Airing Dirty Laundry

IN MY CAREER AS A SOCIOLOGIST thus far, I have chosen research projects that involve the state and state policies. In the process, based on my empirical findings, I have been compelled to be critical of the state and state policies. Over the years, I have received support as well as witnessed resistance to what I have to say, as any scholar should expect. This is most palpably felt at conferences and workshops located within Singapore, as people come to the microphone to ask questions or make comments. Because there are certain patterns in who tends to be supportive and who tends to be critical, I see too that there are some concrete anchors for any given person's views. Specifically, where and how people make their careers, and the level of independence these careers are from the state, are somewhat associated with their inclinations and sensibilities. These directly shape their interpretations of what I say as well as how they see my work as either bolstering or undermining their sense of the world. This should not be a surprise—our concrete material interests and the institutions in which we spend our everyday lives shape our worldviews, our judgment

and, more often than we probably realize, our loyalties.

For years, I stayed at this interpretation of what is going on, and it mostly served me well. I learnt not to take criticism too personally. I figured out the importance of adjusting my tone in speaking to different audiences. I understood, and to an extent respect, that some people do not want to hear what I have to say in the way I am inclined to say it. In many ways, this has done me a lot of good—I learnt to see other perspectives even if I did not agree with them, and I learnt to communicate better, in what I hope are ways that allow for real exchanges and not just monologues.

My work on poverty and inequality has brought a new layer to these experiences. Sometimes we do not fully recognize what we are doing until we get reactions we have not seen before.

Hitting a nerve

In an earlier essay, I talk about national narratives and internal narratives. I mentioned two specific incidents at two workshops: after I described how one of my respondents experienced being homeless and her children having to take cold showers in a public bathroom every morning at 4am, one man quipped that he also took cold showers and that this is fine because Singapore is very hot; after I talked about the ubiquity of bed bugs, another person downplayed this by saying that he grew up in a time when there were a lot of bed bugs. In the essay, I talk about how these quips render the speakers dignified rather than ashamed because their internal narratives are of progress, about

overcoming hardship and ultimate triumph. Importantly, their internal narratives map nicely onto our *national* narratives of economic development, growth, wealth, prosperity. The speakers do not want to hear stories of people whose life stories disrupt the national narrative. A disruption of the national narrative is a disruption of their internal, personal narratives. Stories about people living in 2017-Singapore inhabiting what sounds more like their 1965-Singapore are stories that are troubling—they challenge the coherence of their stories, they disturb the moral goodness of their trajectories, they raise questions about their deservedness.

For people who have unambiguously 'made it,' as the two men had, the comments about my work are made lightheartedly. I use the word 'quip' because that was how they were launched—delivered quickly, a little under the breath, almost as an aside, accompanied by big smiles and small chuckles, aimed at rousing laughter in the room. They were meant to be heard as magnanimous rather than petty, light rather than profound. I have no doubt that part of the effect of their words, in those rooms where they were spoken, was to reduce the weight of my findings and trivialize the hardships of my respondents.

Where, in their defense of the national narrative, the tone of these men was triumphant but light, I soon encountered other kinds of resistance tinged with anger and indignity. This makes me see more clearly the depth, complexities, and contradictions embedded in Singaporean nationalism. It also raises new questions about what I, and others like me, are doing when we

apply critical lenses to the national narrative, and what costs we bear in the process.

"Why are you telling people this about Singapore?"

In 2017, I presented my work at a conference in Singapore. By this time, I had presented various findings about my research on low-income Singaporeans multiple times. Many of these presentations were to nonacademic audiences consisting mainly of Singaporeans. I had encountered both encouraging support as well as expressions of skepticism. In general, because of the self-selection process in the attendance of these talks and perhaps because Singaporeans are not generally confrontational, it was primarily the former. This particular workshop and my presentation turned out to be disturbing for one very unhappy audience member partly because the conference participants were from many other places besides Singapore.

I opened my presentation by saying that I will talk about a group of people who are often out of sight when people discuss the Singapore case. In the short time I had, I mentioned a few details about their hardships and challenges, and about the ways in which social policies have not seriously dealt with their needs. I ended by calling attention to the importance of dignity and made the claim that what we have at stake is not just about a small group of Singaporeans but about our shared notions of social worth and belonging. At the question-and-answer segment, I saw an older person put up her hand. By the time we got through an initial round of questions, she did not have time to ask hers.

