

The Ideology of Pragmatism: Neo-liberal Globalisation and Political Authoritarianism in Singapore

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ABSTRACT *This article uncovers the strongly ideological quality in Singapore's theory and practice of pragmatism. It also points to a strongly pragmatic quality in the ideological negotiations that play out within the dynamics of hegemony. In this complex relationship, the combination of ideological and pragmatic manoeuvring over the decades has resulted in the historic political dominance of the People's Action Party (PAP) government in partnership with global capital. But in an evolving, diversifying and globalising society, this manoeuvring has also engendered a number of mismatched expectations. It has also seen a greater sensitivity and attention to the inherent ideological contradictions and socio-economic inequalities that may erode what has been a relatively stable partnership between state and capital. This article argues that Singapore's one-party dominant state is the result of continuous ideological work that deploys the rhetoric of pragmatism to link the notion of Singapore's impressive success and future prospects to its ability to attract global capital. In turn, this relies on maintaining a stable political system dominated by an experienced, meritocratic and technocratic PAP government. While this Singaporean conventional wisdom has supported the political and economic interests of the state and global capital in a period of neo-liberal globalisation, its internal contradictions and external pressures have also begun to challenge its hegemonic pre-eminence.*

KEY WORDS: Authoritarianism, Gramsci, hegemony, neo-liberal globalisation, People's Action Party, pragmatism, Singapore

In an effort to derive a core definition of ideology from what he considered to be an unhelpful multiplicity of usages in the social sciences, John Gerring (1997: 971-2) produced a comprehensive definitional framework that included as one of its seven components a list of ideology's functions. For him, ideology explains otherwise incomprehensible social realities, represses elements that do not fit the belief-system, establishes norms and values to integrate individuals into a community, motivates individuals and collectivities to act according to a programme, and legitimates these explanations, repressions, integrations and programmes.

Almost three decades earlier, Giovanni Sartori (1969: 411) described ideologies as "the hetero-constraining belief systems par excellence ... the crucial lever at the

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disposal of elites for obtaining political mobilisation and for maximising the possibilities of mass manipulation.” Attempting to clarify ideology as a concept that could be used social-scientifically to analyse “how populations and nations can be mobilized and manipulated all along the way that leads to political messianism and fanaticism,” Sartori (1969: 411) conceptualised ideology and pragmatism as polar types. The former is a closed belief-system consisting of fixed elements that are strongly felt, rigid, dogmatic and impermeable to arguments and evidence, and the latter an open belief-system consisting of flexible elements that are weakly felt, open to arguments and evidence, and changeable even for the sake of convenience.

Breaking down Sartori’s dichotomy, Chua Beng-Huat (1997a) argued that the rhetoric of pragmatism in Singapore is ideological and hegemonic in nature, adopted and disseminated in the public sphere by the People’s Action Party (PAP) government and institutionalised throughout the state in all its administrative, planning and policy-making functions. By doggedly describing itself as pragmatic, the Singapore state is actually disguising its ideological work and political nature through an assertion of the absence of ideology and politics. Chan Heng Chee (1975) earlier described Singapore as a depoliticised “administrative state”, where ideology and politics had triumphantly been replaced by rational and scientific modes of public administration.

Recognising the thorough fashioning of pragmatism as both a pervading characteristic and an ideological instrument of Singapore’s political regime, this article provides a systematic, sustained and critical analysis of the ideological nature of claims to pragmatism, updating and extending Chua’s analysis. It does this by highlighting and illustrating the links between the ideology of pragmatism, the values and interests of neo-liberal-capitalist globalisation, and the hegemonic one-party dominant state. The article brings into focus the PAP government’s political interests, shored up by mutually advantageous relationships with global capital and justified by economic ideological expressions that circulate in the public sphere where pragmatism is enshrined as a national value, though not without internal contradictions. Further problematising Sartori’s ideology/pragmatism dichotomy, the article explores the extent to which pragmatism in Singapore has – paradoxically for Sartori’s conceptualisation – become its dominant ideology. This situation is less paradoxical when understood in Gramscian terms as a national world view that is constantly struggled over in efforts to perfect and secure – and, from the vantage point of resistant subordinate classes, to weaken and displace – political dominance (Gramsci, 1971). The PAP government’s political dominance, as Chua has argued, requires continuous ideological work of this kind. Elsewhere, I have analysed the annual National Day Rally speeches of three Singapore prime ministers as sites of ideological negotiation, where ideological work is done to maintain consensus and to forge new alliances among classes and social forces being transformed by globalisation (Tan, 2007). State coercion is exercised as a last resort.

