common intention” was hotly contested by the protestors – who repeatedly pointed out that they did not know each other before the protest, and therefore could not have planned to do this – legally speaking they did not have much of a case there either. As the judge explained, all that the term “common intention” means is that they had acted collectively, and that the intention to disrupt had therefore been “common” to the protestors as a group. When they marched into the YMCA area, it was not a collection of individuals who just *happened* to do that simultaneously; it had been the action *of a group*. That was all that the prosecution

meant by “common intention”, and it could hardly be contested. “Notwithstanding that the three accused had their own agenda when participating in the CPF event or that they had never met prior to the CPF event,” the judge wrote in his ruling, “I accept the prosecutions submission that a common intention may be formed on the spot just before the commission of the relevant criminal act.”

Not surprisingly, therefore, the lawyer who initially represented the protestors, Eugene Thuraisingam – one of Singapore’s most famous civil rights lawyers – suggested that they plead guilty to all the charges, in order to minimize the punishment. Two of the accused, Roy and one more protestor, accepted this deal and were let off with a small fine. According to Janet, Eugene had told Roy and the other protestor that, if they pleaded guilty, someone would step in and pay their bill. This, she claims, is also what happened. According to Janet, however, pleading guilty made no sense. “Why should I plead guilty if I am innocent? I don’t understand”. Janet has always maintained her innocence, and therefore thinks that it was absurd that her lawyer – the one person who was supposed to defend her – asked her to plead guilty, just to get away easy. “In a sense,” she told me, “it was a blessing in disguise that Eugene acquitted himself. Now we could fight for ourselves.” To Janet, this was a point of pride: the three remaining protestors stood up for themselves.

Before we proceed, I want to make something clear. When I say that the protestors did not have much of a legal case, this is not to disagree with Janet when she claims to be innocent. As will become apparent from looking at the actual court proceeding, when Janet and the other protestors claim their innocence, this is in a much broader sense of the word. Whatever the law says, they claim, what they did that day in Hong Lim Park were not the actions of criminals. According to them, the illegality – or at least the illegitimacy – is instead on the side of the state, which in their view uses the law to deny citizens their human rights.

Such, to be sure, is the nature of broad and vague laws that are applied selectively: from the point of view of those who are accused, there is very little to differentiate them from other citizens who are not accused, except that the law was

applied here and not there. From the point of view of the law, however, the accused is a criminal, plain and simple, as they did in fact break the law.

Some arguments

Throughout the whole trial, the main point that the three demonstrators made was that it was absurd that they were charged with having committed a “public nuisance” when all they had done was to organize a protest in “the only unrestricted area for protest in Singapore.”

When asked why he went to Hong Lim Park to protest, Ivan said: “Because Hong Lim Park is the only designated vicinity for freedom of expression and freedom of speech [...] Of course, if the government allow us to march to parliament or whatever, to get freedom of speech, for our rights, I also will follow up there, you see, but unfortunately, no such thing in Singapore.” To bring home this point, the three of them asked almost every witness who took the stand if he or she was aware that the Speakers Corner is the only place in Singapore where citizens are allowed to voice their concerns; if such witnesses were aware that marching, shouting, holding placards and blowing whistles are normal occurrences during a protest; and whether or not they knew that the Singaporean constitution gives citizens the right to freedom of speech. They did this regardless of whether the person taking the stand was a mother of a Y Star, a police officer, a YMCA organizer, or anyone else who was not there to answer such questions. Not surprisingly, almost all the answers they got was, “no comment”.

The second major point that the protestors made was that the whole trial constituted a form of political persecution, or what they called “political entrapment”. Their argument was that the real fault did not lie with them, who had just exercised their constitutionally protected freedom of speech in the only place in Singapore that allows public speaking, but with NParks, who had allowed these two events to take place at the same time. During the trial, Janet expressed this idea in the following terms:

I want to give a scenario, okay. When there's a fire, we will look into the cause of the fire. We cannot simply charge the fire for burning down the house. We cannot say the fire is the guilty party for burning down the house. The cause is the person who has set the fire deliberately which we call it as an arson case. This person, we call him the mastermind who plotted the incident. The cause can be accidentally; it can also be non-human factors like electrical, chemical or natural factors like earthquake or lightning. For this incident, the clash between "Return our CPF" event and the YMCA event, it was like an arson case. And it was so obvious a trap was being set up to make the participants of the "Return our CPF" event fell into it. I believe most of them who attended know about it [...] I appeal to you, the Court, Your Honour, to be justice and look into who is the real mastermind behind this whole set-up and I also wish that he would be bring to justice. Singaporeans requires true justice to be practiced in order to ensure safety and security and not fearful for Singaporeans to live in. We are a First World country. So we must have First World law enforcement to ensure First World justice. So where do we being charged fit into this clash incident? We, who are being charged, are not the mastermind as we did not plot or set up this clash incident. We, who are being charged, are actually not even the fire as there were no damages done to anyone. We, who are being charged, are just like one of the houses on fire in this incident. We are also the victims.

The protestors also suspected that similar motives might have been at play behind the choice to invite minister Teo Ser Luck as the guest of honour to the YMCA event, as this would undoubtedly trigger a reaction among the CPF group, who felt angry and disappointed with PAP. To pin the blame for all this solely on the protestors, they therefore argued, would be to miss the full picture. To that affect, Hui Hui offered a similar analogy to that provided by Janet:

If I may quote Singapore's Minister of State for Transport, Josephine Teo: "If people choose to take the train at the same time, it will definitely break down." Similarly, if YMCA choose to invite the Manpower Minister in charge of our CPF money to Hong Lim Park during a CPF protest at the same time, it will

definitely end up as what it ended up as. [...] When we started our event at 3.00pm, in order not to clash with the YMCA event because there were children, they purposely came early so as to blast their speakers against us. And Teo Ser Luck purposely came early, instead of at 5.00pm which was the original time [...] The reason why he do so after knowing that our event started at 3 o'clock, was so that this can become a political trap for us to fall into and so that we will be fined more than \$2,000, so that we can't stand for the coming election in 2020 [...] Whether anything is a nuisance or not is not a question to be determined, not merely by an abstract consideration of the thing itself but in reference to its circumstances.

The suspicion that Janet and Hui Hui shared was therefore that the “clash” between the CPF protest and the YMCA event had been engineered, or “masterminded”, in order that the CPF protestors could be charged with “public nuisance”. Throughout the trial, they would be hard pressed to produce any concrete evidence to back up this claim. However, they argued, this lack of evidence was itself part of the “entrapment”, as the fact that the police had only investigated the CPF protestors – and not NParks or YMCA – meant that they had not done a “thorough investigation”. Hence, in the protestors’ view, the lack of evidence was not a bug but a feature: an expression of the state’s attempt to entrap the protestors, and not evidence of the contrary.

In this way, the core of the protestors’ argument was that none of this would have happened if it was not for the double-booking, and that the “nuisance” was therefore an outcome of the situation itself – two large events sharing a small space, and in particular, a PAP minister being present at an anti-PAP demonstration. As they saw it, it was inevitable that this would result in some commotion, and hence some “disruption” for the YMCA. Furthermore, they argued that they were neither in a position to “rally” their fellow demonstrators, nor to stop them from “disrupting” the YMCA event, even if they had wanted to do so. To that effect, Janet and Hui Hui made several references to Hui Hui’s weight and age – 35kg and 23 years at the time of the protest – asking the judge if he believed that such a small young girl can really control a big crowd. Hui Hui also said that “Rome wasn’t built in a day”, by which she meant that the emotions that were

aroused that day were not the result of a “common intention” of the accused, but rather the result of a long history of failed government policy that had caused frustrations among the Singaporean population, some of whom showed up to the protest. Consequently, Hui Hui said, if the judge really wanted to get to the bottom of what caused the disruption, perhaps he should look into the CPF system itself, which in her view was the real and final cause behind the “nuisance”.

A third and much-repeated argument by the protestors was that, if their actions had indeed been criminal, why had the police not intervened to stop them on the day itself? In addition, they repeatedly asked the YMCA participants and organizers if they had been able to “fulfil the agenda of their event”, suggesting that if they had, they had not been “disrupted”.

All these points, the judge found unconvincing, as he stated in his ruling that:

I [...] reject the defence argument that their act did not amount to public nuisance because these were committed within the Speakers’ Corner. This argument is fallacious because they had marched beyond the boundaries of the Speakers Corner. In any event, as rightly pointed out by the prosecution, the gravamen of public nuisance is that they had intruded upon and disrupted the YMCA event, regardless of whether the acts were done within or without the confines of the Speakers’ Corner.

I also did not accept the defence argument and suggestion that the YMCA organizers had decided to organize and run the YMCA event so as to deliberately clash with the CPF event. The evidence showed that the YMCA event had been approved and planned well before the CPF event. Accordingly and in similar vein, I reject the defence suggestion that there was any form of entrapment on part of the YMCA organisers or any other party

In addition, I find no merit in the defence argument that no public nuisance was committed simply because neither the police nor the NParks officer tried to stop or arrest the demonstrators. This did not detract from the fact that the marches had caused annoyance to the organisers and participants of the YMCA event.

The judge ended his ruling by observing that, “This is a case where, ironically and regrettably, the accused persons while ostensibly championing the rights of a class of persons, did so by blithely trampling on the rights of another group of persons.”

Kettle logic

As the reader will notice, not all of the arguments made by the protestors were internally consistent with one another. Summarizing their arguments, they argue a) that there was no disruption of the YMCA event, because if there was, the police would have intervened; b) that the protestors could not be held responsible for the disruption, as they did not have control over the big crowd; and c) that the disruption was “masterminded” by whoever made sure that the CPF event would “clash” with the YMCA. Taken at face value, these arguments cannot all be true at the same time, as the disruption cannot both have been masterminded by someone from behind the scenes, and not taken place. Instead, these arguments provide an example of what philosophers call “Kettle logic”. The classic example of this, which gives the fallacy its name, comes from Freud, who tells the story of a man who borrows a kettle and returns it broken, only to give his defence: a) that the kettle was not broken when he returned it, b) that it was already broken when he got it, and c) that he never borrowed a kettle in the first place (Freud 1976; see also Derrida 1998).

At one level of analysis, this inconsistency should simply be read, I think, as a reflection of the difficulty that anyone who is not legally trained will have in presenting a legally sound case to a court of law. To that end, Janet and Ivan repeatedly reminded the judge that they are working-class people with little education, especially lacking legal expertise. “[M]ost of the other participants [in the protest], they are more well-educated than me”, Ivan said. “Maybe they [...] felt that they can argue well in the Court, like me, Ivan [...] ‘This man can bully, yah, pick him up’”. Elsewhere, he said: “I’m not legal. I very less educated. My English not so good, how can I be a---to---to defend?” Similarly, Janet said that “because I don’t have any more lawyer who represent me, I’m not legally trained, actually, I depend very much from the lawyer

initially, hoping they can help us out. But in the end, that Eugene discharged himself because of some issue”.

At another level of analysis, however, the inconsistency in the protestors’ position should in my view be understood as indicative of their refusal to accept the basic legitimacy of the case that was brought against them – meaning not its legal validity, but its moral/political legitimacy *regardless of the law*. To them, the trial represented a form of political persecution enacted under the guise of rule of law. Therefore, when they argued that the disruption was masterminded as a trap for the CPF protestors to fall in, at the same time as they were arguing that there was no disruption at all, this was not primarily because they were unable to avoid contradiction. Instead, it was because they oscillated between on the one hand assuming the language of the law, and on the other hand moving outside or beyond it.

Legally speaking, the YMCA event could not have been both disrupted and not disrupted. However, if one assumes that the ultimate purpose of the law is not to maintain law and order – in this case, to make sure that no event is ever “disrupted” – but to silence activists by taking them to court under the pretence of an ostensibly non-political charge like “public nuisance”, then it does make sense to make this claim. On the one hand, to the extent that the accused did nothing out of the ordinary as protestors – shouting, whistling, waving flags, holding placards, marching, etc. – there was no “disruption” or “nuisance”, only normal behaviour of citizens using their constitutional rights. On the other hand, to the extent that the CPF protest was led into a “trap” of “clashing” with the YMCA event, a legal case could be made against them on the legal grounds of “disruption” and “public nuisance”. But that is only because there are vague and broad laws that make this possible in the first place, not because there was a “public nuisance” in any meaningful sense of the word. So there both was, and was not, a public nuisance.

Seen from this perspective, the main mistake that the accused made was that they did not pick a clear line: either to fight the case using strictly legal arguments; or to assume their legal guilt while fiercely maintaining their moral innocence, thus demonstrating the contradiction between legality and morality. As it happened, it was

the latter of these strategies that led to the establishment of the Speaker's Corner in the first place. To tell this story, a short digression is necessary.

Origins of Speaker's Corner

In 2001, psychiatrist, political activist and leader of oppositional party Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), Dr Chee Soon Juan, stood up in the middle of Singapore's financial district to make a political speech. He was soon arrested by police, who took him to the police station for interrogation. Chee had a clear mission: he wanted to expand the democratic spaces of Singapore by consciously breaking the laws that curtail citizens' democratic freedoms, in order to provoke a debate around why these laws are there in the first place. One of these was the law regarding public speaking, which at the time of his financial district speech was illegal. His act had two immediate consequences. One was that a prolonged national debate took place around why Singaporeans do not have the right to make public speeches. This led, among other things, to the setting up of the Speaker's Corner in Hong Lim Park later that same year. The other consequence was that the Public Order Act was amended so that "public assembly" was defined as one person or more, having previously been defined as minimally three people. Chee had stood up alone, after all. That "public assembly" had been legal then, but not after.

At first, the Speakers Corner had all sorts of restrictions: for example, participants were not allowed to raise their fists during speeches. Once again, Chee and those around him consciously broke those rules, causing them to be arrested and taken to court. Inspired by Gandhi's non-violent resistance, Chee's tactic was to assume full guilt in the legal sense, but to use every chance he got to point out what he saw as the illegitimacy of the laws that he had broken. He would also, and for the same reason, refuse to pay the fines that he was charged to pay. This led to him having to serve some jail-time, a punishment he readily accepted. He was also forbidden from leaving the country. This, Chee took as an opportunity to make himself a symbol of the oppression faced by oppositional politicians in Singapore, speaking to international audiences about his experiences in the he hope of giving the Singaporean government some bad

press. Eventually, his travel ban was lifted – according to Chee himself, probably because the government found that they had more to lose from allowing him to play the role of a martyr, than from allowing him to travel.

While symbolically and politically powerful, this tactic is very difficult to live through, and Chee has suffered the consequences. Because he has consistently refused to pay his fines, he has been forced for many years to live as a bankrupt. He cannot open a bank account, and therefore cannot hold a normal job. Instead, he has for many years been making money from selling books that he has written on the topic of democracy – most notably his book *Democratically Speaking*, which was read in prison by another political dissident, Amos Yee, who we will get to know in the next chapter. This fate, he shares with another famous dissident, JB Jeyaretnam, who was similarly bankrupted through various court cases being brought against him, and was also reduced to selling his books on the streets in order to make a living. Both Jeyaretnam and Chee brought important democratic breakthroughs to Singapore: Chee by getting the Speakers Corner set up, Jeyaretnam by becoming the first elected oppositional member of parliaments. Both did so at great personal cost.¹⁰⁹

The CPF – opium or ethic?

At this point, let us zoom out a bit. In chapter three, I suggested that the CPF – and more specifically, the CPF/HDB scheme – has functioned as an *ersatz*-Protestantism in Singapore, as it has provided the population with the “spirit of capitalism” needed to make industrialization work. Central to this “spirit”, I said, is the willingness to delay gratification by saving and investing one’s income, rather than spending it on consumer goods, as this is what allows capital to accumulate. The key difference between Protestantism and the CPF is how they instil this “spirit” in the population.

To Marx, the Protestant ethic, and Christianity more generally, represented an ideological fiction created by a society in which people are required to produce an economic surplus, which can be reinvested as capital. To that end, he famously called

¹⁰⁹ This section is based on interview material with Chee Soon Juan

religion “an opium of the people”, by which he meant a belief structure that provides “illusory happiness” (i.e. promises about an afterlife) in place of “real happiness” (i.e. social change), “the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions” (Marx 1970: 131; see also Hägglund 2019). In this, Marx located an important aspect of the Protestant ethic, namely that it is in one sense clearly a con: “Listen, you will be rewarded in the afterlife if you work hard, consume as little as possible, and invest the surplus productively in this life” – quite a convenient story to tell a population whose labour you wish to exploit for profit! On the other hand, such an attitude *is* extremely helpful for a population to adopt if they are to grow richer over time. As I see it, this is the most important insight of Weber: while the Protestant ethic may be understood as an ideological mystification from the point of view of the individual worker – who will live and die without receiving any reward in heaven (or let us suppose so) – from a multigenerational point of view, it is definitely better to live in a society where such an ethic has prevailed over time, than to live in a society where people have always shunned hard work and never saved (see Henrich 2020). Put another way, while at every given moment, the Protestant ethic may be understood as a tool of exploitation for the capitalist class, over time, it is a tool of economic ascension for the working class. Hence, it provides a solution to the prisoners’ dilemma of capitalism.

What the CPF claims to provide is precisely this: an incentive for people to work hard and save a large portion of their income, which can be invested as capital, in order that society will grow richer over time. The difference is that, instead of telling the citizens that they should act in this way because God wants it, the CPF secularizes the story: it is *the government* that wants you to work hard and save a large portion of your income; and *the government* that will reward you for doing so – in retirement! As a result, the CPF introduces the possibility of accountability into the story. For Protestants, the promise about future reward had to be taken entirely on faith, as it would only be revealed to be true or false after death. For Singaporeans, by contrast, there is the possibility of actually checking whether or not the promise was real, as most people will be alive by the time that they reach retirement, at which point the promise will be either kept or broken.

Most importantly, I will say, while Protestants stood to gain regardless of whether or not the underlying promise was real – as it led them to act in a way that was beneficial to them and their families – it is absolutely essential for Singaporeans that the promise is real, as they are not just working hard and saving “for the glory of God”, but handing over their money to the government each month on the promise that they will get it back in the future, and with sufficient interest to retire. At the same time, the government stands to gain immensely precisely from breaking the promise while keeping the population in a state of belief, as the government gets to use the citizens’ money to make private profit, and therefore is incentivised to take as much as possible while returning as little as possible. As a consequence, while the CPF was officially set up to do for Singapore what Protestantism did for Europe, its structure is such that the government is at every given moment incentivized to use it as a tool of economic exploitation. And given PAP’s parliamentary monopoly, *the only thing that keeps the government from doing so is the fact that the government has promised to use the money for the good of the people* – thus placing the government in the same structural position as God in Protestantism, but with the moral failings of human beings who may get corrupted by money and greed, and who may develop interests that are different from those of “the nation”.

