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Living with Hobson's Choice: An Analysis of Singapore's Nation-Building and Identity Formation

For a country obsessed with key performance indicators, Singapore has had a peculiar, even vitriolic, struggle with measuring the cohesiveness of its nation and the distinctiveness of its identity. In this paper, I will analyse four articles by Catherine Lim, Shirley Lim, Linda Lim, and Terence Chong, and their bearing on Singapore's nation-building and identity formation. I will do so in arguing that the articles reveal latent themes of utilitarianism and transactional mindsets, lack of agency, and schisms in Singapore's body politic.

Utilitarianism and Transactional Mindsets

Anderson's "imagined political community" envisages nations as peoples with a collective feeling of belonging. "Feeling" is not just an "essential element in everybody's life" as C. Lim posits, but also an essential element in the interactions within a nation. However, it is not feeling, but transactions driven by utilitarianism, that form the bedrock of interactions in Singapore. State-engineered initiatives are rejected by ordinary Singaporeans not just because they are "authored" by the state, but also because they use a utilitarian approach that leaves Singaporeans frustrated with Hobson's choice. This is evident through the Singaporean motifs of a hyper-focus on economic development, the rationalization of cultural issues, "practical politics", and "moneytheism."

Taken literally, transactions and utilitarianism have pervaded the Singaporean entrepôt economy over centuries. L. Lim holds that Singapore "served the needs of the British empire," whereas after independence, it continues to play host to "the global production networks of foreign corporations." The Government's hyper-focus on economic development has resulted in the proliferation of trade and commerce, and brought "astounding" economic

prosperity to Singapore. L. Lim points out that this has made Singapore a mere “place” or “stepping stone” for businesses and foreign talent to profit off of Singapore; these are transactions where Singapore’s economy has gained at the cost of its nation and its local entrepreneurs. L. Lim’s posit that Singapore is a “place” rather than a “nation” is extended by Chong, who points out that the very concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” were bartered away by the PAP at the altar of utilitarianism, ready to be moulded and “reinvented” by the “forces of globalization.” In other words, the collective memory of the nation is “reconstructed ... to emphasize only social stability and material prosperity.”

S. Lim holds that sentimental issues such as the installation of English as a dominant *lingua franca* were reduced to the utilitarian problem of “maximizing [economic] potential.” She illustrates that transactions are transient and unrooted by including Lee Kuan Yew’s shifting positions on the issue. Under the guise of utilitarianism, cultural implications are devalued and swept under the rug, destined to become Chong’s “ancestral ghosts” in the future. Chong illuminates this dismissal by highlighting the utilitarian arguments against Singlish (“poor English that which prevents foreigners from understanding locals”) and the sentimental arguments for it (“natural non-state engineered piece of indigenous Singaporean culture”).

C. Lim contends that the transactional mode extends into the relationship between the state and the people, resulting in an “affective divide.” The PAP constructs itself as men who do not lust for power, and whose stance is thus a Hobson’s choice: “better to be unpopular and do a good job than to be popular and lead the country into chaos and ruin.” Power is earned, not desired, and this gives the PAP a morally superior position that they perform with trademark straitjacketed, pragmatic, “arrogant” fashion. Faced with this Confucian image of “honourable men” and what Chong calls an “ideology of survival,” the Singaporean people too, are faced with the *modus vivendi* of another utilitarian compromise: *suspend sentiment, and vote for the PAP*. She strengthens the imagery of a transaction by highlighting the “double-bookkeeping” on either side of the state-people divide. This suggests that like the people, the Government too hides its true intentions in public, akin to a monetary transaction.

Interestingly, while Chong lays down Confucianism as a “national value system” and “ideological identity” for the PAP, L. Lim, writing six years later, speaks of an “abandoned Confucianism.” Wherein lies the difference? Perhaps C. Lim’s posit of a new-found “moneytheism,” which commands the loyalty of affluent Singaporeans, is at play here. This

religious love for the “good life” (C. Lim) and aversion to risking it (L. Lim) atomizes the individual and is a “travesty of the patriotism it has displaced,” calling into play Tolstoy’s quip about “happy families” who might only live the “good life.”¹

Lack of agency

The Hobson’s choice that Singaporeans face in their dealings with the Government does not limit itself to their sentiments; it extends to their civil liberties as well. If utilitarianism hampers “imagination”, then the loss of agency hampers the “political” in Anderson’s definition of a nation. Imagination is of no use if citizens have no avenue to realize it.