Helen Davis (2004: 46-7) describes hegemony as “negotiated power whereby members of a class are able to persuade other classes that they share the same class interests.” For Stuart Hall (1994: 460), these negotiations and persuasions occur in and through popular culture, an ideological “battlefield” where there are “always strategic positions to be won and lost” and where the “complex contradictions” of unstable equilibria play out in moments of dominance, complicity, negotiation,

alliance, resistance, opposition and rupture. Hegemony is, therefore, a complex and non-linear process of multiple actors creating, maintaining, adapting to and disassembling consensus often by making connections or disconnections among ideological fragments that do not necessarily cohere but which serve as relatively persuasive and momentarily stable foundations on which diverse classes and social forces may forge alliances for maintaining or challenging dominance. Such a dynamic, process-focused, and open-ended approach to understanding ideology exceeds the definitional categories of Gerring's (1997) framework, which identified "internal coherence" as a core attribute of ideology. A Gramscian approach would not look for coherence as an essential characteristic of ideology. What matters is an analysis of the struggle to make coherent – and therefore broadly convincing – the many complex connections among ideological fragments that attend alliance-building, in ways that seek to remove or at least disguise internal contradictions and the recognition of how ideological formations privilege the ruling classes and their allies.

This article will show how there is a strongly ideological quality in Singapore's pragmatism, and a strongly pragmatic quality in ideological negotiations within the dynamics of hegemony. In this complex relationship, the combination of ideological and pragmatic manoeuvring over the decades has resulted in the historic dominance of government by the PAP in partnership with global capital whose interests have been advanced without much reservation. But in an evolving, diversifying and globalising society (in large part an outcome of Singapore's deepening participation in neo-liberal globalisation), this manoeuvring has also engendered a number of mismatched expectations and a greater sensitivity to the inherent ideological contradictions and socio-economic inequalities that may erode this relatively stable state-capital partnership.

The article takes as its primary objects of analysis public communications (including political speeches and statements captured in news reports) and scholarly discourse on Singapore's public administration and policy making. It analyses these texts to see how the rhetoric of pragmatism has been constructed and re-constructed, how it has adapted to cope with internal contradictions, as well as what and whose interests are served by these constructions and adaptations. It argues that the one-party dominant state is the result of continuous ideological work. That work deploys the rhetoric of pragmatism to link the notion of Singapore's impressive and yet fragile success and future prospects to its ability to attract global capital. In turn, attracting global capital relies on maintaining a stable political system dominated by an experienced, meritocratic and technocratic PAP government. While this Singaporean conventional wisdom – no doubt an ideological articulation – has supported the political and economic interests of the state and global capital, its internal contradictions and external pressures from an evolving society have also begun to seriously challenge its hegemonic pre-eminence.

The PAP Government and Global Capital

In Singapore, the PAP has been continuously elected to power since 1959 when the British granted the colony self-governing status. After a short-lived political merger with Malaysia, Singapore attained full independence in 1965. The government quickly consolidated its power as a highly interventionist and entrepreneurial state

whose coercive instruments were able to tame, co-opt and train a once militantly unionised labour force. The economic bureaucracy was able to accelerate the course of economic and industrial development mostly by luring prospective foreign investors and multinational corporations (MNCs) with generous tax incentives, industrial infrastructure and political stability. This outward-looking approach to national development and the apparent disinterest in assisting local capital could be explained by viewing the government, as Rodan (1989: 98) has done, as “averse to local Chinese capital” that “had sympathies with some of the PAP’s opponents.” Viewed in stark contrast to other newly independent states’ nationalistic display of hostility towards the West and MNCs (Tan, 1976), this early internationalist strategy is today regarded as one example of longstanding pragmatism in Singapore’s practice of governance. In the early 1970s, Singapore was already being described in official speeches as a “global city” whose fate depended profoundly on the international economic system (Rajaratnam, 1972). By the 1980s, Singapore was grouped with Hong Kong, Korea and Taiwan, collectively known as the “Asian tigers” because of their rapid industrialisation that enabled them to achieve advanced and high-income status within a few decades. In this regard, Richard Stubbs’ (2009) comprehensive review provides a useful background for understanding the different ways in which Singapore has been characterised as an East Asian “developmental state,” how its strong state institutions have become embedded and how its strong state capacity continues to be deemed necessary for continued economic success.

Today, an interdependent relationship between the state and foreign capital – the basis of the PAP government’s consolidation and maintenance of deep and wide powers – is best understood through the lens of neo-liberal globalisation. Neo-liberal globalisation promotes free markets through policies of privatisation, liberalisation and deregulation, all of which require – in actuality – not a weakened state but increased state capacity to facilitate the interests of capital (see Scholte, 2005; Purcell, 2008). Based on 2008 data from the International Monetary Fund (2009), Singapore is the fourth wealthiest country in the world according to GDP per capita measured in terms of purchasing power parity. It is placed at or near the top of several international rankings on economic performance, competitiveness and business environment (Economic Development Board, 2009).