Ultimately, I think, this was why the “Return Our CPF” protestors kept oscillating between assuming the language of the law, and moving outside or beyond it. On the one hand, it would have been great for them to win the case on legal terms, as that would have spared them much pain and money. On the other hand – legality, *schmegality!* If the government has betrayed the citizens trust when it comes to investing their money; if the government has been using the CPF for its own purposes, without regard to the interests of the population at large; if the government has sought to give back as little as possible, while keeping as much as possible for itself – if in all these ways, the government has reneged on its part of the social contract, while the citizens have kept their part, then why should the citizens feel bound by laws that were formulated and enacted within the context of that social contract? Throughout Singapore’s history, the fact that the citizens have been given such limited civil liberties has always been justified and legitimized on the basis that full civil liberties – such as

exist in the West – would make it hard (if not impossible) for the government to live up to its side of the social contract, as it would force the government into the short-termism of politics, impeding its ability to invest the citizens’ money on the basis of the long-term interest of society as a whole (see Chua 2017). Hence, if the government has reneged on its part of the social contract, then there would seem to be little justification for Singapore’s less-than-liberal laws, especially when applied to a group of people who are using their limited freedom of speech *to point out precisely that the social contract has been broken*.

Understood within this broader context, the protestors’ arguments start to make a lot more sense. Within the narrow context of the court room, the protestors’ guilt or innocence had nothing to do with the broader question of whether or not the government has failed the citizens in its CPF policy – which is why, from the point of view of the judge, much of the protestors points were moot. Within the broader context of the social contract, however, it is not possible to discuss the protestors’ guilt without at the same time discussing the guilt of the government when it comes to making good on its side of the social bargain – for, if the government has broken its promise to the citizens, then its laws are no longer valid. Conversely, if the government has made good on its side of the deal, then there would not have been any protests in the first place. Hence, from the protestors’ point of view, to discuss one without discussing the other was simply impossible. As Hui Hui made this point when cross-examining Ivan:

Q: Lee Hsien Loong said, “People support CPF cuts because there’s no protest outside the parliament”, correct?

A: Yes. I [...] heard that when he’s speaking in the house or whatever. Yes.

Q: The CPF event was not at the parliament, it was at Hong Lim Park.

A: Yes.

Q: Why did you not protest at the parliament instead?

A: Do you think the PAP government allow? Do you think that the PAP government allowed you to do that? Because of this---I remember Lee Hsien

Loong trying to tease the people, say, “Everybody is so comfortable in here--- here our CPF policy, you see no protest outside parliament.” If he said, “Okay, you can protest outside parliament”, I’m the first one to go.

[...]

Q: That means if you can, you would have protest outside the parliament like what Lee Hsien Loong said? Or if, let’s say, Singapore allows you or the PAP government allows you, you would have protested outside the Ministry of Manpower but the reason why you are protesting at Hong Lim Park because Hong Lim Park Speakers’ Corner is the only unrestricted area in Singapore under the Public Order Act that allows us to express and use our freedom of speech and freedom of public assembly, correct?

A: Yes, I agree with that.

Janet made the same point:

I’m already 56. I’m supposed to get back all my CPF. Until today, I still cannot get back my CPF [because she hasn’t been able to reach the minimum sum], I mean, fully. If the PAP has promised the people and fully returned the CPF, there won’t be any protest at Hong Lim Park on this issue. That’s what I want to voice out.

[...]

Lee Hsien Loong said people support CPF cuts because there are no protest outside Parliament. I did not protest outside Parliament. I did not protest outside Istana [the Presidential palace]. I’m a law-abiding citizen [...] so I protest at the only place, that is Hong Lim Park, which is a legal venue for people to do protest. I only want my CPF money at 55, now I’m 56, that’s what our government promise. At the age of 55, we are supposed to get back our CPF. But now I’m 56, I still cannot get back all my CPF, that’s why I go to Hong Lim Park to protest. Because I feel the government should not shift pole. That’s why I wanted to go there to voice out my opinion, voice out to the government, “I want back my CPF, please return me.”

Ivan's perspective was perhaps most illustrative of this point, as he came to the "Return Our CPF" protests carrying a sign saying "PAP = Murderers", in reference to the Graduate Mothers' Scheme. Seemingly out of context, this really brought home the protestors' larger point, which is that the government has been using the people as a resource for their own wealth accumulation. According to Ivan, the government has gone so far in this as to sterilize mothers and "kill babies", in order to optimize the quality of the people as a resource. Hence, when he found that PAP had not made good on its promise to return the CPF with proper interest, his reaction was understandably one of rage. "They took your money, they took your life", as Roy put it. To Ivan, that point was understood quite literally.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have followed the Return Our CPF protestors as they were taken to court. In doing so, we have explored the space of lawlessness that a social contract based on trust entails for those who no longer trust the government – and who make this distrust known in public. In Singapore, citizens have been made to trust the government in two fundamental ways: first, by having their money invested into the state's various profit-making enterprises, on the promise that the money will be returned in the future with sufficient interest to allow the citizens to retire; second, by being governed on the basis of vague and broad laws that are selectively enforced, allowing the government to prosecute more or less anyone it wishes, at any point. Such a system, I have argued, requires a great deal of trust, as it not only allows a competent government to serve the national interest, but equally empowers a rogue government to pursue a self-interested agenda – to use the citizens money to enrich itself, and to use its vague and broad laws to persecute anyone who speaks up against this fact – thereby leaving the citizens in a state of complete lawlessness, as the social contract will in that case have been turned into a mechanism for legalizing theft, and illegalizing protest.

According to the activists we have met in this chapter, this is exactly the reality of Singapore society today. Whether or not they are correct in this assessment, I have

left as an open question, seeking instead to show that their case illustrates the principal weakness of the MM state's social contract, which is that it *opens up this risk*. If you have to trust the government to do the right thing, this means that you have no protection against a government that chooses to pursue a self-interested agenda of oppression and exploitation. Hence, the flipside of trust is here a state of lawlessness, in which the citizens are completely exposed to the arbitrary exercise of power by the government. This is what Agamben describes as the state of exception – and in Singapore, its paradigmatic site is not the concentration camp, but the court of law.

Chapter 7:

Amos Yee:

A Rebellious Teenager, and the Problem of the “Third Generation”

“The fact is that Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable – even legally actionable – to Westerners. Chinese mothers can say to their daughters, “Hey fatty – lose some weight.” By contrast, Western parents have to tiptoe around the issue, talking in terms of “health” and never ever mentioning the f-word, and their kids still end up in therapy for eating disorders and negative self-image.”

- Amy Chua, 2011

Introduction

In the previous two chapters, we looked at how the MM state operates a *dual legal system*, in which arbitrary government – rule by law – is inscribed into the rule of law in the form of vague and broad laws that are selectively applied on political dissidents and other “problematic” individuals. This, I have argued, is a classical middleman minority strategy, as it allows the MM state to play by the rules of the “host society” (the global market) in terms of its commercial interactions with it, but to organize its internal affairs according to more informal rules. For the classic middleman minority, this strategy typically involves things like avoiding unionization, relying on unpaid and/or cheap family labour, extending credit to one another without the need for formal contracts or receipts, and working much longer hours than the surrounding population

– all of which are made possible by the fact that the middleman minority enjoys stronger intragroup trust compared to their host societies. Looking at the MM state – and in particular, the “Return Our CPF” protests that erupted in 2013 – we have discussed how this strategy may run into trouble when elevated to the level of state, as it is not clear whether the relation between people and state can similarly be organized on the basis of trust, as trust in the state can easily flip into a relation of lawlessness, since the state may over time develop interests that are different to those of the population at large.

In this chapter, we will look at another aspect of the middleman minority strategy, which is how the MM state seeks to maintain a cultural difference vis-à-vis the “host society” – the global market – while at the same time integrating economically with it. In chapter four, we discussed the contours of this strategy, noting how the MM state, like the classic middleman minority, has always struggled to find a balance between the goals of economic integration with the “host society”, and cultural segregation from it. In this chapter, we will look at how this strategy results in tensions in the MM state, both between the rulers and the ruled, and between the different generations of society, as society must allow its young people to interact with the global market – in terms of media consumption, movies, products, travel, etc. – while nevertheless making sure that they do not adopt wholeheartedly the values that circulate in that market.

We will do so by looking at the case of Singapore’s *enfant terrible*, YouTuber and activist Amos Yee, who came to public attention in 2015 after posting a video online in which he celebrated the death of Lee Kuan Yew. Amos, I will argue, represents a classic case of a middleman minority youth becoming too assimilated, and rejecting wholesale the values of his own group in favour of those of the “host society” – which in his case was the United States in general, and the (mostly American) free speech community on YouTube in particular. Amos, I will show, has not only come into conflict with the government and other mainstream elements of Singaporean society, but also with many oppositional activists, who view him as untrustworthy and cynical – not caring authentically about Singapore, but out to promote himself as an online

personality. At the same time, he has received much more support and praise by the Western media than any other Singaporean dissident in recent memory, if ever.

In this, Amos represents the same danger to the MM state as the “third generation” has always represented to middleman minorities. In her bestselling book, *Battle Hymns of the Tiger Mother*, Yale law professor Amy Chua defines this as the generation that no longer has a sense of the hardships that the previous generations had to go through, and who therefore are much more likely to assimilate into the values of the host society than the previous generations were – thereby threatening to undermine the competitive advantage of the minority group. Chronicles her life as a second-generation Chinese immigrant in the US, seeking to inculcate “Chinese values” into her third-generation kids, Chua writes:

There’s an old Chinese saying that “prosperity can never last for three generations.” I’ll bet that if someone with empirical skills conducted a longitudinal survey about intergenerational performance, they’d find a remarkably common pattern among Chinese immigrants fortunate enough to have come to the United States as graduate students or skilled workers over the last fifty years. The pattern would go something like this: The immigrant generation (like my parents) is the hardest-working. Many will have started off in the United States almost penniless, but they will work nonstop until they become successful engineers, scientists, doctors, academics, or businesspeople. As parents, they will be extremely strict and rabidly thrifty. (“Don’t throw out those leftovers! Why are you using so much dishwasher liquid? You don’t need a beauty salon—I can cut your hair even nicer.”) They will invest in real estate. They will not drink much. Everything they do and earn will go toward their children’s education and future. The next generation (mine), the first to be born in America, will typically be high-achieving. They will usually play the piano and/or violin. They will attend an Ivy League or Top Ten university. They will tend to be professionals—lawyers, doctors, bankers, television anchors—and surpass their parents in income, but that’s partly because they started off with more money and because their parents invested so much in them. They will be less frugal than their parents. They will enjoy cocktails. If they are female, they will often marry a white person. Whether male or female, they will not be as strict with their children as their parents were with them. The next generation [...]

is the one I spend nights lying awake worrying about. Because of the hard work of their parents and grandparents, this generation will be born into the great comforts of the upper middle class. Even as children they will own many hardcover books (an almost criminal luxury from the point of view of immigrant parents). They will have wealthy friends who get paid for B-pluses. They may or may not attend private schools, but in either case they will expect expensive, brand-name clothes. *Finally and most problematically, they will feel that they have individual rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and therefore be much more likely to disobey their parents and ignore career advice.* In short, all factors point to this generation. (Chua 2011: 20-22, emphasis mine)

This pattern can easily be mapped more or less exactly onto Singapore/the MM state. The first generation of Singaporeans were mobilized into factory labour, where they had to work long hours for little pay. They were led by an authoritarian autocrat, Lee Kuan Yew, who was both extremely strict and extremely thrifty, as he forced the population to save much of their income in the CPF, in order that they would not waste it on useless consumer goods. They were moved from the kampongs into the HDBs, in order to make Singapore a “homeowning society”, thus getting the population invested in real estate. The second generation was also hard-working, but more likely to go into the professions than to work in factories – transforming society into one of engineers, doctors, lawyers and scientists. The second generation was richer than their parents, not for working harder but for starting out richer. They largely maintained the values of their parents.

By contrast, the third generation of Singaporeans – or perhaps fourth, or fifth – are at risk of straying from the values that made their society successful in the first place, as they have all grown up in a society that is two, three or four generations removed from the hardships and struggles of the past. As a consequence, they demand more individual freedom; they evaluate their society on the basis of the values that they find in Western culture, rather than celebrating their distinctiveness vis-à-vis the West; they ask for rights before asking what their responsibilities are; they question and

disobey authority, both that of their parents, and that of their political leaders. As a result, they risk putting society on the road to ruin.

Such, at least, is the fear – both of the tiger mom, and of the MM state. Amos would no doubt be a nightmare for both, and an indication that their fear is becoming a reality. In this chapter, we will follow his trials and tribulations. How does the MM state deal with a teenager who talks back?

The rise of Amos Yee

Amos Yee came to public attention in early 2015. Less than a week after the death of Lee Kuan Yew – who died on 23 March – Amos posted a video on YouTube entitled, “Finally Lee Kuan Yew is Dead!” (henceforth referred to as “the video”). In the video, Amos argues that Lee, while generally revered as a great leader by the Singaporean people, was really a dictator, and that his death should be celebrated by Singaporeans. The video opens by Amos asking, “Why hasn’t anyone said, ‘fuck yeah, the guy is dead’?”, a rhetorical question that he immediately answers himself:

Because everyone is scared. Everyone is afraid that if they say something like that, they might get into trouble, which, give Lee Kuan Yew credit, [...] was primarily the impact of his “legacy”. But I’m not afraid. So if Lee Hsien Loong wishes to sue me, I will oblige to dance with him. Come at me, motherfucker!¹¹⁰

In the following, I will quote Amos quite liberally, as it is difficult to do justice to his style of speaking in any other way. Amos expresses himself in highly creative and almost poetic forms of vulgarities. No doubt, much of his appeal comes from this particular style. The reader would be missing out if I were to just report factually on what he says.

¹¹⁰ The video is not available online anymore, and therefore not possible to direct the reader to.

Having dared the current prime minister to sue him, Amos continues the video by saying that Lee Kuan Yew, “contrary to popular belief, was a horrible person and an awful leader to our country. He was a dictator but managed to fool most of the world that he was democratic.” During his reign as prime minister, Amos says,

he controlled the entire media and education, proliferating nationalistic propaganda on a daily basis. Like right now, since Lee Kuan Yew is dead, all day you see 24 hour news coverage of necrophiliacs sucking Lee Kuan Yews dick. [...] And of course he is notorious for suing people who criticized him, forcing them into jail and leading them into bankruptcy. And apparently, his thirst for suing is hereditary too. So he created an environment where his blatant flaws as a leader were hidden, because most people were afraid of criticizing him in fear of being found guilty by the judicial system that he controls. So everything that people hear is about how great Lee Kuan Yew is. Of course he is able to deceive people into voting for him! Despite our voting rights, he is undoubtedly totalitarian.

Shortly after the video was published, Amos was taken court, where he was found guilty of having “wounded the feelings of religious others.” It was thus not for what he had said about Lee Kuan Yew that Amos was charged; such critiques of the prime minister, while generally frowned upon, are not illegal in Singapore. Instead, it was for comments that he made in the video comparing Lee Kuan Yew to Jesus Christ, in a way that was unfavourable to both. “Seeing what Lee Kuan Yew has done,” Amos says in the video, “I’m sure many individuals who have done similar things come to mind”, all the while flashing images of Mao, Stalin and Hitler. “But”, Amos continues:

I’m going to compare him to someone that people haven’t really mentioned before – Jesus. And the aptness of that analogy is heightened seeing how Christians seem to be a really big fan of him. They’re both power hungry and malicious but deceive others into thinking that they are compassionate and kind. Their impact and legacy will ultimately not last as more and more people find out

that they're full of bull, and Lee Kuan Yew's followers are completely delusional and ignorant and have absolutely no sound logic or knowledge about him that is grounded in reality, which Lee Kuan Yew very easily manipulates, similar to the Christian knowledge of the Bible and the work of a multitude of priests.

In addition to the charge of having “wounded the feelings of religious others”, Amos was also handed an obscenity charge related to a drawing that he had published in connection with the video, in which he had attached the faces of Lee Kuan Yew and Margaret Thatcher onto an image of two people having sex. This was in response to a comment that Amos had made in the video that “world leaders seem to like [Lee], most notably Margaret Thatcher”, referring to the admiration that Lee and Thatcher had expressed for each other (and apparently giving credence to the view that Singapore is a “neoliberal” society).

Amos' case created quite a divide in popular opinion. On the one hand, many were angered by what he had done. “Yee's video broke the country's zero tolerance policy on offending race and religion, while simultaneously mocking a man who occupies a very special place in the hearts of most Singaporeans”, wrote journalist Nadeem Shad in an article published around the time of Amos trial (Shad 2015). Perhaps most angered of all was a 49-year-old father of three, Neo Gim Huah, who waited outside the state court when Amos was going for his pre-trial conference. When Amos arrived at the court house, Neo walked up to Amos and slapped him hard over the face, upon which Neo ran away from the scene. Later, Neo was sentenced to three weeks in jail for having “voluntarily caused hurt” to Amos. In his mitigation plea, Neo said that “Yee had been disrespectful and had insulted Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew”, and that he “only wanted to teach Yee a lesson as an elder and did not want to hurt Yee”. He also added that, given Amos' young age, whatever punishment would be given to him by the state would probably not be severe enough to teach him a lesson, which was why it was necessary for Neo to take matters into his own hands. “This child is so disobedient”, Neo said, “that even the elders, parents, police, the court and the society will not have any impact on him”, adding that: “I remember how arrogant he

was. That's why I thought giving him one slap would instil fear in him, and also let him know what are the ways of the world" (Ng 2015)

In sentencing Neo, what the judge found most troubling was the fact that Neo "had decided to take matters into his own hands, as he had doubts whether the criminal justice system would be effective", adding that: "A strong message must be sent to the public at large and particularly to like-minded persons as the accused, that his brand of vigilante justice must never be allowed to take root" (ibid.)