Singaporeans are not empowered by the state; rather, they are made to live with a “fear of failure” (L. Lim). Chong makes a stronger claim, that “cosmopolitan government discourse is purged of political liberalism.” This prevents risk-taking in the service of the nation (despite the Government’s aim to make citizens “less risk adverse”), and precludes basic liberties like “joining the political opposition,” or voicing out dissent in public, which are essential in a democracy. The Government’s desire to have a monopoly over political power has resulted in the economic disempowerment of local entrepreneurs, to prevent them from becoming “alternative centres of power” (L. Lim).

Chong posits that the PAP often uses “memory through forgetting” and “selective amnesia” to present a narrow view of Singapore’s history, one that I hold may conveniently ignore or misrepresent periods of political activity and agency, such as the Malayan Spring or the socialist bus strikes. Even personal acts of expression such as arts, culture or sports are reduced to “character-building exercises.” Chong does, however, offer a resolution: Singaporeans can gain agency and “counter government expressions of nationhood and identity” by espousing “visceral” and “grassroots” positions on Singlish, for example. S. Lim provides more detail; she theorizes that beneath the PAP’s hegemony, the latent undercurrent of a national identity “is already much present” and needs “unpacking.” Holding that national identities require multiple voices to build, she claims that this unpacking can only take place by according agency to the people and not through the “one agency” of the Government.

¹ “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” *Anna Karenina* by Leo Tolstoy.

Of note in the exaltation of “grassroots” (and its relevance in a democracy) is the position that the PAP has never had a cadre-based, grassroots system to choose its leader. Coupled with the PAP’s electoral dominance, this slights the democratic compact, further hampering efforts to build a pluralistic Singaporean nation.

Schisms

Anderson’s third requirement of a unified “community” faces profound challenges in Singapore, since it is stricken by what Chong terms “schizophrenia” - “schisms” (L. Lim), “divides” (C. Lim), or “fissures” (Chong) that split the body politic into local / global, economic / emotive , and cosmopolitan / heartlander.

As mentioned earlier, Chong lays out Singapore’s development as a “global city” requiring “practical politics” and a “fluid nation.” S. Lim’s criticism of the search for universality can thus be seen as the search for external constancy in a nation of local flux. Rejecting this, she argues for the championing of local literature, art and songs to “inspire” Singaporeans. L. Lim too, contests the notion of a global city, arguing that it has negative economic, social and political impacts on nation-building.

S. Lim casts Singapore along two planes with different rhythms – the economic and the emotive. While the government and its people are in synergy on the first, she claims that there is a “divide” on the second. However, Chong’s views on income inequality oppose her first claim, as he posits that Singaporeans are intrinsically divided by class – what happens when a man’s

“good life” is juxtaposed with his fellow’s “better life”? He delineates the Government’s attempts to ameliorate not the inequality, but its perception, by romanticizing the working class as “heartlanders,” and the affluent class as “cosmopolitans.” Chong points out this shallow “stereotype” of either, and claims that the Government affords neither “vernacular identities” nor “true cosmopolitan liberalism.” PM Goh’s comments about viewing the two identities as “equals” is an affront to the tangibly inferior quality of life that heartlanders live – their supposed cultural superiority is of little succour.

Other recurring motifs in the articles include the schism between generations, with the young painted as affluent, “qualitative” and generally more aspirational; and the failure of state

attempts to manufacture “regimes of authenticity” (Chong) such as the Chinatown renovations (S. Lim), or even the National Flag (C. Lim).

Present-Day Context

Manifestations of the aforementioned themes are evident even today. Despite its best efforts, the Government has treated COVID as a transactional exercise, rather than one that builds solidarity. Repeated promises to reduce restrictions if citizens comply with particular objectives, such as vaccination or social distancing, evidence this modern Hobson’s choice. The use of terms such as “heightened alert” or “circuit breaker” to denote stressful periods of lockdown only serve to intensify the lack of sentiment in the Government’s messaging. Finally, the sustained periods of lockdown in households, and the absence of nation-wide initiatives mirroring Malaysia’s White Flag movement, might also lead to further atomization of the family unit and of the individual, and deal a serious blow to nation-building and identity formation in Singapore.

References (excluding newspaper articles):

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Declaration

I acknowledge that this research essay is the product of my own work.

All materials consulted have been duly cited and credited.