As soon as the session ended, she came up to me and very indignantly told me that "you researchers shouldn't believe those people." Before I could speak, she went on to tell me that I was seeing only what "those people" wanted me to see. She sighed impatiently and told me they are in fact very well taken care of by the government, and they can go and seek help from the CDCs and MPs.[1] She told me I should just write to tell the Prime Minister about their problems, and that the government will help them. I was initially willing to engage her, and wanted to find out why she was so convinced that I was wrong and she was right. But when I spoke, she started to get more riled up and raised her voice more and interrupted me multiple times. Then she started gesturing, waving her index finger about, and saying repeatedly, "Aiyah, you academics, you really shouldn't believe those people. Those people are not telling you the real thing. I know those people." Her repeated reference to "those people" triggered something in me, and I started to feel angry. I asked her why she kept referring to the low-income as "those people" and why she would speak so disrespectfully of them. At this point, the organizers noticed this heated interaction and came over to separate us and encourage us to take lunch.

I did not think too much about the incident, but throughout the rest of the day and the next, I made sure there was space between her and me. At the final half-hour of the workshop, as the organizers opened up a conversation about the proceedings of the two days, I was surprised to see her go up to the microphone. She

1 CDC: Community Development Council; MP: Member of Parliament.

remained deeply unhappy about what I, and another presenter on Singapore, had said. In her second, this time public, rant—for this is what I think is a fair characterization of what it was—she rearticulated that we/I had got it wrong. She said that migrants (the topic of the other presenter's paper) are actually very rich. She then turned to my paper. She said that it is herself, and other 'Pioneer Generation' folks like her, who are really precarious. "Those people" in rental flats are "actually very well taken care of." She then suggested that I accompany them to seek help, and even offered to come with me.

Two things struck me about her second outburst: first, her position, unlike the two people I had spoken about earlier, probably *is* significantly different. There was something in her tone that suggests she is angry that academics like myself are not talking about *her* precarity and instead focusing on "those people"—the migrants, and rental-flat dwellers who, on paper at least, already qualify for much of the social assistance that is available. On this, I must agree that there are other Singaporeans who are *not* the focus of my research who also deserve attention.

But a second dimension of her reaction is perplexing: if she is feeling precarious and upset about her situation, why was *I* the focus of her ire? More strikingly, why does the government come out smelling like roses? How is her precarity my responsibility but not the state's? And here, how she launched her comments are telling. The reason she wanted to say all this in public at the microphone, even though she had spoken to me the day before is because she wanted the *non-Singaporean* audience to hear. She

was upset not just because she thought I was wrong, but because to her, I was "presenting the wrong things" to "people who don't know about Singapore." She was, in other words, trying to set the record straight *on behalf of Singapore*.

Majulah Singapura

The same night, I had difficulty sleeping and spent more time than I should have scrolling through my newsfeed on Facebook. Several people and news media pages had posted segments of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's interview on the BBC program *HARDTalk*. One post stood out to me for its extracted quote: "I would not presume to tell you how your press council should operate. Why should you presume to tell me how my country should run?" This was part of the answer the Prime Minister gave when the host Stephen Sackur asked him how he would respond if the UK pressed Singapore on freedom of expression and freedom of the press. I immediately thought, well, that's going to be a crowd pleaser. And indeed, it was. On Prime Minister Lee's Facebook page, accolades, which I reproduce here verbatim, poured in:

> Great response sir! Hats off to you and yes, Spore maybe small but we're strong enough to stand side by side with the big boys!
>
> PM, you answered the questions with so much grace and dignity and calm. ... Your answers showed an

educated society that is always forward looking, an Asian society that holds on to her values and yet, is articulate in thoughts.

Well done PM, MM Lee and Mrs Lee are (I still prefer to use present tense) definately proud of you, as we Singaporeans are. Majulah Singapura

Sir, you answered with style and power and I'm sure the interviewer can felt your punches. I'm so proud that my PM handled it so well and I believe many others got to agree with me. Majullah Singapura!!!