Another highly publicized reaction to Amos' video was an interview with three actors from the Singaporean movie *Young & Fabulous* – Joshua Tan, Jeffrey Xu and Joyce Chu – who were asked to comment on the controversial video. They were all highly sceptical of Amos. Chu said that while Amos "was very daring to do what he did [...] one should still be grateful for what our predecessors has done for us". She further said that, "despite your opinions and objections, the fact that you have the luxury of sitting at home in front of your computer to make these videos, that's pretty fortunate, don't you think? You have nothing to worry about, I feel, at the least, you should be grateful." Similarly, Tan said that "People can say, oh you know, we should have the right to say whatever we want to say. But at what expense? When you offend someone, right, which one do you value more – your right to say whatever you want to say? Or his right not to feel offended by what you say?" Tan believed that the latter right should be prioritized over the former, and further pointed out that "even in America, there are plenty of censorship laws. So I would say that we have a filter in our minds and it's good to use it sometimes *lah*." Finally, Xu stressed that, in his opinion, "the vital point here is education." When asked what kind of education he had in mind, he answered that "it's not about the schooling system. It's about what parents and teachers communicate to him, instilling the right values and morals in him. Instead, he is using his own understanding and mentality to manipulate facts" (Tan *et al* 2015).

On the other hand, Amos received a lot of support, both locally and internationally. Locally, the campaign "Free Amos Yee" was organized by the Community Action Network (CAN), one of Singapore's more prominent local NGOs. They made T-shirt, organized a petition and a held a large demonstration in the

Speaker's Corner at Hong Lim Park. During the demonstration, organizer Jolovan Wham – who we met briefly in the former chapter – made a statement:

People have asked the Community Action Network why we are doing this. Why are we supporting Amos Yee? Amos Yee is a brat. Some people have told me that he is an ill-disciplined child. [...] So what this boy really needs is a tight slap – that's what some people tell me. And we shouldn't be supporting someone like him. Now I think we all need to be very clear here why we are supporting this cause. We support Amos Yee because we are against what the state is doing to a 16-year-old child: arresting him, detaining him and torturing him, just because he uploaded a YouTube video that some people didn't agree with. If the government can do this to Amos Yee, the government can also do this to any other 16-year-old children. The government can also do this to every other Singaporean, just because we have views which they deem unacceptable. It is for this reason that [...] we have decided to organize this event [...] so that we can take a strong stand that we will not accept the crackdown on freedom of speech by the Singapore government. (see Tobin 2015)

Amos also received strong support internationally, in particular from Hong Kong activists who organized a protest under the banner "Free Amos Yee". The Hong Kong University Students' Union also produced an open letter addressed to Lee Hsien Loong, which they read out loud during their protest:

Ever since independence, Singaporeans have endeavoured and thus built the current prosperity and renowned reputation. Your government yet suppresses freedom of the press. Your barbaric deed and means in handling oppositions have long been notorious and denounced worldwide. Were your government to be heir of the former tyranny and continue trampling human rights, no matter how prosperous and extravagant you would be, you would never be able to wipe out such opprobrium of misgovernance and harm. If you are not willing to witness the country belittling to an iron-fisted regime, you must turn over a new leaf and

take a different course unlike your father. (Hong Kong University Students' Union 2015)

Additionally, Western media outlets – such as *BBC*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *CNN* – got hold of the story, and began producing articles about how Amos' case “tests [the] limit of Singapore's laws” (Newton 2015), and has “set off criticism over the city-state's handling of critical speech” (Ramzy 2015). One article in particular, published by *The New Yorker*, expressed very strong sympathy with Amos, arguing that his case “doesn't just underscore his complaints about Singapore's backwardness on rights and freedom”, but “shows the country's dire need for cultural education through intelligent dissent” (Heller 2015). In this way, the author echoed one of the Singaporean film stars, Jeffrey Xu, in that he too saw the problem as lack of education – though not of Amos by “parents and teachers”, but of society as a whole by free thinkers like Amos. To that end, the author argued that Amos' “flamboyant thought and language is part of the best tradition of dissension, from Voltaire to the Velvet Revolution, and it accrues to creative fields beyond politics”. He ended by suggesting that Amos “is exactly the kind of person you would one day want reviewing your books, making your movies, maybe even running your country”, and that “Americans, who enjoy the benefits of free media, have a responsibility to take him more seriously than they take the government that has tried to quiet him for thinking freely in the public sphere.”

Lastly, Amos received support from several human rights organizations, all of whom condemned the sentence against him as a violation of the universal human right to freedom of speech. Amnesty International called the sentence “a dark day for freedom of expression”, and the organization's Research Director for South East Asia and Pacific, Rupert Abbott, said that “[i]f there is any justice Amos Yee would be walking free from court without a conviction against his name. The Singapore authorities must respect the right to freedom of expression” (Amnesty International 2015). This sentiment was echoed by Human Rights Watch, who issued a press statement demanding that “Singapore authorities should exonerate a 16-year-old convicted for a blog and video post about the death of Singapore's founding prime

minister”, since “[n]othing that Amos Yee said or posted should ever have been considered criminal – much less merit incarceration” (Human Rights Watch 2015).

Even though Amos was officially found guilty of having wounded the feelings of Christians, then, it was not primarily what he had said about this religious group, nor the drawing that he had made of Lee and Thatcher, that made him receive such massive attention. Nor was this in all likelihood the real reason why he was taken to court in the first place, but merely the official front for what should more accurately be described as political persecution. Amos, like the other activists we have met, was a victim of Singapore’s vague and broad legislation, which was used to legitimize action against him for what he had said legally – but outside the OB-markers – about Lee.

Asylum in the US

Such, at least, was US immigration judge Samuel Cole’s assessment when he chose to grant Amos asylum in the US as a political refugee. “[T]hough Yee’s prosecutions may have been legal under Singapore law,” Cole wrote in his grounds of decision, “they clearly served a ‘nefarious purpose’, namely, to stifle political dissent.” Cole gave eight reasons why he believed that to be the case.¹¹¹

First, he said, “the video [...] was scathing in its criticism of not just Yew [he means Lee but confuses Yew for Lee Kuan Yew’s family name] but of the Singapore regime in general,” while religion, second, “was only tangential to the video.” Third, the public reaction to the video had been all about the criticism of Lee, not Christianity. Fourth, Amos’ punishment and, fifth, his terms of pre-trial release, had both been unusually harsh for the crime in question, in that the then 16-year-old was sent to an adult prison and had been prohibited for an extensive period of time from posting on social media. Sixth, “[O]ther people who made disparaging comments about religions but who were not similarly critical of the Singapore regime avoided prosecution”. To that end, the judge specifically mentioned Calvin Cheng, a former Nominated Member

¹¹¹ The decision used to be available at: https://www.grossmanyong.com/files/ij-decision_media.pdf but that link appears now to be broken. It can now be found at: <http://ionsg.blogspot.com/2017/03/comments-on-amos-vees-asylum-in-united.html>

of Parliament and now self-ascribed “fashion entrepreneur”, and Jason Neo, a former leader of the PAP youth wing, YPAP. Arguably much harsher than Amos’ comments on Christians, Neo had posted a photo of a school bus with Malay children, together with the caption, “Bus filled with young terrorist trainees?”, referring to the fact that Malays are all of Muslim faith. Seventh, while the image of Lee and Thatcher had been deemed illegal on the basis of its obscenity – and not because it poked fun at Lee – Cole observed that “many more-explicit pictures are available to the Singapore public and do not result in prosecutions. But this particular drawing had the face of Yew [sic. he means Lee, but confuses the order of Chinese family names] superimposed on one of the figures. [...] This raises again the inference that the prosecution was politically motivated.”

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Cole noted that from what he could gather, “this is the *modus operandi* for the Singapore regime – critics of the government are silenced by civil suit for defamation or criminal prosecution,” as we saw in the previous chapters. In this, Cole mainly based his assessment on two sources of information: on the one hand, testimonies that he had collected from two Singaporean witnesses – one anonymous, the other Kenneth Jeyaretnam, son of JB. Jeyeratnam, Singapore’s first oppositional MP. On the other hand, he based it on reports from international NGOs such as Freedom House, The World Press Freedom Index, and Human Rights Watch. “Singapore”, Cole wrote:

is a democracy essentially controlled by one party [...]. The PAP controls 93% of the seats in the parliament and won 70% of the popular vote in the last election. Though the election was contested, the PAP maintains its advantage largely by its control over Singapore’s traditional media. [...] PAP also targets opposition leaders directly by selectively enforcing an arsenal of laws intended to intimidate and stifle dissenting voices, such as sedition, defamation, and ‘wounding religious feelings.’ Outcomes in civil suits ultimately ‘raises questions about judicial independence, particularly because lawsuits against government opponents often drive them into bankruptcy.

This, however, is getting ahead of ourselves. Before seeking asylum in the US, Amos had in fact ended up in Singaporean court a second time, once again for the crime of “wounding the religious feelings of other”. This time, however, the charge did not come off fully as “nefarious” as last time, as Amos, once out of prison, had put much of his energy towards criticizing precisely religion, especially Christianity and Islam. For this reason, too – and perhaps also because this was his second time around – the whole affair did not receive nearly as much attention, neither locally nor globally.

Still, I would argue, the second trial might for this reason tell us more about Singapore’s particular form of rule by law, and the lawlessness it creates for dissidents, as the second trial presented the court with exactly the kind of “criminal” that they had claimed to be dealing with during the first one – namely, someone who “with deliberate intention of wounding the religious or racial feelings of any person, utters any word or makes any sound in the hearing of that person, or makes any gesture in the sight of that person, or places any object in the sight of that person, or causes any matter however represented to be seen or heard by that person”. In other words, while the state had previously orchestrated what might be viewed as a show trial in order to legitimize their political persecution of him, Amos now chose to play the role that had been assigned to him. The second trial thus represented sort of satirical over-identification with the state narrative – as if to say that even if he had been *exactly* who the state claimed him to be, it still would not be legitimate to go after him. Indeed, in a Facebook post from the time of his second trial, he appeared to be confirming that this was what he had in mind. Under the headline, “Amos Yee’s planned list of illegal acts in Singapore”, he wrote:

2015 - Criticising the Government (Done)

2016 - Criticising religion (Done)

2017 - Skipping national service

2018 - Stepping on the national flag

2019 - Graffiti

2021 - Porn

2022 - Tax Evasion
2023 - Not Paying CPF
2024- Non-violent public protest
2026 - Taking marijuana
2030 - Hacking in and revealing private government files
2036 - trafficking marijuana/ attempting to sneak firearms into Singapore
(Death Penalty)

He thus gave the state the middle finger: if you are going to use your vague and broad laws to go after me for political reasons, he appeared to be saying, then I will break all of these laws just to give you exactly what you are asking for.

Trial number two

Amos second trial began on the 14th of September 2016. He was tried on a total of eight charges, six for “wounding the feelings of religious others”, and two for not showing up at the police station when wanted for questioning regarding these charges. The first six were for a number of videos and blog posts in which Amos had made fun of and criticised Islam and Christianity, all in the most over-the-top and vulgar ways possible. In one of the videos, “Refuting Islam With Their Own Quran”, Amos for example imitates a God-fearing Muslim who, in order to show her love for Allah, starts licking, kissing and, eventually, having sex with the Quran. “Look at me as I make love to the Quran”, he exclaims. In another, “Responding to the Common Bullshit of Christians”, Amos says that he will “strap these Christian scum to the ground and fuck them in the ass”, all the while referring to God as a “mass murderer”. On polygamy, he said the following:

[Prophet] Mohammed, at 50, married his niece Aisha, at 6, plunged his Allah-bred cock into her when she was 9 – had the courtesy to wait three years before

fucking; very nice, Mohammed, very nice – “I love your sandy vagina.” Since Allah said it, I now know that it is a fact that women are lower than me. I never liked women. Women smell weird and they have vaginas. If I marry them I get to rape them. Fuck women in the ass, wahahaha!¹¹²

Prior to the trial, police raided Amos’ home, where he lives together with his mom, to confiscate a number of computers and mobile phones that they suspected had been used for uploading the videos and blog posts that he was now being charged for. In Singapore, the crime of “wounding the feelings of religious others” is a so-called “arrestable offence”, which means that police officers, on suspicion that someone has committed it, have the right to seize the property of that person, as well as detain him or her for up to 48 hours, without having to obtain a warrant. Usually, offenses are “arrestable” if the suspect might reasonably be considered a danger to society – such as rapists and murderers – but it also includes a couple of “crimes of conscience”, like the one Amos was tried for.

The first thing that happened during the first day in court was therefore that Amos was presented with a massive bundle of documents – “evidence” that had been retrieved from his phones and computers. I happened to sit next to him in the courtroom when he was given all this material, and could observe his reaction. “This is such an infringement on my privacy!”, he exclaimed a number of times, shocked at seeing how most of the material consisted of private chat messages between him and his friends, as well as a complete search-history from his internet browser. It must have been over a thousand pages in all. Before the court proceedings commenced, the prosecution asked him to review it.

Upon receiving this material, a small group of supporters – family, friends, journalists, activists, and me – gathered outside the courtroom to collectively figure out how to react to all of this material, none of which had been presented to Amos beforehand. Was it even legal to wait until now to present him with all this? Probably, the more legally experienced members of the group concluded. Nevertheless, they also

¹¹² All of these videos and blog posts are removed from the internet.

assumed that the reason why he was presented with this material at this late stage was most likely not legal. Instead, this was a scare tactic. “They are trying to intimidate him”, one person commented.

Amos and the rest of us went back into the court room. On the stand, right before the prosecution was going to call the first witness, Amos told the judge that he would like to “take a certain course”. This, I was later informed, is legal parlance for taking the court into Criminal Court Resolution (CCR), which is a newly instituted and somewhat obscure court mechanism in Singapore that allows parties to find a quicker resolution to criminal court cases behind closed doors. This move somewhat shocked everyone, including the judge, as Amos had apparently come to this decision without any legal counsel. How did he know about this possibility? “I came across this by sheer luck”, Amos said.¹¹³ Because of this surprise request, the court adjourned for the day, reassembling the next day for CCR. Here, Amos was quite immediately given a deal. Five charges will be dropped completely if he agrees to plead guilty to the remaining three: one for not showing up for police interrogation, and two for injuring the feelings of religious others, with a total sentence of imprisonment for roughly a month. I asked Amos if he was going to accept, and he replied that accepting a deal was never the point. Instead, “I just wanted to see what kind of punishment they had in mind for me”.

Throughout the first days of court proceedings, there was a sense of optimism among Amos and his supporters. While most assumed that he was going to be found guilty no matter what – “they have already made up their minds”, was the general sentiment – the hope was that he might nevertheless be able to expose what the supporters saw as the ridiculous nature of the trial. Specifically, the plan was to draw the judge’s attention to the fact that, in many of his anti-Islamic posts, Amos formulates his critique of Islam in terms of a critique of ISIS. What ISIS is doing, Amos argues in these posts, is really the logical conclusion of what Islam teaches. For example, in one of his posts, entitled “What in the world is a ‘moderate muslim’?”, he writes:

¹¹³ There is a bit more to this story, but for reasons of confidentiality I cannot say more.

A fucking hypocrite that's what. The truth of the matter is that what isis has been doing and what these 'moderate muslims' considers 'extremist interpretation of the theology', is what muslims should be doing if they claim they follow the koran. Those people aren't the extremists, you guys are the underachievers really. All these 'non-extreme' religious people who fap to their holy book but aren't liable for a murder charge, have to deal with so many contradictions, lying to both other people and themselves every day to feebly preserve their delusion. It must be really hard isn't it? You 'moderate muslims' or 'semi-partial christians'? I'm pretty disappointed when christians and muslims claim that they are not offended by my comments. They fucking should be, I condemned your disgusting beliefs and viciously explained how everything you have lived for is utter bullshit. You should get depression and cry yourself to sleep.¹¹⁴

The idea among Amos and his supporters was that, because Amos' arguments against Islam are formulated in terms of a critique against ISIS, making his comments illegal would force the prosecution into the uncomfortable position of having to argue that criticism of ISIS should be illegal under Singaporean law. But this cannot be the case, as the government itself is clear about its commitment to fight religious extremism. This, the supporters thought, would demonstrate the political nature of the trial: if Amos is found guilty, the state will effectively have to argue that it is illegal when a citizen does it, but legal when the state does it.

As it turned out, however, there would not be much debating at all. Instead, the first three days were dedicated to forensic examination, meaning long, technical, and incredibly boring interviews with police officers who had been in charge of obtaining the various materials from Amos' electronic devices. Typically, the prosecutor would ask the police witness a) when they obtained the material, b) from which device they obtained it, and c) how they stored it. These examinations would usually be quite difficult to follow as every piece of evidence (for example a specific video) would be referred to in terms of an assigned serial number – say, exhibit B4 – which in turn would be presented in a folder which was also given a serial number. This confused the judge

¹¹⁴ Removed from the internet.

as well, who often asked the prosecution to clarify exactly which piece of evidence they were referring to – “Are you talking about exhibit B4 in folder A5?” – and most of the time, this was done simply to establish how the police officer in question went about obtaining something like a publicly available YouTube video. For the people in Amos support group, this was highly frustrating. Why it is even necessary to go through all this, they wondered? Amos does not deny that he has uploaded these videos, so why go to such length to prove that he has? The simple answer, when Amos finally asked the judge, was that this is the procedure for how to admit evidence. (So fair enough.)

The second recurring feature of these first days in court was when the judge asked Amos, after the forensics people had been interviewed, if he had any objections. Every time this happened, Amos would stand up (or when he got too tired of such formalities, sit down) and say: “Yes, I do object. I don’t see the relevance of this evidence”. This referred to all the chat messages, Internet browsing history, and other private information obtained by the police from his electronic devices. Often, before such episodes, Amos and the group of supporters had speculated outside the courtroom what reasons might be given by the prosecution in defence of including this or that piece of evidence, and often there would be discussion as to how Amos might respond. Every time, these speculations would turn out to be more or less useless, as the reasons given by the prosecution would typically be related to the material in a much more indirect way than had been guessed. Or, alternatively, Amos would just run up against the wall of “I was just doing my job”.

Thus, a lot of frustration was felt in the group due to the fact that three long days were spent dealing with technical evidence regarding aspects of the alleged crimes that Amos either did not dispute or felt irrelevant to the case. There were in total seven such witnesses, and besides being seen as irrelevant by Amos and the group of supporters, they were made increasingly frustrating by the constant confusion regarding which piece of evidence was being discussed: “In paragraph 8, there is a table that describes five types of data – these are illustrated in the annexes referred to in table 3 – can you confirm?”, “Table 8 describes a number of pieces of evidence, are these the same data as found in table B?”, “the video was saved in CD-ROM with serial number 34255...”,

and so on. The more witnesses that were called for such questioning, the more did the atmosphere change from one of defiance to one of hopelessness. When is he going to get to discuss the issues? When would the substantive issues be brought up?

