

2019 02.003 HASS

Assignment 1

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Over the past few months, the issue of sexual misconduct in Singapore's universities has been trending due to Ms Monica Baey's case, which gained quite some traction and prompted an intense, prolonged discussion on the sufficiency of policies regulating sexual conduct and the availability of help platforms for both the victims and the offenders. Surprisingly, sexual misconduct issues in Singapore are not uncommon. TODAYonline provided an extensive breakdown¹ on the sexual misconduct cases at Singapore's local universities in the last three years. While the cases are plenty, disciplinary and support frameworks provided by the respective universities are often lacking. In this essay, I will be conducting a Weberian analysis on the decisions that the National University of Singapore (NUS) pursued in tackling this issue.

I would like to analyse the way NUS responded. An early report² showed how students were dismayed since the review committee was not even established yet by the time the townhall meeting was conducted. This exactly highlights Weber's worry about the impact of bureaucracy. As a large university, it is understandable that bureaucracy is needed to run the university efficiently. However, this bureaucracy tends to hinder communication between different levels of the hierarchy and slow down the execution of policies in society. The fact that NUS' management was "out of touch" with students and the irony of NUS putting the responsibility on the students to form policies to help themselves³ shows how reflexivity and accountability has been neglected. With only scientific calculability, precision and methodical behaviour left in the rationalisation process, the support platforms get overridden by paperwork and formation of committees without any concrete actions implemented. Ms Baey was justified in the sense that by only providing secretive counselling sessions without any visible public punishments for the offenders, these individual victims are being dehumanised and their dignity are disregarded.

¹ Choo, C. (2019, May 6). A breakdown of the 56 sexual misconduct cases at local universities in last 3 years. *TODAYonline*.

² Ng, C. (2019, April 26). Students disappointed by lack of answers at NUS town hall meeting. *The Straits Times*.

³ Tan, G. Z. (2019, April 26). Everything wrong with NUS town hall, according to students who attended. *Mothership*.

Counsellors would also be required to abide by the formal frameworks that the university has established, preventing them from providing more personalised assistance. When they do administer sanctions and security measures as mentioned in the article,⁴ it is likely to achieve the rational objective of not degrading the reputability of the university, instead of actually upholding moral and ethical values. The university administrators have become enslaved and disenchanted in this '*iron cage*'⁵ as mechanical cogs of the university with no real freedom to change the university's overall attitude towards sexual misconduct cases. The reason for this inertia is that this is how the institution works.⁶ As a result, we are trapped in this hyper-rational system which does not resolve these issues effectively.

As Singapore continues to develop forward as a capitalist society with organic solidarity, we need to be careful so as to not lose sight of the foundational values that formed these educational institutions in the first place. Even if more sexual misconduct cases in our autonomous universities are discovered and reported, we should not let bureaucracy hinder the effectiveness of policy implementations. In this manner, we would be able to continue to evolve technologically, while still retaining our moral foundations in the enforcement of our rehabilitative laws and regulations.

⁴ Teng, A. (2019, June 13). Harsher penalties for sexual misconduct at NUS to take immediate effect. *The Straits Times*.

⁵ Weber, M., & Parsons, T. (2001). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (Routledge Classics)*, 123. London: Routledge.

⁶ Weber, M., & Swedberg, R. (1999). *Essays in Economic Sociology*, 110. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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