PM Lee Hsien Loong: you represented Singapore honorably and your reply was what I would have enunciated. The progressive achievements Singapore has made speak volumes of the correct path Singapore has adopted. We Asians know best that we gotta be well fed and must sustain a deep pocket so that when we speak people in other parts of the world shall listen.

What I most proud of you is your CONFIDENCE. You show the world we know what we are doing and we know what we want. And most of all, we know who we are. We don't live in self-delusion. We don't feel inferior. We will just focus in our growth as a nation and as one people. Once again, thank you Sir.

Well said. Our PM is a true gentleman and diplomat as he has shown time and time again. A lot of countries could learn a great deal from Singapore including my own. Huge respect for this man and for Singapore

The 'west' like to use the term 'democracy' to bog us down so that they can plant puppets for their own political or economic agenda. Singapore is a sovereign nation, lead by a trustworthy leader which from time to time has prove the world, how to run a nation with good balance between leadership and democracy.... We are on the right path, do not fix what is not broken... You have replied well, Sir PM

Proud of you as our PM! Such a fair and objective response to his curt question and attitude.

you tell 'em, mr lee!

The framing of the question by Sackur and the full response by Lee were actually quite interesting. Sackur's question was framed as almost a threat—that addressing the lacks in freedoms would be a precondition to continual trade. To this, in the world where we live, one can only laugh, and this the Prime Minister did. He went on to essentially mock the question for its naiveté—pointing out that countries which purportedly value certain freedoms, such as the US, have and will continue to trade with

countries, such as the oil-rich ones, which continually violate human rights, because "you have to do business." He then made some more conciliatory comments about diversity in the world and the need to understand that no values are universal. This proved immensely popular, and several commentators, both on his page and elsewhere online, would later proudly repeat his line: "The world is a diverse place. Nobody has a monopoly on virtue or wisdom."

Yet, although there is plenty to unpack in the 30-minute interview, as well as lots to debate, the positive, almost gleeful responses from certain segments of the population fixated not on the substance of what he said but on the *tone* of what they felt he accomplished on that global media stage that is the BBC: Lee Hsien Loong did Singapore proud by showing "them" that a little country can punch big.

Airing dirty laundry

What does it mean to punch big? And what does this have to do with responses to my work?

There is of course something partial about the comments on the Prime Minister's own Facebook page. The people who are in disagreement with his comments are probably not going to post them there. I am by no means suggesting that this is the only response to his interview. What I am pointing to is that the positive comments are framed largely in terms of national pride, *and* that this national pride is tied up in Singapore's purported progress and prosperity in spite of its limited size. As I saw in my

earlier work, this is *the* script people go to when they think about Singapore vis-à-vis the world.[2]

Stories about poverty and inequality disrupt this script. Judging by complaints, in recent years, about increases in costs of living, about intensifying senses of insecurity, and about the role of immigrants in many of these trends, Singaporeans are not entirely enamored with state-led economic development nor blind to the chips in the script of progress and prosperity. These, however and apparently, are not for others, for *outsiders*, to see or comment on. These gripes are compartmentalized—saved for different settings and for separate discussions, when there are no outsiders. When the Prime Minister is on BBC, his job is to present the best face forward. Majulah Singapura.

*

Stories about poverty and inequality create a lot of discomfort, as I think they should. It is this discomfort that will propel us into action. It is this discomfort that will compel various members of this society to push for change, to push for widening the circle in which people can enjoy the successes of economic wealth.

The resistance to this disruption and discomfort, I had mostly interpreted as people unwilling to give up their own privileges. And I saw my role as continually trying to get people to see that we can disrupt our narrative and build alternative narratives, and that some of us can and should give up some things because what we will gain in return will be worthwhile.

2 Teo (2011).

But I now see that there is an additional dimension to this that may be an equally large, if not larger, impediment to disrupting the narrative.

Accepting that there is poverty and inequality is difficult if nationalist pride is a high priority. In this mode, we lose face as a nation if we foreground such problems. At the conference, I evoked such a strong reaction, and one that was targeted at me so personally, essentially because I was airing dirty laundry. I was basically a traitor.