And so it went on for three days. Then, on the fourth day in court, Amos decided to admit his guilt.

Singapore's biggest newspaper, *The Straits Times*, reported that Amos had made a U-turn. It would better be described as a slightly more unexpected turn out of many previous ones. On the morning of the third day in court, Amos told the group of supporters that he planned to admit to one count of injuring religious emotions. The supporters all tried to dissuade him: "Your job is not to confess your guilt but to raise reasonable doubt", they insisted. But Amos had made up his mind. He did not believe anymore that he could make a good legal case in relation to this particular charge, and therefore, he would plead guilty to it.

When he stood up to confess, he had once again changed his mind: he decided to plead guilty to not one but three charges! This somewhat shocked everyone, not least the judge, who asked Amos if he fully understood what this meant, to which Amos replied that he did. I spoke to Amos afterwards. His reasoning was the same as with the single admittance, only now applied to three charges. "It's no fun to fight if I don't have a good legal case", he said. After admitting to the first three charges, the court adjourned, and set the date for dealing with the remaining three. There was some speculation in the group as to whether the prosecution would drop the rest, now that they had already gotten three confessions. In the end, they did not.

During the week or so that passed between these first three confessions and the prospect of fighting the remaining charges in court, Amos finally received legal counselling. The main human rights lawyer in Singapore, M Ravi, had not been able to represent Amos, as his licence had long since been revoked, and so Ravi directed Amos to another lawyer, Kana. In discussion with Kana, Amos decided to confess to the remaining charges, too. When the court reconvened for the remaining charges, Amos once again stood up and said that he wished to plead guilty. That marked the end of open court.

The next time I met Amos was for his final sentencing. This was also the first time I met him together with his lawyer, as I had not been present for his last three confessions. The presence of a lawyer with Amos changed the dynamic quite drastically. Amos did not do much talking now, and Kana understood his role in terms of getting Amos the lowest possible sentence – a role that had probably been agreed on by him, Amos and Amos’ mom, Mary. I asked Kana what their tactic would be. He explained that it would be to get Amos to “confess to all the charges and say that he’s sorry, very remorseful”. When the judge asked Kana to stand up, he read a long mitigation plea.

Kana opened by saying that Amos is “the only child in the family” and that his “highest educational standard is GCE O levels” (i.e. secondary school). It was hard not to hear this as a way of changing the image of Amos in the eyes of the judge, from a dangerous dissident to a harmless boy without any higher education. This short biographical note set the tone for what was to follow. Amos, Kana said, “is deeply remorseful, for all his acts were grossly offensive and provocative to the Christian faith and to Islam. He admits his acts were premeditated”. This was the part of the mitigation that was admitting to the crimes; the rest was more apologetic, and went beyond mere confessing. Amos, Kana said,

admits that he does not possess any religious, scholastic and/or intellectual ability to discuss religion [...] In this regard, the Accused has not read the full texts of the Koran and the Bible and as such, at the material time, he had a skewed concept of the religions which he very much now regrets and repents. He now wishes to show his deep respect for Christianity and Islam and notes that both the religions are more than 1500 years old which are fervently followed by billions people all around the world.

This passage was particularly interesting, considering that one of the videos that Amos was charged for in this trial, “Responding to the common bullshit of Christians”,

discusses precisely the issue of Amos not having read “the full text” of the Bible. In the video, however, Amos argues that:

You do not need to have an extensive knowledge of the Bible or religion to tell a Christian that their beliefs are fucking bullshit. All you need to do whenever a Christian is like, “Ave Maria, Praise the lord” [is to say:] “Yeah, yeah, do you have any evidence that God exist? Oh, you don’t? Well fuck you!”¹¹⁵

In court, by contrast:

The accused admits that his contemptuous and vituperative language [...] shows his shallowness of his thought in respect of both Christianity and Islam. While it is considered that the accused is not immature, the Accused has a lot to learn from the words and acts he had used against Christianity and Islam. He repeats that he vows never to wound the religious feelings of others in any manner whatsoever in future.

The judge, after hearing this, sentenced Amos to six weeks in jail and a fine of S\$2000, adding that he hoped not to see Amos again in court. “This was a very fair sentence”, Kana commented to the group of supporters when convening outside the courtroom. Outside the courthouse, a small press team greeted Amos for a final interview together with Kana. The latter repeated to the press that the sentence was fair, and Amos, with a quiet smirk on his face, told the reporters that he was “very remorseful”, before rushing off. “He is probably going home to sleep”, his mother told me. “He stays up very late and sleeps long in the mornings”.

What to make of this? On the one hand, the mitigation plea represented a sort of ultimate triumph of the state: they had turned the defiant boy into a remorseful subject. On the other hand, it was obvious to everyone involved that the statement was only a

¹¹⁵ Removed from the internet.

performance: an overidentification with the state narrative, rather than a genuine statement of remorse. Amos, gave the court *precisely what it wanted* – a remorseful teenager who admits that he knows nothing – but in so doing made a mockery of the whole thing, as he was only playing the remorseful criminal, rather than genuinely embodying this position. It was if he was saying: “I don’t take this seriously either way, so I may as well give you what you want in order get away with a slap on the fingers”. Indeed, while his supporters had wanted him to fight, he could not be bothered to do so if it meant sitting through many days of boring witness reports by police, who told the court how they had included YouTube videos into the evidence file. So, he simply played along in order to get along.

After the verdict had finally fallen, me, Amos’ mom and two supporters walked over to a food court that is located in the basement of a shopping mall right next to the state court. The atmosphere was a mixture of relief and disappointment. While no one had hoped for a better outcome – everyone was in fact rather pleased with the “fair” sentence – there was a distinct melancholy about seeing a young man, let alone a son, being found guilty of a “crime” that everyone there felt should not be criminal. “We have freedom of speech, right? Should he not be protected?”, Mary asked me. She told me that a lot of people have been saying that Amos is really just a pawn in a game intended to upset religious harmony in Singapore, and that someone else is writing his material. “But if you look at the videos, it’s clear that it’s just him!”, Mary exclaimed. In her view, Amos’ videos must be seen as artistic. “He spends a lot of time on the videos, editing them and so on”. According to Mary, it is clearly a performance, though one that comes directly from Amos, and that he believes in.

I asked Mary what she thought about Amos future. She told me that he will probably end up in trouble again. “But next time they might not be as nice to him. Next time, he will be 18 years old.” She therefore supported his plans to leave the country. “He has to go, it is not possible for him to stay here.” Contrary to what has been suggested in the media – and generally on the internet – Mary is an active defender of her son, and not just a weak mother who has lost control. She talks about her son as a

very bright kid, as someone who has a lot of talent but who has been unable to fit into Singaporean society:

His teachers often complain that he is rude. But he is misunderstood. If you show him a text, he will look at it for five seconds and then look away. People think that he doesn't care. But really, he has already read it. He can speed-read, but his teacher's think that he's rude. He did very well in the human subjects in school, like history and social science. When it's just about memorizing things, he loses interest.

When I asked Amos himself about his future, his answer was clear and unambiguous: seek asylum in the US, the country that has “the best protection of freedom of speech in the world”. Indeed, already before seeing asylum, he had been welcomed in the US as a martyr of freedom of speech, by the online community.

Amos goes to the US

One of the most important channels in the free speech community on YouTube is the *Rubin Report*. Hosted by Dave Rubin – a former leftist who used to work for *The Young Turks*, but who currently describes himself as a “classical liberal”, and lately has been an outspoken Trump supporter – the show was briefly home to the so-called “Intellectual Dark Web”, a loose collection of heterodox thinkers ranging from the political left to the political right, who were united in the common commitment to discussing taboo topics in a civil and open manner. The name of the group was coined by mathematician and managing director of *Thiel Capital*, Eric Weinstein, who introduced the name in conversation with podcaster and neuroscientist Sam Harris, on the latter's podcast, “Making Sense” (preciously “Waking Up”). The name jokingly makes a comparison between the ideas circulating between its member, on the one hand, and the illegal goods traded on the dark web, on the other. In a *New York Times* article about the group, journalist Bari Weiss described them as follows:

Here are some things that you will hear when you sit down to dinner with the vanguard of the Intellectual Dark Web: There are fundamental biological differences between men and women. Free speech is under siege. Identity politics is a toxic ideology that is tearing American society apart. And we're in a dangerous place if these ideas are considered "dark." (Weiss 2018)

Amos largely fit into this group of "maverick" thinkers, although he would likely have been considered a bit too much of a provocateur by the other members. Amos himself found a home in the younger atheist community on YouTube, citing specifically TJ Kirk – more commonly known as "The Amazing Atheist" – as an inspiration, saying at one point that "somebody should nominate him for a goddamn Nobel price". Amos has also appeared on repeatedly on Count Dankula's channel, a Scottish YouTuber whose real name is real name Mark Meechan, and who is most famous for having taught his girlfriend's dog to do a Nazi salute when hearing the phrase, "gas the Jews". For this, Meechan was found guilty of hate speech, and charged to pay a fine of £800.

Rubin introduced Amos on his show by saying that he is an "atheist and free speech advocate", and that he is "mocking others' ideas with ideas of his own", adding that: "He isn't calling for harm to a person or group of people", but is "in fact doing the most human thing you can do, which is thinking for yourself". Amos, on his part, introduced himself by saying that he is famous for having made videos criticising Christianity and Islam "in a country called Singapore, which is a completely totalitarian dictatorship state." "But fortunately", he said, "there's the internet, so I posted it online, and I'm being charged for it".¹¹⁶

Throughout the interview, Amos kept referring to his own views by saying that "some would deem" that Amos thinks this and that. This was a sarcastic way of mocking the (in his view) overly litigious nature of the Singaporean state, while also avoiding being taken to court once again. "When I use the phrase 'some would deem'", Amos

¹¹⁶ "Is There Free Speech in Singapore? | Amos Yee | FREE SPEECH | Rubin Report". *Rubin Report*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mNQwo84chOA&t=459s>

said, “it’s basically my opinion. It’s just that I’m gonna use that phrase now so that I will, you know, not be charged for it in Singapore. It’s because, you know, if I use ‘some would deem’ I’m just stating a fact and they can’t charge me for it, hopefully – I hope I don’t get charged for it!”. “So *some people would deem* that’s what you’ve done”, Rubin responded, excitedly, after Amos had laid out his reasons for humping the Koran in a video. “Yes, some people would deem!”, Amos responded, adding “that may or may not be my intention”. “Wow you should be lawyer also, I think”, Rubin responded, clearly amused by Amos’ sarcasm and quick wit.

After discussing Amos’ videos critiquing religion – which, Amos said, represent the best of their kind on YouTube, “objectively speaking” – the two moved on to talk about Singapore, which Rubin remarked is a country that most Americans know very little about, as it is not much discussed in the US. “Singapore”, Amos explained with characteristic brashness, “is the worst country in the world, in my opinion”, continuing:

It is a completely totalitarian dictatorship. It controls the entire mainstream media. But the reason why you distinguish Singapore from, like, North Korea, the reason why it’s much worse is because it is way more insidious. People don’t know the atrocities that’s happening in Singapore, and Singapore has been able to fool all foreigners into thinking that Singapore is democratic, Singapore is peaceful and harmonious, and they still come in, work with Singapore so as to increase their goddamn GDP. What is bad is that Singapore, you know, it doesn’t have the kind of like torture where it’s like flogging or, you know, putting them in concentration camps or selling human organs, but it’s more of a psychological torture where you just dull the minds, you keep them in fear. People usually think that if you’re angry you go out and write and protest in the streets, but, you know, Singaporeans are angry, Singaporeans are not peaceful [...] but the government dulls their minds so fucking bad that they basically don’t have any goddamn passion to do anything. It manifests itself as depression rates: everyone’s depressed, everyone’s horrid – fucking disgusting country, my country sucks, Rubin.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

I do not know if Amos took the last piece of analysis about depression directly from Roy, but it sounds a lot like something that the latter would say. What I do know is that Roy has been a huge influence on Amos' thinking about Singapore. In his infamous video about Lee Kuan Yew, for instance, most of the information that Amos uses to dispel the "myth" that Singapore is a great country – and to prove the point that Lee Kuan Yew was really a dictator who oppressed his own people – is taken directly from Roy's blog. And in another video, entitled "How to Create Change in Singapore" (originally titled "How to Destroy the Singapore Government"), Amos stated upfront that he would not be where he is today if it was not for Roy.¹¹⁸

In response to Amos' second imprisonment, Roy wrote a long article in which he offered his support of Amos, calling him a friend, a brother, and (even) "the child I will never have". "Some chide Amos for mocking Lee Kuan Yew", Roy wrote, "but they also choose to ignore what he had to say. [...] He is a 16-year-old child but he is also wise beyond his years. In the end, he might not have used the best of words, he might not have done the best of comparisons. But he meant well. And he has integrity".¹¹⁹

In this, Roy identified an important difference between himself and Amos. Where Roy has tended to criticize Singapore in terms of Singaporean values – speaking about the good of the nation, serving the interests of "the people", and how PAP government has failed to serve both – Amos outright rejects his country, calling it disgusting, and seeks to break as many cultural taboos as possible. Roy, to that end, has a rather collectivist mindset, in that he cares about equality, fairness, and the good of society. Amos, by contrast, is a strong individualist who cares about his rights to do and say whatever he likes, regardless of what other people may feel about it. More than anything else, I would say, Amos appears to be driven by a wish to take positions that are diametrically opposed to whatever the Singapore consensus may be, making him something of a compulsory contrarian.

¹¹⁸ Removed from the internet.

¹¹⁹ Blog post, The Heart Truths: "My Heart Goes Out to Amos Yee, My Friend". Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2015/05/01/my-heart-goes-out-to-amos-yee-my-friend/>

Among other things, this difference between Roy and Amos is seen in how they speak. Roy speaks with a Singlish accent, and his oratorical style is reminiscent of many oppositional figures in Singapore's history: passionate, morally outraged, and carrying on the social justice tradition of people like Lim Chin Siong. Amos, by contrast, speaks with a heavily Americanized accent, though he retains some of his Singlish underneath (which he resorts to in person-to-person conversation with other Singaporeans). Specifically, to my ears, Amos' repeated use of the word "goddamn" is reminiscent of the American conservative commentator William F Buckley, who famously threatened liberal author and political commentator Gore Vidal that he would "sock" the latter "in the goddamn face" if he did not stop calling Buckley a "crypto-fascist" (a phrase that Buckley later recycled in his *Firing Line* conversation with Noam Chomsky). To be sure, Amos has most likely not picked up this habit of speech from Buckley; in fact, I highly doubt that Amos is familiar with Buckley. The point, however, is that he did not pick it up from Singapore, where I have never heard anyone use it that way. The same goes for his extensive use of profanity: while many Singaporeans tend to use swear-words in an old-fashioned English way – using words like "shucks" – Amos frequently uses words like "motherfucker", "cocksucker", and other highly Americanized forms of profanity.

Unsurprisingly, Amos is rather controversial in activist circles in Singapore, as many do not consider him to be a good faith actor, but view him as a person who cynically presents himself as a social justice activist in order to boost his YouTube career. "While Amos should have the right to express himself whether anyone agrees with him or not," journalist and activist Kirsten Han said for instance, "he's not necessarily a good advocate for free speech in Singapore, because people don't like him", adding: "They don't see him as responsible in his speech or actions. He's also said some misogynistic things that have lost him support among a lot of liberal Singaporeans who might have otherwise supported him" (quoted in White 2016). Indeed, in my personal experience, I have often been rather shocked to find how disliked Amos is even among people who I would have expected to support him. For instance, when I have gone to punk rock shows in Singapore – a community generally known for their defiant attitude and anti-government sentiments – I have found that they generally believe that

Amos should not have said what he said, as it was very disrespectful towards Christians and Muslims. Some have mentioned Singapore's fragile ethnic make-up as a reason for taking a more caution approach to speech, saying that one should not make inflammatory comments about religion, as it can create animosity between groups. In fact, to this day, I have yet to have a single conversation with a punk rocker who wholeheartedly defends Amos. (Partly, I suspect, this is because the punk rock scene is mainly made up of Malays, who are Muslims, and therefore do not like Amos' anti-Islamic statements. Had Amos criticized only PAP, the story would probably be different.)

In addition to this, Amos is known to be a notoriously bad ally, as he has many times turned his back on the few people who actually support him. The most notable example of this was when Amos claimed to have been molested by the man who provided bail for him, after he was jailed the first time – family and youth councillor Vincent Law – only to later admit that he had made the whole thing up in order to “trick the media”, adding however that Vincent is “immensely creepy”. When I asked Amos about this, he told me the story from his point of view. Vincent, he said, had posted bail, but had then become clingy and demanded that Amos would see him so that he could provide “moral council”. Amos was not interested in counselling, however, and therefore made up the story about molestation in order that Vincent would go away.

During this debacle, Amos also came into conflict with Terry Xu, the editor of one of Singapore's most important oppositional news site, *The Online Citizen*. Terry had been present throughout the entirety of Amos' second trial, and reported diligently on it. During the trial, he had also discussed the case with Amos, and provided much legal assistance. When Amos made the allegations against Vincent, however, Terry refused to report on it, despite being pushed to do so by Amos and his mother, as he believed that Amos' accusations were not credible. Roy, too, was reluctant to offer support, as he did not believe that Vincent would molest a child. This led Amos to write a long Facebook post in which he railed against his former allies Terry and Roy, and by extension, the entire activist community in Singapore:

My mother, upon reading what Vincent had done to me, was absolutely horrified and disturbed, contacted Terry Xu of TheOnlineCitizen, to confirm that the moments I had mentioned concerning her in lieu of the Vincent story, was true, and to perhaps express it to the general public. However, as of now, Terry has yet to reply to my mother, even though he had been prompt in replying to her before, and voluntarily offering to write an article, explaining and showing the true nature of my mother's police report. And Roy Ngerng who initially condemned me for my actions towards making molest allegations to Vincent. Now chooses to remain absolutely silent about the affair, after I had revealed the emotional abuse Vincent had inflicted on me. [...] So Roy Ngerng thinks that hiding the truth, is advantageous for Vincent. As... I see now why they are very good friends. But I think really, the true reason why Terry and Roy have refrained from talking about all of this, is simply because people just don't like to admit that they have changed their opinions once further evidence have surfaced, because that might indicate that when they made their initial hasty judgement, they were wrong. And this is the reason, why PAP is able to rule the country for so long. The government in Singapore really fucking sucks, but then again, the opposition are manipulative too.

In this way, Amos had been heading for the US long before actually seeking asylum. While he became famous for a video about Lee Kuan Yew, his work was ultimately not about Singapore, nor geared towards a Singaporean audience. Instead, he was criticising Singapore from the point of view of the international, online community, complaining that the Singaporean government fails to provide its citizens with the "universal" rights provided to citizens in the West. Hence, he became very interesting from the Western point of view, as a martyr of Western values in a non-Western society. However, he had little to offer Singapore society, as even those who defended his right to freedom of speech ultimately became objects of his attacks. His mode of operation, we might say, was one of *pure negation* – criticising anything that could be criticized, but for that reason, incapable of building stable alliances over time, and destined to sooner or later self-destruct.

For me, this aspect of his personality was brought home most clearly by the fact that, during our short interaction with each other, Amos went from calling himself a

libertarian capitalist to calling himself an anarcho-communist. He explained this seemingly sudden shift by saying that he realized that anarcho-communism was as far from Singapore as one could get, as Singapore represents a form of state capitalism. “So the opposite of that must be anarcho-communism,” he said, “which is naturally what I must be, since I am the opposite of the Singaporean government”.

More famously, soon after Amos was granted asylum in the US, he began arguing that paedophiles should be allowed to have sex with children as long as there is consent, since there is nothing inherently wrong with sex with minors. As a consequence of this, many of his former allies – including Dave Rubin and Melissa Chen – openly declared that they no longer support him. Chen, a Singaporean journalist working and living in the US, went so far as to publish a statement in which she called for Amos to be deported back to Singapore. “There is obviously some irony in the fact that a so-called free speech warrior like me is [...] actively advocating for the deplatforming of Amos everywhere”, Chen said. However, “Given my active role in his successful asylum case that gifted him a clean slate and newfound freedoms, I must oppose him out of sheer personal responsibility, as he has thoroughly abused these hard won freedoms”, adding that: “Being in America is a privilege and not a right, and he has straight up proved that as somebody who is not even contributing to society positively, but is actively trading in and promoting morally bankrupt ideas that harm children, he absolutely does not deserve to be here” (Thet 2018). Similarly, under the interview with Amos on the Rubin Report’s YouTube channel, one now finds a disclaimer which states that “[i]t has come to our attention that Amos Yee has been charged with soliciting child pornography. This discussion was conducted over four years ago when he was seeking political asylum from Singapore. [...] The Rubin Report does not endorse Amos Yee's views or apparent actions.”

In this context, a statement that the Singaporean Ministry of Home Affairs put out in response to Amos being granted asylum in the US reads as somewhat prophetic. While it is the “prerogative” of the US to take in someone who engages in hate speech, the statement read, Singapore has chosen a different path. “In 2015, Amos Yee was

charged for engaging in hate speech against Christians”, the statement began, continuing:

He pleaded guilty to the charges, and was sentenced to six weeks imprisonment and a fine of \$2000. He was represented by counsel in both the 2015 and 2016 proceedings. Yee had engaged in hate speech against Christians and Muslims. The US adopts a different standard, and allows some such hate speech under the rubric of freedom of speech. The US for example, in the name of freedom of speech, allows the burning of the Quran. Singapore takes a very different approach. Anyone who engages in hate speech or attempts to burn the Quran, Bible, or any religious text in Singapore, will be arrested and charged. The US Department of Homeland Security had opposed Yee’s asylum application, on the basis that Yee had been legitimately prosecuted. It is the prerogative of the US to take in such people who engage in hate speech. There are many more such people, around the world, who deliberately engage in hate speech, and who may be prosecuted. Some of them, will no doubt take note of the US approach, and consider applying for asylum in the US.¹²⁰

Another Singaporean, See Soo Eng, gave voice to a similar sentiment in a short letter published in *The Straits Times*, which had the heading “Good riddance to Amos Yee” (See 2017). Expressing his gratitude to US Judge Samuel Cole “for granting Mr Amos Yee asylum in the United States”, as Singapore “is now free of a badly brought up Singaporean”, See wrote: “I truly hope Mr Yee will go one step further and take up citizenship there. The US will fit Mr Yee fine as he continues his ranting or his hate speeches, which we in Singapore do not want to hear.” In this, both See and the MHA echoed the comments that Devan Nair had made decades earlier, in response to the Dutch Labour Party’s request to have Singapore expelled from the Socialist International, where Nair had said that if DLP and other Western social democrats want to “play poker” with their communists, “we sincerely wish them good luck. For we

¹²⁰ MHA’s Comments on Amos Yee’s US Asylum Application. Available online: <https://www.mha.gov.sg/mediaroom/press-releases/mha's-comments-on-amos-yee's-us-asylum-application/>

think that they will require lots of luck. But we beg to opt out.” The difference was that, this time, the threat did not come from communism, but from the capitalist West itself, as Amos was criticising Singapore for being less liberal than the latter, and therefore a “disgusting” society.

In this, Amos represented a different kind of threat, and potentially a more difficult one in the long run. For all its worldwide ambition – and strong economic and military backing by both China and the Soviet Union – the communist threat could quite easily be overcome by the Singaporean state, as it could easily demonstrate to its population that capitalism brings better living standards than communism. As economist Werner Sombart famously said about the prospects of a socialist revolution in the US: “All Socialist utopias came to nothing on roast beef and apple pie” (Sombart 1976: 106) – meaning that it is impossible to get wealthy workers to opt for revolution. Same in Singapore: simply by succeeding on its own terms, the state could undermine socialism/communism as an ideological contender.

With Amos, however, the story is arguably the opposite, as it is *precisely* economic development that brings about the risk of people like him. In this, Amos represents the threat of Chua’s “third generation”, who no longer remembers the hardships of the past, and who “will feel that they have individual rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and therefore be much more likely to disobey their parents”. Here, the fact that Amos turned out to be such a loose cannon was simply dumb luck for the government. Such luck cannot be relied on forever, however, as the “third generation” (or fourth, or fifth) will sooner or later find better and more effective ways to oppose the MM state from without – attacking it in terms of the values of the “host society”, rather than holding it to account on its own terms.

One such threat, I will suggest in closing, may come from the critical social justice movement – also known as “wokeness” – which may well prove fatal to the MM state in the long run, as ever-more young people come to look at the policies and practices of the MM state as unacceptable and oppressive, rather than as sources of pride. In the concluding section of this chapter, we will look briefly at this movement’s introduction into Singapore, and what the reactions to it have been.

Going forward: “wokeness” comes to the MM state

On January 26, 2021, three people were arrested outside the Ministry of Education (MOE), located on Buona Vista Drive in the southwestern part of Singapore, “for allegedly taking part in a public assembly without a permit” (Ang 2021). The protest was organized in response to a *Reddit* post, made by a transgender high-school student, Ashlee, in which she claimed that MOE had interfered with her planned hormone treatment, and that they had denied her the right to present as a girl at her school by demanding that she cut her hair “to fit the boys’ hairstyle in the handbook, and that I was specifically to wear the male uniform”.

MOE denied these allegations. “MOE and schools work closely with and respect the professional advice given by [the Ministry of Health’s] healthcare professionals,” representatives from MOE responded. “We are not in a position to interfere with any medical treatment, which is a matter for the family to decide on”, adding that: “We invite the student to approach the school to clarify and discuss how the school can support *his* schooling better” (emphasis added) (*Channel News Asia* 2021-01-16). In response to this, Ashley updated her *Reddit* post, saying that MOE’s statement “is an outright lie, contradicts what I was told by my doctor, and I am sure my classmates can vouch for me. In addition,” she wrote, “they do not respect my pronouns and instead intentionally misgendered me (against the advice and recommendations)”.¹²¹

At the demonstration outside MOE, the protestors carried with them placards which said: “#FIX SCHOOLS NOT STUDENTS”, “WHY ARE WE NOT IN YOUR SEX ED”, “HOW CAN WE GET A’s WHEN YOUR CARE FOR US IS AN F”, “trans students will NOT be erased” and “trans students deserve access to HEALTHCARE & SUPPORT”. The placards were all seized by the police, and the three arrested protestors (out of five in total) were released on bail later the same day, at 10pm. According to activist group Community Action Network (CAN), the goal of the protest had been to

¹²¹ Available at: https://www.reddit.com/r/SGExams/comments/kwqqdu/rant_transgender_discrimination_in_singapore/

call on education minister Lawrence Wong to “end discrimination against LGBTQ+ students by MOE schools”, to “uphold the fundamental rights of all students to education within a safe and supportive school life”, and to apologize for “the harm done by schools to LGBTQ+ through their schools’ discriminatory practices”.

Wong responded. “I recognize how strongly some people feel about this issue”, he said in a statement to parliament. “We welcome continued dialogue and feedback, and must strive to provide a supportive environment in schools, to support our students holistically.” However, he added, “Issues of gender have become bitterly contested sources of division in the culture wars in some Western countries and societies. We should not import these culture wars to Singapore, or allow issues of gender identity to divide our society” (Mothership 2021-02-02). In this, Wong joined a long line of Singaporean politicians who have similarly warned about importing the “fads and fetishes” of the West into Singapore, as doing so will undermine the fragile social order of society, and ultimately lead to ruin. More specifically, by addressing the problem as one of “culture wars”, Wong inserted himself into an emerging conversation in Singapore regarding the concept of “wokeness”, and whether or not this new social justice movement represents a sorely needed reckoning with power and privilege, or whether it represents a foreign ideology that will do damage to Singapore by sowing seeds of mistrust between members of society along the lines of race, gender and class.

Just a few days before Wong made his statement, *The Straits Times* had published an opinion piece by writer Lester Wong, in which he argued that “Too much of ‘wokeism’ can become too much of a good thing”. “Being woke, or socially conscious of injustice”, Wong wrote, “is a good thing. But there is nothing to be gained from hyper-vigilantly policing other people’s words and thoughts, waiting to pounce on their ‘mistakes’” (Wong 2021). More widely discussed was an article published in *Today* on March 15, as part of a series called “Gen Y Speaks”, in which editor and university teacher Bertha Henson asked her students to write op-eds on a given topic, one of which would be published. This time, the topic was, “What are your thoughts on wokeness?”, and the winning article, written by 24-year old media student Dana Teoh Jia Yi, had the headline, “This is why I don’t want to be woke. Don’t cancel me for it”.

Similar to Wong's article, Teoh argued that while there are "some aspects of the woke movement I genuinely applaud" – such as "cancelling slurs like 'slut', 'faggot', and 'tranny'" – there are other aspects of woke culture which are less applaudable, such as intolerance of different opinions. "What I cannot get on board with", she wrote, "is the cancelling of people and organisations for believing or saying something that opposes the 'woke stance', whatever the issue" (Teoh 2021)

To make this point, Teoh focused on the trans issue, and specifically the attempt by some activists to "cancel" *Harry Potter* author J.K Rowling after she questioned the term "people who menstruate" as a (trans-inclusive) substitute for the term "woman". "People who menstruate", Rowling wrote in a tweet. "I'm sure there used to be a word for those people. Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?" Teoh commented:

Ah, she would rue the day she put this on Twitter. [...] A year later, she still seems to be lying low – I haven't seen her name in a while. That is insane to me. Can we no longer have discussions? To what extent are we going to take this "cancelling" (extreme censorship)? Perhaps Ms Rowling phrased her stance in a less-than-tactful manner. But she was trying to say something, wasn't she? She was trying to say that to her, in her personal opinion, trans women are distinct from cis women [...]. And at the risk of getting cancelled, I'm going to say there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing wrong with saying, believing, and perhaps even convincing some people that what she thinks is true. Everyone is entitled to the freedom of thought, if not of speech. I myself am not particularly well-versed in trans issues, trans rights, and the trans experience overall. I'd say I'm pretty ignorant on the topic. But as a young person who lives on the internet, I would never ever admit that I think being transgender is a little out there for me. (ibid)

The last sentence of Teoh's in particular sparked outrage among trans activists and other social justice advocates in Singapore, who accused Teoh of transphobia. What exactly does she mean that "being transgender is a little out there", they wondered.

Another statement of Teoh's that attracted a lot of criticism – and which was later redacted from her article – was her admittance that “I still get weirded out by photos of post-op bodies, and still struggle with the argument that trans children should be given hormone blockers”. According to critics, this was nothing but flat-out bigotry on Teoh's part. One critic, Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, a senior editor with the *Economist Intelligence Unit*, asked his Facebook followers to perform a “smell-test”: replace the term “transgender” with any other minority group, such as “being Muslim is a little out there for me” or “I still get weirded out by photos of circumcised Jewish males/hairy, dark-skinned bodies”. No one, he said, would find those other sentences acceptable. So “why should the language be acceptable when used to describe a transgender person?”. These “dangerous words”, Vadaketh said, “should never have been published by a national paper because they can foster a climate of hate towards the transgender community.” Another critic, Indulekshmi Rajeswari, a privacy lawyer and LGBTQ activist, similarly asked her Facebook followers to perform a smell-test, suggesting that the word “transgender” should be replaced “with ‘indian’ and see how it can easily be incredibly hurtful to a real person when you criticize what their bodies are”. She further argued that *Today* had used “transphobia to drive clicks”, saying that, “if you wanted an honest discussion about detransitioning, puberty blockers and so on, maybe try talking to a trans person, googling the statistics or reading up first”, adding that: “If you don't know trans people I'm here as a trans ally and I'll educate you to the best of my ability or direct you to the right people.” Yet another critic, Singaporean writer and poet Alfian Sa'at, summarized Teoh's article as follows: “I know that I'm ignorant about certain things but rather than going through the trouble of educating myself I demand that you respect my ignorant opinions”.¹²²

A more general criticism against Teoh's article was her use of the terms “cancel culture” and “wokeness” themselves, which critics argued were ill-defined at best, and at worst a way for a person with privilege to portray herself as a victim. Journalist Kirsten Han argued that the very topic given by Henson to her students was problematic, as it was likely to elicit a particular (i.e. anti-social justice) response, unless the students

¹²² All quotes in this paragraph are taken from their Facebook pages.

were first presented with a properly critical introduction to the term “woke”. “The word ‘woke’ has been so hijacked by right-wing and far-right conservatives”, she wrote, “[...] that if there was *no* discussion or critique of these contexts and connotations, such an assignment could also be quite dog-whistle-y, signalling to students the sort of opinion and content the teacher might prefer to see.” Hence, Han thought, asking students to write about “wokeness” was similar to asking them to “write about your thoughts on hysterical bitches”, expecting to get “neutral” perspectives on the role of women in society. “If you get an assignment topic like the second – which I hope you don’t – it’s quite clear how the teacher feels about the matter, and what they would prefer to hear/see”.¹²³ Along the same lines, historian PJ Thum suggested that talking about cancel culture and excessive wokeness in Singapore, without also bringing up the role of the government in cancelling unwanted opinion, is hypocritical, and only serves to diverge attention away from the real problem. “I’ve had my work and opinions repeatedly ‘cancelled’ by the Singapore establishment”, Thum wrote. “I’ve been blacklisted from working in Singapore, had publishers change their minds about publishing my books and articles, organisers disinvite me from talks, venues return deposits, and received all sorts of smears and attacks online”, continuing:

I hope everyone who is now condemning ‘cancel culture’ will also now issue statements defending my right and the right of other progressives like Kirsten Han, Jolovan Wham, and Terry Xu to publish our work and peacefully express our opinions. Alternatively, I hope they recognise that they are hypocrites and cowards who are using the idea of ‘cancellation’ as a way to turn their discomfort with changing social norms and the gradual empowerment of minorities, into a justification for their own victimhood and a defence of their own privilege within the status quo.¹²⁴

In response to these criticisms, Henson wrote a long Facebook post in which she defended her student’s article. According to Henson, most of the criticisms of Teoh’s

¹²³ Published on her Facebook page.

¹²⁴ Published on his Facebook page.

article had missed the point, as the goal of the article had, in Henson's view, not been to promote the view that "being transgender is a little out there", or that post-op bodies are actually "weird". Instead, according to Benson, those statements – which were universally criticized for being transphobic and ignorant – had been a way for Teoh to set the stage for her argument, which was that cancel culture makes it difficult for someone like herself, who is admittedly "pretty ignorant on the topic" of transgenderism, to ask questions and express her less-than "woke" thoughts, without fear of being called names and piled on by an online mob. As Teoh put it herself in the article, "In a room full of woke people, I would probably just sit quietly, smile, and nod if someone said: 'Children should have access to puberty blockers, no questions asked!' And that doesn't help the trans community at all. All I'd be doing is pretending to understand and embrace all their choices, a facade erected to mask how ignorant and uncertain I actually am." Hence, Henson argued, responding to the article by calling Teoh transphobic and ignorant is "only validating her point", as these are precisely the reactions that the author claims is keeping so many people in her generation from voicing their genuine thoughts and opinions on sensitive issues. "Telling people to go read up and don't take up online space is a response that can be applied to any topic anyone chooses to weigh in on", Henson wrote. "But she isn't talking about whether she agrees or disagrees with the transgender group and supporters, she is asking them to understand that cancelling others (who aren't even anti in the first place) is not doing themselves any favours".¹²⁵

This episode was in no way unique, but represented one of many such incidents that have been popping up recently in Singapore, in which the arguments and concepts of critical social justice, or "wokeness" – including terms like "privilege", "lived experience", "dog-whistle", "decolonize", "discomfort", "status quo", "transphobia", "islamophobia", "ally", "ableism", "cis-gender", "...will not be erased", "cultural appropriation", "safe space", "bodies" (e.g. "black bodies", "brown bodies"), "non-binary", "gentrified", "systemic racism", "problematic", "doing the work", etc. – have made their way into Singaporean public space and consciousness.

¹²⁵ Published on her Facebook page.