What I have written in this essay will not be news to activists working in Singapore. The vitriol I have seen online, launched at friends and acquaintances who work on various issues to do with human rights, has been as sustained as it has been shocking. The attacks sometimes essentially take this form: you liberal, western-educated elites. That's it. That is the entire argument of the attack. A sentence fragment constituting the whole punch. One cannot comprehend this without juxtaposing it against "you tell em, mr lee!" Despite having English as an official language; using British colonial names as a matter of pride on our most elite institutions; accepting as common sense that our top students must go to Harvard, Stanford, Cambridge, Oxford; and generally embracing pop cultures and lifestyles that are 'western,' or perhaps precisely because of all this, there is a desire—when the outcome places Singapore as superior— to reject 'the west.'

But what is this 'Singapore' that is so terrific, and who are in this 'Singapore'? Who are these 'Singaporeans' invoked who

are supposed to always feel pride? Once on this mental path, differences must be flattened. You are either with us, or against us. And if you are with us, you cannot speak of all the variations and inequalities within the 'us.' Once you do, you are against us, your loyalties must lie elsewhere.

Resist nationalist tendencies, we must

We need to get beyond this. This nationalism—willing to ignore problems to protect pride; able to overlook complexities in order to satisfy momentary pleasures of being 'winners'; insisting on seeing society through narrow lenses in order to justify complacency—is as stifling to progress as it is dangerous to social harmony.

Poverty and inequality in Singapore are real. You can cut the data in different ways to present different interpretations of how it has come about and how it will go away. But no matter how you cut it, there are real lives, real people, real hardships. These grind against real rules, real policies, real institutions. Denying its existence and its seriousness, as well as its relationality to wealth, represents a double-violence. Ignoring the accountability and obligations of wealthier and more powerful segments of society is morally problematic. For these reasons, we should not let either our individual narratives or our national narratives and nationalist pride compel us to look away.

2017 is, for anyone who cares about goodness and decency and fairness and justice, a despairing time to live in. We should look outside Singapore. When we do, we should do so not just to

satisfy base instincts for affirmation. If it is so that Singapore is small and global and at the mercy of global trends, then there are trends we must pay attention to and take heed. Among the things we must learn when we look at the world is that nationalism is an ugly beast. It is a beast that is tempting for people to feed. The fallout of the feeding is probably not complete, but as we see societies torn apart—by profound cruelty manifesting between persons, by an unraveling of civility and respect for personhood—our response cannot be to celebrate our awesomeness or exceptionalism. For, in the ethos of that act of celebration, in that articulation of simplistic and incomplete visions of our society, lies the same base instinct toward drawing boundaries without consideration for current realities of inequalities and future dreams of justice.

When I began thinking about writing this book of essays, I had in mind a relatively modest set of writings—keeping to the topic, staying on the narrow scope of my empirical research. The reality of thinking and writing about poverty and inequality, however, is that one is forced to see that many things are related to many other things. And so it is that this book touches on many things that did not appear at the onset to be related—housing, schools, mothers, social workers, individualism, family holidays, soccer boots, nationalism, dignity.

If social life is made up of many things that are interconnected and interrelated, then two things follow: the specialist academic cannot afford to stay in her safe corner, studying and commenting

only very narrowly on a small realm of expertise. Second, and more importantly, the generation of ideas, of knowledge, of understanding, cannot be limited to academics or other 'experts,' but must be the right, the work, *and* the responsibility of everyone who lives in and cares about this place. For this to work, one's engagement has to be deep and sustained. It cannot be oriented primarily toward silencing the engagement of others.

This book, I hope, does not read like prescriptions. Although I have a viewpoint and opinions about how things should be done and ought to be, I believe we do and should see and act from many different places. I invite anyone who has read this far to consider how their everyday lives, their work, their families, their choices, their refusals, can be understood from the perspectives I have presented. In the process of doing this work, I have had the privilege of knowing that there is in fact already a community—of scholars, activists, social workers, artists, and thinkers of various backgrounds—who resist cynicism, who refuse the notion that this is it. I invite everyone who cares to step in to be part of the creation of new directions, new narratives, new imaginations, new dreams.

Laundry needs to be aired. Don't shy. Maju, lah.