The clearest example of this is the increasing prevalence of the term “Chinese privilege” in Singaporean political discourse, especially online – on blogs, on social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok), etc. – and especially among young people. This term is an adaptation of the more well-known term “white privilege”, which Peggy McIntosh and others have defined as “the invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools, and blank checks” given to white people simply for being white (McIntosh 1989: 1; see also DiAngelo & Senzoy 2012: 57ff). In her work, which has been very influential on Singaporean activists (see Tan 2017), McIntosh lists a number of “privileges” that white people are said to enjoy, but that they typically do not perceive as privileges, as they are simply taken to be the natural order of things. These include: “I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time”; “I can go shopping alone most of the time, pretty well assured that I will not be followed or harassed”; “I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented”, “When I am told about our national heritage or about ‘civilization,’ I am shown that people of my color made it what it is”; “I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race”; “I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing, or body odor will be taken”; and “I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group”, to mention just a few (she lists 46 in total) (McIntosh 1989).

In Singapore, similar lists of privileges that Chinese people are said to enjoy have recently begun to circulate on social media. One such list, put together by writer and entrepreneur Faz Gaffa-March, gained a lot of attention. “The reality is that a Chinese person’s Chineseness has come – and continues to come – with an array of benefits and advantages not shared by many people of minority races in Singapore”, Gaffa-March wrote. According to her, these include: “Your race is represented and spoken for across all media, including mainstream TV, digital campaigns, social media key opinion leaders, etc.”; “In the local context, you live in a world where the advertised standard of ‘beauty’ looks like you”; “You never feel the pain and dehumanisation of being subjected to a racial slur”; “You have the luxury of being able to ignore the systematic political, economic and social unfairness imposed on minority races”; and “You don’t

have your culture appropriated, generalised and turned into some kind of a minstrel show for others to laugh at”.¹²⁶ Another such list was posted in a *Medium* article by marketer and advertiser Pat Law, and included things like: “When I’m lazy, people don’t blame my race”; “When I smell as a result of forgetting my deodorant, people don’t blame my race”; “I don’t need to explain how I got into an elite school”; “‘You have done well... for a Chinese’ Said no one ever”. “To be in denial or dismissive about our privilege”, Law commented, “is to disregard our fellow Singaporeans who are non-Chinese” (Law 2019), adding that “I recognise that I may have missed out some other Chinese privileges”, which he asked his readers to provide in the comments section.

Like the privileges listed by McIntosh, most of these “Chinese privileges” have to do with the kind of everyday advantages or “perks” that come from being a member of the majority group in society, especially when that majority group happens to be the most successful economically, as are the Chinese in Singapore. For this reason, it can be somewhat difficult to parse what is a genuine “privilege” (meaning unearned advantage), on the one hand, and what is a consequence of intergenerational success, on the other, as some of these “privileges” are things that the Chinese in Singapore share with majority groups in other places – such as being represented in the media, or generally falling within the beauty standards of society – while others are shared by successful minority groups living in other societies. As an example of the latter, it can be noted that no one would say the sentence “You have done well for a Chinese” in Malaysia either, nor expect a Chinese person there to explain how they got into an elite school. This, however, is despite the fact that the Chinese are in a clear minority in Malaysia, and despite the fact that Malays are given legal advantages in the Malaysian constitution under the *bumiputra* legislation (as discussed in chapter 4). Does this mean that there is “Chinese privilege” in Malaysia as well? Or have the Chinese simply done disproportionately well for themselves as a group over the generations, which is why certain positive stereotypes exist about them? (see Sowell 2018: 251-155). Is there Chinese privilege, Chinese overachievement, or a bit of both?

¹²⁶ Posted on her Instagram @fazgaffa.

According to the person who came up with the term “Chinese privilege”, writer and activist Sangeetha Thanapal, the reason why she coined it was “to theorize racial privilege in a non-white context”. Specifically, she wanted to draw attention to the fact that Singapore is, in her view, “a racist, Chinese supremacist, settler-colonial state”, as well as a “hyper-capitalist, fascist dictatorship”, in which Chinese people occupy the same structural position of oppressor vis-a-vis other racial groups as white people do in the US, according to critical race theory (see Delgado & Stefancic 2001; Crenshaw 1995). “I was born in a shithole country”, Thanapal writes in one of her Instagram-posts, echoing Amos’ description of Singapore as “the worst country in the world”. “Not because it was poor or because it was underdeveloped or any of those things people think of when they think of ‘shithole countries’. No”, she says,

Singapore is a shithole country because it is the most racist and exploitative state I have ever had the misfortune to live in. Singapore sells itself to the international world as some economically powerful post-racial state where minorities live in perfect harmony. The truth is that underneath that façade, Singapore is a Chinese supremacist, racist, settler-colonial dictatorship [...], which is why I coined the term #chineseprivilege to talk about Chinese racism in Singapore. [...] The discourse around racism is always centred on whiteness but for me and other minorities in Singapore, Malaysia, China, Taiwan and even non-Chinese Asians in the West: [...] Chinese privilege is real. It is existing right now, it is functioning within our societies and if we don't address it, we are creating an anti-racist practice that is fake & shallow.¹²⁷

Here, Thanapal echoes Amos in more ways than one, as Amos similarly argued that there is a huge gulf between Singapore’s international image as a “peaceful and harmonious” society, on the one hand, and the reality on the ground, on the other. More generally, Thanapal, like Amos, criticizes Singapore from an *external position*. Not only is she literally writing and communicating from a different society, as she has left Singapore for Australia. Metaphorically, she is criticising Singapore from a point of

¹²⁷ Posted on her Instagram @kaliandkalki

view that is both morally and theoretically imposed on Singapore *from without*. Her main concept – “Chinese privilege” – is a direct adaptation of a concept developed to describe race relations in the US, with their particular history of slavery and segregation. “While I realize that the concept of white privilege has its own context and history,” Thanapal says in an interview, “it really helped me to understand the situation in Singapore by analogy. By virtue of being Chinese in Singapore, you start life at a higher place compared to minorities” (Tan 2017). As a result, Thanapal’s critique of the Singaporean government is not that it has broken its promise to “the people”, as the “Return Our CPF” protestors argued. Instead, her critique is that Singapore’s form of government is *inherently* illegitimate and depraved: fascist, hyper-capitalist, Chinese supremacist, etc. From her point of view, therefore, it does not matter whether or not the government has managed to bring about economic development, or made good on the social contract, as the social contract is fundamentally rotten and irredeemable. “Singapore”, she writes, “is a carefully crafted facade under which there is intense racism and political repression by a fascist dictatorship. Singapore is NOT a model for any other country to emulate”.¹²⁸

In this, Thanapal also echoes some of the older Marxist/Communist critiques of Singapore, which emphasized how Singapore’s economic development has not benefitted “the people”, but only benefitted the “fascist” government and its neo-colonial foreign investors. The difference is that, instead of presenting a view of the world in which global capital and the Singaporean ruling class oppresses and exploits the domestic working class, Thanapal’s critique is made *along racial and ethnic lines*, as she argues that it is the Chinese supremacist state – including the Chinese majority, working-class population – that oppresses and exploits the non-Chinese minority. This shift in analysis is crucial, for several reasons.

First, when the Marxists and Communists argued that Singapore’s economic development was based on exploitation of the working class, the Singaporean government could plausibly counter this claim by pointing out a) that the living condition of the working class in Singapore has improved markedly since the dawn of

¹²⁸ Posted on her Instagram @kaliandkalki

foreign investment-driven industrialization, and b) that Marxist/Communist regimes have consistently produced much worse outcomes for the working class. By contrast, when one looks at Singapore from a “woke” perspective, one finds a large number of policies and practices that appear to put the Singaporean government squarely on the wrong side of history. For example, was the “Graduate Mothers’ Scheme” not an atrocious example of racist eugenics which disproportionately singled out minority women for sterilization, while encouraging Chinese women to have more babies? Thanapal thinks so, as she writes in one Instagram post (which, as I write, has over 3,000 “likes”):

Singapore [...] is a country that has openly espoused eugenicist statements, and passed eugenicist policies. In Singapore, Chinese people are seen as the reason for its economic progress while minorities are seen as a drain, an awful burden for the majority Chinese state to bear. Its policies are designed to keep Chinese Singaporeans economically, politically and socially powerful while disenfranchising minorities and keeping us weak. The government that passed these policies in the 80s is still mostly in charge. There have been no apologies for its racism and there has been no structural change either.¹²⁹

Other government policies and positions – not just those having to do with race, but others as well – have been criticized by Singaporean activists along similar lines. These include the ethnic quotas in the HDBs; the exclusion of Malays from the higher levels of the military (due to the fear that they would not fight against the Malays in Malaysia in case of a war between the two countries); the insistence among PAP politicians that Singapore “is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister” (though several polls have shown that the most popular PAP candidate for prime minister is Tharman Shanmugaratnam, who is Indian); the requirement that applicants to SAP schools (a particular type of elite secondary schools) speak mandarin; and most notably, the controversial section 377A of the penal code, which criminalized consensual sex

¹²⁹ Posted on her Instagram @kaliandkalki

between males adults. All of these laws and policies are said to provide clear evidence that the government's goal of combatting racism and other forms of bigotry is really a cover story for structural and institutional racism/bigotry on part of the government. As Kirsten Han humorously distilled the argument in a viral Tweet: "PAP: We must not tolerate racism and discord between the races in Singapore!!! Also PAP: Only Chinese people can be Prime Minister because Singaporeans aren't ready for non-Chinese to be in that position of power!!!".¹³⁰

Faced with these "woke" challenges, the government has mostly responded in its usual way – namely, by insisting that Singapore should not import the culture wars of the West, or allow "foreign ideas" (such as those of critical race theory) to upset the country's social cohesion (see Han 2021), as well as throwing lawsuits at the various individuals who are seen to be engaged in this sort of "inflammatory" tactics. One example of the latter came when the government instructed the police to investigate a video put out by YouTuber Preetipls (real name Preeti Nair) and her brother, rapper Subhas Nair, in which the two performed a rap song about how "Chinese people" are "always out here fucking it up". The video was put out by the duo in response to a much discussed "brownface" incidence involving Chinese actor Dennis Chew, who appeared in an ad for *NETS E-Pay* dressed as the three main races of Singapore – wearing brown face-paint and a moustache to portray an Indian man, and brown face-paint and a *tudung* (headscarf) to portray a Malay Muslim woman. In the video, the siblings included a disclaimer saying that the term "Chinese people" did not refer to "all Chinese people", but "only the racist one's". They also added the word "racist" in brackets before the word "Chinese" in the subtitles to the rap, to make it clear the ones "fucking it up" were not Chinese people in general, but specifically "racist Chinese people".¹³¹

Despite these precautions, the video was reported to the police, and attracted the attention of law minister K. Shanmugam, who said that it crossed the line of what is acceptable in a multiracial society, as its goal was, in his view, "to make minorities angry with Chinese Singaporeans". Shanmugam said that allowing such a video in the

¹³⁰ Published on her Twitter @kixes

¹³¹ Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=en3C4paSpBY&t=2s>

public sphere would set a dangerous precedence, as more such videos would then be put up by others, which the government could not take down if it had not act decisively against the first one – something that would over time lead to a tearing of the social fabric, as “racist statements” became normalized. “Let’s say a Chinese now does a video, attacking Indians and Malays, using four-letter words [’fuck’], vulgar gestures – same kind of videos – and let’s say there are hundreds or thousands of such videos”, Shanmugam said. “How do you think the Indians and the Malays will feel? [...] There are good reasons why Singapore is different, why there is racial harmony here, why all races feel safe, why minorities feel safe, and we must maintain that, we will maintain that” (Mahmud 2019). The siblings’ video was therefore taken down from YouTube, and the two were let off with a warning, on the condition that they first produce an apology – something they managed to do after two tries, their first apology having been rejected as “a mock, insincere apology”. On their second attempt, they said: “We have apologised but we understand that more needs to be said and done. People are offended and we sincerely apologise for it. If we could do it again, we would change the manner in which we approached the issue, and would have worded out thoughts better.”

Historically, this way of dealing with dissent – throwing lawsuits at it; forcing the dissenters to make public apologies; getting ministers to make statements about the threat it poses to the social fabric; and so on – has worked remarkably well for the Singapore government. Therefore, it is not surprising that they have chosen to apply it to this new “woke” movement as well. It is far from obvious, however, that this strategy will work this time around. As mentioned, when faced with the accusation of racism/bigotry, the government has a much harder time presenting itself as being on the right side of history, as compared to when faced with the accusation of having failed the working class. Most importantly, for the generation of young Singaporeans who “live on the internet”, as Teoh put it in her article, the government’s approach to “social justice” is likely to be much less convincing compared to the “woke” approach to these same issues, as the latter dominates the social media platforms where young people find their information. While the government still has the power to prosecute anyone who works and resides in Singapore for what they say online, therefore, it has little to no power to control information that young people actually consume, as it cannot control

the vast majority of ideas that circulate online, which are produced by people who live and work outside of Singapore – including Singaporean citizens – and which are readily available to anyone in Singapore with a computer or a smartphone.

A massive shift may therefore be taking place. As the younger generation of Singaporeans come of age, the government will be less able to convince the population that “there are good reasons why Singapore is different”, and that Singapore “should not import” the “culture wars” of the West, as young people will increasingly look at their country from the point of view of the ideas that circulate online – in the global “ideoscape” of social media (Appadurai 1990) – rather than the other way around. As a result, they may come view Singapore’s difference vis-à-vis the “host society” (the global marketplace of ideas) as embarrassing and “problematic”, rather than as a source of national pride.

In this, the MM state will be facing the same problem that every successful middleman minority has ever had to face, as they have reached a certain level of achievement – namely, that the more successful they become on their own terms, the more likely are the younger generations to assimilate into the host society, and as a result *reject the values and behaviour patterns that led to the success in the first place*. “The fact is that Chinese parents can do things that would seem unimaginable – even legally actionable – to Westerners”, Chua writes (2011: 38). The problem, for both the classic middleman minority and the MM state, is that if the young generations assimilate into the “host society”, they may well come to view the older generations as criminals, rather than as examples to be emulated. From the point of view of the parents/state, this represents an existential threat to the survival of the group. From the point of view the younger generations, it represents progress. Who is right, time will tell.

Chapter 8:

Summary and Conclusions:

Social Democracy with Middleman Minority Characteristics

Summary

The argument of this thesis can be summarized in one sentence: Singapore is a social democracy with middleman minority characteristics.

A more precise (but less memorable) way to say the same thing is that the Singaporean state is a social democracy built on top of a middleman minority culture that had existed long before the city had to survive as an independent nation, and before PAP had to make good on its socialist promises to the electorate. My suggestion is that it is the fusion of these two – the culture of the middleman minority, and the statist corporatism of social democracy – that has allowed the Singaporean state to set up a form of social democracy that is capable of not just surviving but flourishing under conditions of globalized capitalism.

The outcome of this fusion, I have dubbed a “middleman minority state”, or “MM state” for short, extending on the arguments made by Bonacich and Sowell; and I have argued that the key difference between the MM state and traditional social democracy is that the MM state does not depend on the ability of the state to exert political control over the market. Instead, as a small state operating within the global market, the MM state operates *the same way as any middleman minority operates in a host society* – namely, by inserting itself into an economy over which it has no political control, and making money by entering into mutually beneficial and voluntary business deals with whoever is willing to trade. To that end, I have laid out a number of parallels

between the classic middleman minority and the MM state, including the role of middleman itself (both politically and economically); the focus on hard work combined with high levels of savings and investments; the necessity of maintaining a social contract that incentivises people to view their interests in terms of the multigenerational project of upward mobility; a strong focus on education, especially “more difficult and rewarding fields, such as science, medicine, and law” (Sowell 2008: 95), coming out of a lack of natural resources; and the need to remain culturally segregated from the “host society” while nevertheless integrating into it economically.

Despite these strong parallels, I have nevertheless argued that the basic mode of operation of the MM state is still to be regarded as a social democracy – first, because that is how the MM state self-defines; and second, because the main job of the MM state is to bring about a class compromise between capital and labour whereby the two replace zero-sum struggle over current output with collaboration and co-operation towards positive-sum increases in wealth over time, which I have argued is also the essence of social democracy.

In addition to this, I have suggested that the “social contract” of the MM state has a distinctly *corporate character*, as it is based on getting the citizens to invest into the state as a profitable corporation, rather than on getting the citizens to accept high taxes in exchange for a well-funded public sector, in which goods and services are offered in a “de-commodified” form (as is the case in traditional social democracy). Following Kapferer and Wolin, I have therefore described the MM state as a corporate/state formation, or “corporate state” for short. This is consistent with the overarching argument about Singapore being an MM state, as middleman minorities have throughout history and throughout the world typically operated family businesses. When the logic of the middleman minority is scaled up to the level of state, we should therefore expect to find a state that is set up as a corporation – or better yet, as a giant, society-sized “family business” – which is precisely what we find in Singapore. To that end, I have argued, it is not a coincident that the social contract of the MM state is not only the same as that which underlies capitalism, but *exactly the same as that which exists in many old-fashioned company towns*, in which workers are given a “stake” in

the corporation and its future by having their salaries invested in company stock, and in particular company-built homes (“Then they won’t leave and they won’t strike”; Crawford 1995: 52).

In order to study this social contract as a “living” thing, I have spent much of the thesis discussing Singapore’s pension fund, the Central Provident Fund (CPF), which I have argued is the foundation for the social contract. Following Mauss, I have called the CPF a “total social fact”, because this is precisely what it is: not just an institution among many, but rather a *meta-institution* – an institution in which “all kinds of institutions are given expression at one and the same time” (Mauss 2002: 3). Importantly, I have argued that the CPF provides Singapore with an *ersatz*-Protestantism, as it instils in the population the necessary “spirit of capitalism” needed for industrialization and rapid economic development to work (and without which little else in Singapore would make any sense). This is an extension of Weber’s argument about the relation between Protestantism and capitalism, and my argument has been that the CPF, like Protestantism, provides the population with an incentive work hard and save – i.e. to produce a surplus – by promising that anyone who does so will be rewarded handsomely in the future. The difference between the CPF and Protestantism, I have argued, is that the CPF secularizes the promise, as it is the government (and not God) that makes the promise and vows to make good on it – not in the afterlife, but in retirement – a fact that has great implications for how the promise plays out over time.

In the first two chapters based on participant observation, we looked at the “Return Our CPF” protests that erupted in Singapore in 2013, which challenged the legitimacy of the CPF as an institution, and by extension, the legitimacy of the social contract itself. According to the protestors, the main function of the CPF system has not been to instil a beneficial work ethic in the population, but rather to provide them with an opium: a promise about future rewards, the purpose of which is to get the population to accept a situation that they should never have accepted, in which they have been forced to work hard and hand over large portions of their salaries to the government each month, while the government has been allowed to use this money to earn private profits. But the government never had any intention on making good on the promise,

the protestors argue. Instead, the government's goal has always been the opposite: to get the citizens to keep paying into the system, while making sure that the citizens never get to significantly cash out, as this is what maximally serves the financial interests of the state as a corporation. "Some people would call this a Ponzi scheme", the main protagonist of chapter five, blogger and protestor Roy Ngerng, writes. "Some people would call this the CPF-HDB sham-deal. I don't think they are wrong either way".¹³²

In studying these protests, my aim has not been to take sides. I have tried to present the protestors' arguments in as plausible a manner as possible, in order to give their side a fair hearing. However, my aim has not been to endorse, nor to debunk, their claims. Instead, I have sought to argue that, regardless of whether or not the protestors are correct in their specific claims, their movement sheds light on an important problem that's involved in scaling up the logic of middleman minority to the level of state, which is that the middleman minority strategy requires large amounts of ingroup trust. In the case of an ethnic minority living in a host society, this is something that can be generally assumed, as such groups typically rely on ethnic- and kinship-based form solidarity and reciprocity. In the case of a state, however, it may well lead to a situation of tyranny and lawlessness, as the ruling elite may come to develop interests that are contrary to those of the public, and may use the "trust" that the public have placed in them to pursue an entirely self-interested agenda of exploitation and oppression. "We are our own check", as former prime Goh Chok Tong put it, summarizing both the pros and the cons of this set-up.

In 2017, as I was in the middle of writing this thesis, this problem of trust in the MM state was brought to the fore with particular force, when the two siblings of prime minister Lee Hsien Loong – Lee Hsien Yang and Lee Wei Ling – released a statement in which they declared that they no longer trust their brother to lead the country. In a six-page document, entitled "What has happened to Lee Kuan Yew's values?", the siblings presented their case against their "omnipresent big brother", who they claimed

¹³² Blog post, *The Heart Truths*: "Truth Exposed: The Dirty CPF-HDB Scheme To Trick Singaporeans". Online resource: <https://thehearttruths.com/2014/04/02/truth-exposed-the-dirty-cpf-hdb-scheme-to-trick-singaporeans/>

has strayed from the path laid out by their father. “We feel extremely sad that we are pushed to this position”, they wrote:

We are disturbed by the character, conduct, motives and leadership of our brother [...] and the role of his wife, Ho Ching. We have seen a completely different face to our brother, one that deeply troubles us. Since the passing of Lee Kuan Yew, on 23 March 2015, we have felt threatened by Hsien Loong’s misuse of his position and influence over the Singapore government and its agencies to drive his personal agenda. We are concerned that the system has few checks and balances to prevent the abuse of government. [...] The values of Lee Kuan Yew are being eroded by his own son. Our father placed our country and his people first, not his personal popularity or private agendas. [...] *We do not trust Hsien Loong as a brother or as a leader. We have lost confidence in him.* (Lee & Lee 2017)

The immediate cause of the statement was a dispute between the siblings regarding the demolition of the house that their father had lived in for most of his life, located on 38 Oxley Road in central Singapore. According to Hsien Yang and Wei Ling, Lee Kuan Yew had clearly stated in his will that the house should be demolished upon his death, as he “was a strong opponent of monuments, particularly of himself”. However, they write, “we believe that Hsien Loong and Ho Ching are motivated by a desire to inherit Lee Kuan Yew’s standing and reputation for themselves and their children” (ibid), which is why the ruling couple want the house to be preserved as a heritage site.

What makes this statement interesting, I think, is that it illustrates the key role that trust plays in the relation between rulers and ruled in Singapore. According to the siblings, the reason why their brother is a tyrant is not because he has introduced changes into the Singaporean constitution that has transformed the country from a democracy to a dictatorship. Instead, it is because he does not share the “values” of Lee Kuan Yew, and can therefore not be trusted to wield the same kind of unchecked power as him. According to the siblings, “Nobody ever doubted that Lee Kuan Yew always held the best interests of Singapore and Singaporeans at heart. He was authentic and

spoke his mind.” By contrast, “Hsien Loong is driven by a desire for power and personal popularity. [...] We have observed that Hsien Loong and Ho Ching want to milk Lee Kuan Yew’s legacy for their own political purposes.” Hence, the siblings thought, while Lee Kuan Yew was able to use the unchecked power of the prime minister to transform Singapore “from third world to first” in one generation, Lee Hsien Loong has used the same power to enrich himself and his cronies, *even as there is no important institutional difference between the government of Lee Kuan Yew and that of Lee Hsien Loong*. “This is by no means a criticism of the Government of Singapore”, the siblings insist. “We see many upright leaders of quality and integrity throughout the public service, but they are constrained by Hsien Loong’s misuse of power at the very top. We do not trust Hsien Loong and have lost confidence in him” (ibid.)

There is something clearly archetypal – and fascinating – about this juxtaposition of the Good Father, who “placed our country and his people first”, against the Bad Son, who “is driven by a desire for power and personal popularity” (ibid.). What nevertheless makes the statement less interesting, I think, is that it came about in response to such a nonconsequential issue. So what if Lee Hsien Loong has gone against his fathers will regarding the house? Maybe Lee Kuan Yew was wrong to be against monuments of himself? Maybe Lee Hsien Loong does have the best interests of the Singaporean population at heart, but lacks the charisma to sway the people, and therefore needs to milk Lee Kuan Yew’s legacy in order to remain in office?

In my view, this is why the “Return Our CPF” movement represented such a key moment in Singapore’s history. In contrast to the sibling’s feud, it addressed the problem of trust in the context where it matters the most: Has the government used the citizens’ money in a way that serves the interests of the population as a whole? Or has it used the money in a way that serves only the government’s own interests as a profit-making corporation? Has the government used its vague and broad laws to make good on its promise to the citizens? Or has it used them to prosecute any citizen who claims that the promise has been broken? Will the government return the CPF – all of the CPF, including the interest that the money has earned as it has been invested by the government’s wealth funds – or will it seek to give back as little as possible? Is “the

integrity of our leaders” a good enough safeguard against the obvious incentives that a system like Singapore’s provides to those in charge to use their power for short-term personal gain?

In chapter five, we followed blogger Roy Ngerng in his legal battle against Lee Hsien Loong, who sued Roy for defamation after the latter had suggested that the government’s handling of the CPF money “bears an uncanny resemblance” to how the City Harvest Church had “criminally misappropriated” millions of their members’ funds through various shell companies. From Roy’s point of view, the comparison illustrated the general predicament that Singaporeans find themselves in: they are ruled by a government that has legalized what for all intents and purposes amounts to theft of the citizens’ money; at the same time, protest has been made practically illegal, as the government has given itself a set of vague and broad laws that allow it to prosecute most forms of “politically incorrect” speech and action. As a result, Roy argued, the citizens find themselves in a situation of complete *lawlessness*, as they are first robbed of their money, and then denied the right to speak up against this state of affairs without facing the risk of prosecution.

According to the judge, by contrast, the reason why Roy was being prosecuted was because he had made the “totally unnecessary” allegation that the prime minister was a thief “when what he had wanted to do was to criticise the CPF policy of the government”. Most importantly, the judge argued, by making such accusations, Roy risked damaging the “reputation” of the prime minister, and thereby his “moral authority to lead the people”. Hence, the judge thought, Roy’s crime was particularly serious, as “the reputation of public leaders in Singapore can [...] be considered to be their ‘whole life’”.

In this, I argued, we saw the stakes of the social contract play out in real time, as two very different notions of “trust” – and its relation to governance – came into conflict. According to the judge, the prime minister must be protected against all forms of speech that risk undermining the citizens’ trust in him, as trust is his central currency as a leader. According to Roy, on the other hand, the problem with this formulation is that it makes it impossible for citizens to discuss matters of public interest – such as

whether or not the government has been misusing the citizens' money through the CPF – without fear of prosecution, thereby making it very hard (if not impossible) for citizens to determine whether or not they should trust the prime minister in the first place. Hence, Roy thought, instead of protecting the “reputation” of the prime minister against harmful speech, the law should be used to protect the citizens' right to discuss matters of public interests without fear. Most importantly, *trust should be placed in the process of free speech itself to guide society towards the best outcome*, even if that process may lead the citizens to lose trust in the sitting prime minister.

Placing this debate in a broader context, I hypothesized that although Roy's point of view has for long been the default one in liberal, free-market societies – and used by both Western and Singaporean critics to decry the “illiberalism” of the Singaporean government – a shift might be taking place, whereby more and more aspects of social and political life become governed by corporate entities that operate systems of “law” that look more like what we find in Singapore. Specifically, I observed, criticism has recently been voiced from both the political left and the political right that social media platforms – in particular Facebook, YouTube and Twitter – are undermining free speech by governing what is said on the basis of “community guidelines” that are often so vague and/or broad as to cover almost anything. Here, the most important point of convergence, I argued, is found in the fight against “fake news”, which for both the Singaporean government and the tech platforms has involved placing trust in some centralized agency to determine what is true and what is false, rather than in the open-ended and decentralized process of free speech itself (“the marketplace of ideas”), which in the liberal conception is supposed to guide society toward greater understanding and truth over time.

Following Hayek, I argued that this departure from the liberal understanding of rule of law – defined as “rules fixed and announced beforehand” – is a predictable outcome of handing over the job of governance to corporate/state entities. The reason for this, I said, is that corporations are planned entities set up to bring about particular outcomes over time, something that cannot be done on the basis of clear rules announced beforehand, as such rules “are intended to be merely instrumental in the

pursuit of people's various individual ends" (Hayek 2001: 77), and therefore do not allow the rulers to the steer the ruled in any particular, pre-determined direction.

More generally, following Kapferer and Wolin, I described this shift from liberalism to corporatism as part of a second "great transformation", through which we are seeing a reversal of the "great transformation" described by Polanyi. Rather than a simple return to an earlier embedding of the market in society, however, we are now seeing what Kapferer describes as "a sociologizing of the idea of the economy and the market" whereby the market "becomes the principle of social processes" (Kapferer 2010: 127) – that is, an embedding of society in the market. The paradigmatic expression of this second transformation, I suggested, is the blurring of corporate and state power that we see in both the Singaporean state and in the tech platforms; and I argued that, while this blurring leads to the same undermining of rule of law as we saw in classical totalitarianism – fascism, Nazism, and communism – the difference is that these new corporate/state formations are open systems, which, like any corporation, have to operate within the framework of the liberal free-market order, and adapt to its rules insofar as trade is concerned. As a result, while the totalitarian state could more or less openly reject rule of law in favour of arbitrary state rule, these new corporate/state formations must present their departures from the rule of law *in the form of rule of law itself* – i.e. in the form of vague and broad laws that are selectively enforced – as any open rejection of rule of law would alienate foreign investors, who need guarantees that their investments will not be affected by sudden changes in the law, and/or confiscated by the state through nationalization.

Lastly, and most importantly, I suggested that this is exactly the middleman minority approach to rule of law, only writ large: to play by the rules of the "host society" insofar as trade is concerned, but to organize internally according to more informal and flexible principles, as this allows for greater discretion on part of the decision-makers, who are trusted to make decisions on a case-to-case basis, rather than on the basis of rules fixed and announced beforehand.

In chapter six, we explored the dynamics of this middleman minority strategy in more detail, looking specifically at the forms of lawlessness that it implies for

dissidents, whose opposition to the MM state puts them not only on collision course with the political rulers, but also on the receiving end of laws that are so vague and broad as to be nearly impossible to defend against (thus blurring/collapsing the distinction between what is “politically incorrect” and what is outright illegal). This lawlessness, I said, is akin to the “state of exception” described by Agamben – in which the sovereign is shown to be not just the one who guarantees the laws, but also the one who “decides on the exception” to them – with one important difference, which is that in the MM state, this “paradox of sovereignty” is not likely to lead to the setting up concentration camps. The reason for this, I said, has to do with the fact that the “paradox of sovereignty” is in the MM state combined with another paradox – what I called the “paradox of the foreign investor” – which consists in the fact that foreign investors want to have both rule of law and its suspension, as they want the predictability and security that comes from rule of law in the economic arena, but also the political stability and social control that comes from its suspension in the political arena. For this reason, I argued, when we look for what Agamben calls “paradigms of governance” (2005: 1) in the MM state, we should not be looking for concentration camps, but for the sort of lawsuit that was brought against the “Return Our CPF” protestors, in which the “state of exception” takes the form of *an exceptional enforcement of laws that are usually withheld*.

Following the protestors – Hui Hui, Janet, and Ivan – in their attempt to defend themselves, we looked at this modern paradigm of governance from the point of view of people on the ground. What does this new “state of exception” look like here? For the protestors, the most basic experience was that of lawlessness, as they were faced with charges that to them seemed absurd, but to which they were nevertheless advised to plead guilty. How could it be, they wondered, that they were charged with having caused a “public nuisance” when all they had done was organize a protest in “the only unrestricted area for protest in Singapore”, during which they had done nothing but the sort of things that you typically do during a protest – shouting, marching, holding placards, and so on? From the protestors point of view, this did not seem like justice, but like political persecution and “entrapment” – lawlessness! Why had National Parks made the double booking with the YMCA? Was it so that the protestors would “clash”

with the autistic kids, and so that the government could charge the protestors with having committed a public nuisance on the basis that they had “traumatized” the kids? Was it a coincidence that the guest of honour at the YMCA event – then minister of state at the ministry of trade and industry, Teo Ser Luck – was also the minister in charge of the CPF? Or was this a ploy to get the protestors into a confrontation with the minister, and consequently with the YMCA event? Why was any of this the fault of the protestors? “Rome was not built in a day”, as Hui Hui said, meaning that the disappointment expressed by the protestors was the result of a long historical process, which culminated in the acts of the protest.

In this, we again saw the problem of “trust” as the foundation for the social contract. From the point of view of the protestors, the problem that they faced was that they had been put in a situation where they had no choice but to trust the state – first with their money; second with vague and broad laws that can be used against anyone, anytime – only to find that they could not trust the state to do what is right in either case, as the state had, in their view, used the citizens’ money for its own purposes, and then used its laws to go after anyone who spoke up on behalf of the citizens’.

In chapter seven, we looked at a related but distinct problem of the MM state: what I, borrowing from law professor Amy Chua, called the problem of the “third generation”. This problem, I said, is different from the problem of “trust”, since it is not unique to the MM state (as a problem of scaling up the middleman minority strategy to the level of state) but shared between the MM state and the classic middleman minority as *a universal problem of the middleman minority strategy*. This problem consists in the fact that the middleman minority strategy is based on integrating economically into the host society while nevertheless remaining culturally segregated from it, even though economic integration will sooner or later tend to lead to cultural integration as well. When the latter happens, the middleman minority/MM state will cease to be a middleman minority/MM state, as it will no longer be culturally distinct from the majority, and will therefore no longer have a clear competitive advantage. “For the overseas Chinese to allow their children to become part of the larger culture around them and absorb their values and behavior patterns”, Sowell writes, “would have been

to have the family commit economic suicide. The same has been true of other middleman minorities around the world” (Sowell 2005a). Similarly, throughout Singapore’s history, one of the greatest fears of the political leadership has been that the population will adopt the “fads and fetishes” of the West, and thereby lose what makes Singapore successful. “Capitalism with Asian values”, I said, is the most coherent expression of this middleman minority strategy applied to the MM state, but by no means the only one.

Empirically, we primarily looked at this problem as it manifested in the case of Amos Yee, the young YouTuber who rose to national fame after posting a video entitled “Finally Lee Kuan Yew is Dead” one week after Lee Kuan Yew had died, as Singapore was still mourning the loss of its “founding father”. In Amos, I argued, we saw the problem of the third generation very clearly. According to many Singaporeans – young and old (though mostly old) – Amos is nothing but a spoiled brat: someone who should learn some manners; who should be more grateful to those who came before him; who should learn not to disobey his parents (including the “founding father”); etc. According to many Western observers, by contrast, Amos is one of the most inspiring voices to have ever come out of Singapore – and consequently, he probably received more international attention than any dissident in Singapore history ever has.

This, I argued, is precisely the crux of “third generation”: by assimilating into the values of the host society, the third generation is much more likely to be accepted by the majority, and much more likely to integrate into the host society as a full-fledged member. For the same reason, however, the third generation tends to come into conflict with members of its own group – especially their parents’ and grandparents’ generations, but also with their peers – as the third generation “will feel that they have individual rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution and therefore be much more likely to disobey their parents and ignore career advice” (Chua 2011: 22). Most importantly, I argued, rather than a deviation, this phenomenon represents *a predictable outcome of the success of the middleman minority strategy*, as the economic ascension of the middleman minority/MM state means that the third generation will be born into a world that is so far removed from the world that their parents and grandparents were born into

that the “wisdom” of the latter will increasingly seem like oppression and backwardness. As a result, rather than rejecting the values of the “host society” on the basis of loyalty to their parents, the third generation will on the contrary tend to reject the values of their parents on the grounds that these values do not provide the same freedom as those found in the “host society”.

Amos, I said, represents a clear and early example of this problem; however, due to his volatile personality and idiosyncratic beliefs (most shockingly that paedophilia should be legal provided consent), he did not pose a real threat to the status quo. We therefore discussed the introduction of “woke” ideas into Singapore – or what should more correctly be called *critical social justice* – which I argued has a much greater chance of organizing the “third generation” into a viable political subject. In particular, we discussed the term “Chinese privilege”, which has recently come to the fore as one of the most important critical lenses through which young activists analyse Singaporean society. From the point of view of these activists, the once taken-for-granted assumption that Singapore *should* be different from the West/“host society” is no longer obvious, as their political consciousness is largely formed in the global “ideoscape” of social media (Appadurai 1990), rather than in the government-controlled space of domestic media. Hence, rather than viewing Singapore’s difference from the “host society” as a self-evident source of pride, they increasingly view it as a source of embarrassment and outrage – to be resisted and criticised, rather than celebrated and maintained.

Conclusions

The argument that Singapore is a social democracy with middleman minority characteristics, or what I have called a middleman minority state, has been advanced primarily in order to provide an analytical framework for understanding the social contract as it has been forged in Singapore between the state and the people through the Central Provident Fund.

In addition to this, however, the concept of the MM state has also been formulated as part of more general theoretical agenda, where my goal has been to debunk two dominant perspectives in the research areas of globalization, capitalism and

the state. On the one hand, this is the Marxist perspective, which says that globalization will necessarily lead to the destruction of the social democratic state. On the other hand, this is the idea that Singapore is best understood as a neoliberal state, and more generally, that “neoliberalism” should be understood in broad term as a movement that seeks to make the market into the dominant force in human society. Both these perspectives, I have argued, fail to offer a comprehensive and coherent account of the Singaporean state, as both fail to conceptualize Singapore as *a social democracy adapted to the conditions of globalized capitalism*. The Marxist perspective, I have argued, fails to do so by precluding this possibility a priori, by defining social democracy too narrowly, and incorrectly. The neoliberal perspective, conversely, fails to do so by always-already including Singapore’s globally viable form of social democracy under a too broad definition of the term “neoliberalism”. In this last section, I will address and develop my critiques of these perspectives one at a time.

According to the Marxist critique, social democracy provides at best a band-aid solution to the problems of capitalism, as it does not get rid of exploitation, but merely softens its blow. This view, Marxists come to on the basis of the labour theory of value, which argues that all value is created by labour, and that any amount of value that ends up in the hand of the capitalist (the buyer of labour) must therefore have ended up there as a result of exploitation. On this reading, workers’ consent to capitalist relations of production must be “consent to exploitation” (Przeworski 1985: 136), since any value that goes to the capitalist must have been taken away from workers, who produced it in the first place. Here, social democracy does not address the fundamental problem, Marxists argue. Instead, all that social democracy does is getting capital to take a few steps back from maximal exploitation, by organizing labour into a unified movement capable of forcing capital to accept some basic concessions (like a limited workday, holidays, pay-increases, pensions, and the like). This, Marxists argue however, is like addressing the problem of robbery by convincing the robber to take just half of what he would otherwise take. This is no doubt *better* – but it is still fundamentally unjust, as justice would be to not be robbed in the first place.

From this, the argument about the contradiction between globalization and social democracy follows straightforwardly. According to Marxists, the only thing that ever made capitalism less-than-maximally-exploitative was the fact that national labour was able to organize itself in opposition to capital, thereby forcing capital to make concessions that were against its interests in the class struggle, but preferable to revolution. With globalization, capital no longer has to put up with such demands from organized labour, as it can simply move production elsewhere, where such demands are not made. As a result, labour finds itself in a catch-22, as it can either undermine its own economic interests in order to attract/retain capital investment, or insist on its own economic interests but then lose capital investment. From the Marxist point of view, there is no way out of this “reformer’s dilemma” (Callinicos 1997: 17), as it is not possible for labour to both attract/retain capital *and* safeguard its own economic interest vis-à-vis capital. “The source of social democrats’ relative failure [...]”, Lasalle writes, “lies in their pursuit of social reforms within the strictures of capitalism” (Lasalle; see also Harvey 2005)

The problem with this argument, I have argued, is that it confuses what is true about capitalism *at any given moment* with what is true *over time*. At any given moment, capital and labour are indeed locked in a zero-sum struggle against one another, as capital’s share of the output can at any given moment only go up if it correspondingly goes down for labour, and vice versa – and at any given moment, it is in the interests of both parties to maximize their share of total output! This, I said, is true regardless of how much the output increases over time, because at any given moment, it is in the interest of both parties to get as much of the output as possible, at the expense of the other. As Marx put it, “Even the most favourable situation for the working class, the most rapid possible growth of capital, however much it may improve the material existence of the worker, does not remove the antagonism between his interests and the interests of the bourgeoisie. Profit and wages remain as before in inverse proportions” (Marx 1952: 35).

The problem with this analysis, I have argued, is that it is *only* true at every given moment – because over time, the profit-motive has the opposite effect, as it pushes

capital to innovate in the production process to increase total output, thereby bringing about a positive-sum dynamic that allows labour and capital to both increase their earnings without having to take it out of the pockets of the other. This, of course, does not negate the fact that capitalists will at every given moment seek to share as little of the increases as possible with the workers; “That the game is not zero-sum does not yet imply that it is a cooperative one”, as Przeworski writes (1985: 173-174). Yet it does mean that Marx’s central contention – that all value is produced by labour, and that all profits must therefore be based on exploitation – is fatally flawed, as it can only be maintained by disregarding what is over time the main source of value, which is innovation and not exploitation. Most importantly, the only way that Marx himself is able to maintain this contention is by defining labour as “socially necessary labour”, by which he means “the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society” (Marx 176: 129). In less technical terms, I said, this means that the “labour” that produces “all value” in Marx’s theory is not just labour, but also *all the other things that contribute to value, which are not themselves labour*. Marx’s central contention is therefore completely circular – and strictly unfalsifiable – as anything that produces value is immediately defined as “labour”, or “socially necessary labour”, *regardless of whether or not that makes any empirical sense*. Heads, I win; tails, you lose.

On the basis of this critique of Marxism, I formulated what I consider to be a more correct understanding of social democracy, which is that it provides a solution to *the prisoner’s dilemma of capitalism*. This dilemma, I said, consists in the fact that although the interests of capital and labour are aligned over time – as capitalism brings about increases in productivity that allow capital and labour to increase their gains at no expense to the other – the incentive structure of capitalism is such that both capital and labour are pushed to engage in zero-sum struggle over the output at every given moment. In order to realize the positive-sum and collaborative nature of the system, therefore, some kind of compromise between capital and labour is necessary, according to which the two agree to step back from their most radical demands in the class struggle, and cooperate towards future increases in wealth instead. This, I said, is

precisely what social democracy does: it imposes a class compromise according to which capital and labour agree to replace zero-sum struggle over current output with collaboration towards positive-sum increases in wealth over time.

What's important about this formulation, I argued, is that it allows us to look at social democracy as something more than just a weak and insufficient form of socialism, destined to fail. According to Marxists, social democracy requires both capital and labour to compromise on their *ultimate interests*, which for capital is to maximally exploit labour, and for labour to get rid of capital altogether. For Marxists, this conflict of interests cannot be resolved within capitalism, but at best put into a temporary stalemate in which neither party is in a position to fully dominate the other. However, because this compromise/stalemate is really against the ultimate interests of both, it will collapse as soon as the power dynamic shifts in favour of either – either in the direction “real” socialism, or (more likely) in the direction of increased/maximal exploitation.

According to the view that I have proposed, however, these conflicting interests do not represent the “ultimate” interests of either capital and labour, but merely their short-term interests standing in the way of their long-term shared interests. As a consequence, *there is no inherent conflict or contradiction between globalization and social democracy*. Instead, the conflict is between globalization and the particular kind of class compromise that social democracies have traditionally struck, in which the state uses part of the capitalist surplus to finance a sphere of the economy in which goods and services are offered in a “de-commodified” form. Marxists are correct to point out that globalization makes *that* class compromise increasingly impossible. However, if we understand social democracy more generally as a matter of overcoming the prisoner's dilemma of capitalism, then there is no reason why we should equate social democracy with this particular form of class compromise. Instead, social democracy will be understood as *any state-imposed compromise through which capital and labour are made to replace zero-sum struggle over current output with collaboration towards positive-sum increases in wealth*. And because the condition of possibility for such a compromise consists in the fact that capitalism is positive-sum over time, there is no

reason why globalization should make social democracy impossible, since global capitalism is just as positive-sum as any other form of capitalism, if not more. The only question is then: what does a viable class compromise look like under conditions of global capitalism?

With the concept of the MM state, my aim has been to provide an answer to precisely that question. As I have described it, the MM state brings about a class compromise between capital and labour, which like traditional social democracy holds out the possibility of overcoming the prisoner's dilemma of capitalism, but that unlike traditional social democracy does not depend on the ability of the state to force capital into compliance with the demands of organized labour. The way that the MM state does this, I have argued, is by presenting workers with a deal that requires much greater willingness on their part to delay gratification, as workers are made to submit to a labour regime that is in the short-to-medium term directly against their interests in the class struggle, in favour of the interests of capital. Historically, the way that the MM state has done this is first by undermining all forms of autonomous labour organization – including all political parties that advocated on behalf of the more immediate interests of labour in the class struggle – and second, by making the workers shareholders in the state as a profitable corporation, thereby tying the interests of labour to the interests of the state and capital *even as the state actively subjugated the interests of labour to those of global capital*. As a consequence of this, the MM state has been able to operate a form of social democracy that is viable under conditions of global capitalism – or at least potentially so – as its class compromise attracts and retains capital investment, rather than alienates it.

The second theoretical intervention that I have made in this thesis concerns the concept of “neoliberalism”, and its application to Singapore. This intervention is a direct consequence of the first one, and my argument has been that because the concept of social democracy has been so narrowly defined – to cover only the particular class compromise that was struck in Western Europe during the 20th century – the concept of neoliberalism has conversely been allowed to colonize the entire remaining area. As a result of this, the concept of neoliberalism has been stretched out to cover a wide range

of societies that have very little in common, except that they all accept capitalism and “the market” as the unquestioned framework within which “society” and “politics” must be organized. In anthropology, the best formulation of this view comes from Bloch and Parry, who in 1989 observed that a “remarkable conceptual revolution” has taken place in “capitalist ideology”, according to which “the values of the short-term order” – meaning the market – “have become elaborated into a theory of long-term reproduction”, such that “[w]hat our culture (like others) had previously made room for in a separate and subordinate domain has, in some quarters at least, been turned into a theory of the encompassing order – a theory in which it is *only unalloyed private vice that can sustain the public benefit*” (Bloch & Parry 1989: 29). Others, most notably David Harvey (2005), have similarly characterized neoliberalism as a moment of capitalist triumphalism, beginning after the fall of the Soviet Union, during which free-market capitalism has plausibly been able present itself as the “only alternative”, and the “end of history”. Most importantly, these critics argue, with the disappearance of any viable alternative to capitalism – both in the form of social democracy, and in the form of “actually existing socialism” – capital could (re)assert its interests much more vigorously than before, as the threat of socialism was no longer present. As a result, Harvey writes, “we have no alternative except to live under a regime of endless capital accumulation and economic growth no matter what the social, ecological, or political consequences” (ibid: 181). From this point of view, neoliberalism represents a condition in which capitalism has become so hegemonic as to become functionally synonymous with reality, with the result that it is now “easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism” (Fisher 2009; see also Jameson 2003).

The problem with this broad definition of neoliberalism, I have argued, is that when we apply it to a society like Singapore, it gets us into exactly the same kind of predicament as when we define social democracy too narrowly, namely that it forces us into a foregone conclusion. On the broad definition of neoliberalism, Singapore *must* be a neoliberal society, as Singapore’s ruling ideology has always emphasized that the condition of possibility for societal survival is trade with the global market on a capitalist basis. The problem with this, I have argued, is that such a statement provides very little explanation for the more specific aspects of Singapore society, beyond this

basic observation. For instance, when we look at Singapore's legal system, we find that it is in direct conflict with the principles that Hayek laid out as foundational to a (neo)liberal system of law – which is to provide “clear rules announced beforehand” – as Singapore operates a number of vague and broad laws that introduce the possibility of arbitrary rule. Furthermore, when we compare Singapore to other societies that equally fit the broad definition of “neoliberalism”, we find that many of them operate systems of law that have very little in common with that found in Singapore. So how do we account for this specific aspect of the Singaporean state, if we call Singapore a “neoliberal” society? For Harvey, the solution is to say that Singapore combines “neoliberalism in the marketplace with draconian coercive and authoritarian state power” (Harvey 2005: 86). But this merely evades the question, as the real issue is precisely *why* Singapore has chosen this particular path. Why has Singapore combined authoritarianism in politics with neoliberalism in economics? To say that Singapore is “neoliberal” explains nothing, since a neoliberal state could equally well – or more likely – combine economic neoliberalism with *political liberalism*, rather than authoritarianism.

Questions like these multiply across Singapore. What about the fact that the state is the main domestic entrepreneur in the economy? What about the fact that the state provides around 80% of housing? What about the many restrictions on individual civil liberties that we find in Singapore, the provision of which neoliberal theorists saw as one of the most important aspect of free-market capitalism? And so on. While it is possible to broaden the concept of neoliberalism to include a state like Singapore, doing so requires broadening the concept so much as to rid it of most of its explanatory power, as the concept will then no longer predict whether or not the state is authoritarian or liberal, interventionist or non-interventionist, or anything beyond the basic fact that the state takes capitalism and the market as the unquestioned framework within which to formulate policy.

As an analogy, imagine that someone were to misidentify an orange by calling it an apple, but instead of relabelling the fruit an orange when corrected, stated that by apple he does not mean “the fleshy, usually rounded red, yellow, or green edible pome

fruit of a usually cultivated tree (genus *Malus*) of the rose family” – as Merriam Webster defines “apple” – but simply “a fruit that grows on trees and has seeds in it”, or something general like that. By doing so, he would have broadened the definition of apple to also include oranges. However, rather than having extended the explanatory power of the concept of apple to the study of oranges, he would have rid the concept of most of its explanatory power, as it would no longer predict any details about the fruit, such as its colour, its taste, or under what conditions it is most likely to grow. For the same reason, he would no longer be able to use it to identify the wild ancestors of the fruit, as the concept would no longer point to a specific ancestor, but to many different ones (the *Malus sieversii* for apples, as much as the Pomelo for oranges, as well as many other fruits with seeds that grow on trees). Hence, while he would be technically correct in calling the orange an apple, he would have achieved this by stretching the concept so much as to explain almost nothing, except what is plainly obvious, which is that both apples and oranges grow on trees, and have seeds.

This, then, is how I view the concept of the MM state: like introducing the concept of oranges into the study of apples and oranges, where previously there had only been the concept of apples. On the one hand, the MM state concept covers all the aspects of the Singaporean state that are covered by the concept of neoliberalism, such as the fact that the Singaporean state is highly “market-oriented”, and tends to view citizenship as a form of employment in the state as a corporation. In addition to this, however, the MM state concept also explains all the apparent *idiosyncrasies* of Singaporean “neoliberalism” – such as the fact that the state is the most important actor in the domestic economy, and intervenes in all kinds of social processes whenever doing so is believed to have a positive impact on the country’s competitiveness (down to things like who has kids with who, and how many kids they have). Where the concept of neoliberalism would have us view these aspects of the Singaporean state as “local” variations on the global theme of neoliberalism – neither predicted nor excluded by it, but merely *ad hoc* add-ons – the concept of the MM state allows us to view these aspects of the Singaporean state as integral parts of a coherent state strategy.

From a scientific point of view, the benefit of this type of conceptual shift is double. First, it allows us to formulate a number of falsification criteria that were previously not available. For example, if the Singaporean state were to suddenly embrace Western values of individualism and political pluralism, we would seriously have to reconsider whether it is still an MM state, as the rejection of such values is a central aspect of the MM state. By contrast, if we view the Singaporean state as “neoliberal”, such a change would not even register conceptually, as both a rejection and an embrace of these values are fully compatible with the broad definition of “neoliberalism” (but for the same reason, neither predicted nor explained by it). Second, and most importantly, by shifting from “neoliberalism” to the MM state as the conceptual frame, we are able to connect the Singaporean state to a *specific ancestor*: the middleman minorities who lived in Singapore before the city before it became an independent nation-state. As a result, instead of viewing contemporary Singaporean society as a local variation of some general and global pattern called “neoliberalism” – which has no connection to Singapore’s history, but made its breakthrough in the West sometime in the 1970s (having first been formulated by Austrian economists at the turn of the century; see Harvey 2005) – we are able to see the historical continuity that exists between contemporary society and what came before it.

These two theoretical interventions – that the definition of social democracy must be broadened beyond the particular class compromise of traditional social democracy, and that the definition of neoliberalism must be more focused – go together to form a unified argument. The theoretical problem that I have sought to address in this thesis is that the concepts of social democracy and neoliberalism have been defined in such a way as to lead to two foregone conclusions: first, that globalization makes social democracy impossible; and second, that everything is therefore now some version of neoliberalism. These two conclusions, I have additionally argued, set the stage for a third foregone conclusion, which is the old Marxist conclusion that the choice for humanity will ultimately have to be between socialism and barbarism – only that barbarism has now been renamed neoliberalism, but to much the same effect. Neoliberalism, on this reading, is capitalism *without any redeeming features* – capitalism without even a little bit of socialism, as the globalization of capital has made

social democracy unavailable. Hence the choice is again the stark one between “a regime of endless capital accumulation and economic growth no matter what the social, ecological, or political consequences are” (Harvey 2005: 181), on the one hand, and socialism, on the other.

This conclusion, I have argued, relies on a misunderstanding of both social democracy and capitalism. On the one hand, it requires one to imagine that social democracy is identical to the particular class compromise that was struck in Western Europe during the 20th century. On the other hand, it requires one to imagine that capitalism is best understood as a zero-sum game in which the interests of capital and labour can only ever be put into a stalemate, but never truly resolved. Both of those assumptions, I have argued, are false on their own terms. More importantly, they make it impossible to understand the kind of society that Singapore represents – which is a social democracy adapted to the conditions of social democracy – as such a society is *by definition impossible* starting from those basic assumptions. The concept of the MM state is meant to capture precisely what is made visible when both of those assumptions are dropped, which is that the prisoner’s dilemma of capitalism is still possible to solve under conditions of globalized capitalism. But this can only be seen if we look for social democracy in places that do not look exactly like Sweden!

The bulk of this thesis has been dedicated to describing the form that this class compromise takes in Singapore, both in terms of its hoped for benefits, and in terms of its potential problems – looking on the one hand at the social contract that the MM state has forged between the people and the state (chapters three and four), and on the other hand at the potential shortcomings and points of contradiction of this social contract (chapters five, six and seven). In this, my aim has not been to propagandize for this form of state, nor to side with its detractors, but to describe the MM state as *a new form of social democracy that is set up to tackle the novel challenges of globalization*. As such, my aim has been to look at the relation between social democracy and globalization as an open question, rather than as a foregone conclusion, calling for a renewed engagement with the question of social democracy’s future in our increasingly globalized world. What might the future of social democracy look like if we freed the

concept from its particular instantiation in the traditional social democracies of Western Europe? What might be the unique pitfalls of such new forms of social democracy? In this thesis, I have provided *one particular answer to these questions*, though I am sure that there are many more to be found if we start looking at these questions in the terms that I have proposed.

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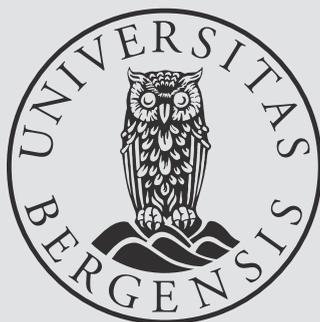
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