The PAP government has, for the most part, enjoyed high levels of political legitimacy based on economic policies that have delivered growth and its ability to deliver on promises to provide for the material well-being of citizens in conditions of permanent vulnerability. At the ideological level, the PAP government has been able to manage the hegemonic discourse of survival and success, producing national slogans that remind the people of how the nation has developed in accelerated fashion “from Third World to First” (Lee, 2000) and of how its national accomplishments are substantial yet fragile. Economic crisis, disease outbreak, terrorism, racial and religious conflict, and volatile relations with neighbours Malaysia and Indonesia are constantly presented to the public as national threats, circulated and re-circulated as reports in the state-directed media. By assuming the subject position of heroic protagonist in official history, the PAP government has been able to explain its political longevity and justify its extensive intrusions into aspects of economic, social and human life that would normally be regarded in more liberal political societies as private and off-limits to the state.

Singapore's formal institutions of representative government are a colonial legacy, fundamentally based on the Westminster system of parliamentary government. In Singapore, the executive has greater power than the legislature. Regularly held political elections since 1959, run according to the simple plurality voting system, have seen the PAP remain in power and a very small number of elected opposition parliamentarians. With an overwhelming majority in parliament, the PAP government has been able to amend the constitution without much obstruction, introducing multi-member constituencies, unelected parliamentary membership, and other institutional changes that have, in effect, strengthened the government's electoral dominance and control of parliament. With incumbency comes electoral advantages that have further secured the PAP's position. From this powerful location, it has effectively propagated the idea that it is more important for a small country with limited resources and talent to have a meritocratic, pragmatic and economically-orientated government than one that is limited by principles of accountability, transparency and checks and balances (Rodan, 2004; Tan, 2008). The PAP government has taken pains to present its principles of meritocracy and pragmatism as a viable alternative to liberal democracy and multi-party competition, sometimes by drawing from a specious notion of Confucian values and Asian culture to construct ideological bulwarks – like “Asian democracy” – against the criticisms of the so-called liberal West. By crediting meritocracy and pragmatism for creating the right conditions for economic success, the PAP government has been able not only to justify its (liberal) democratic deficit, but also to produce ideological resources and a structure of authorisation for the maintenance of a one-party dominant regime. In “pragmatic” terms, Singapore's considerable economic success is justification enough for its authoritarian means. The people's overall trust in these principles creates the conditions for political obedience, acceptance of unpopular policies and political apathy, in general.

A major source for this legitimising work has, therefore, been pragmatism, a complex and dynamic ideological formation through which different and not necessarily compatible meanings are articulated hegemonically. Its internal contradictions make it inherently fragile, particularly in practice. This article analyses pragmatism in Singapore's governance and policy making, identifying its different shades of meaning, including its opposition to idealism, Utopianism and totalising approaches; its adaptive and mimicking nature; its focus on finding the technical means for achieving results that often lie beyond public reflection and criticism; and its disregard for intangible and unquantifiable values. In presenting itself as “anti-ideology,” Singapore's brand of pragmatism is, in fact, thoroughly ideological, particularly in the way it disguises its intimate relationship with capitalism in its most developed and elaborated form: neo-liberal globalisation. From the perspective of proponents of neo-liberal globalisation, political stability and – ironically – a strong state are essential for suppressing systemic crises, maintaining a sense of nationhood amid widening socio-economic divides, and enabling global capital to flourish by selectively liberalising and re-regulating sectors of the domestic economy. In short, Singapore's pragmatism is ideological because it hides – or at least makes more palatable – its association with neo-liberal globalisation, which in turn obscures the crisis tendencies and exploitative goals of global capitalism and the real political goals of the PAP government as it reassures Singaporeans of continued economic success.

Pragmatism in Singapore: Ideological Contradictions

Academic writing in the early decades of Singapore's independence (gained in 1965) pointed to the political significance of survivalism, a leitmotif that continues today. For instance, Chan Heng Chee (1971) characterised the years 1965-67 in terms of a "politics of survival," focusing on the threat of radical trade unionism, communist subversion and racial strife. Today, Singapore's self-declared pragmatism relates not only to more academic accounts of national survival but also to a popularised belief in the nation's essential conditions of resource poverty and vulnerability. For instance, at the conclusion of an interview with the *International Herald Tribune* in 2007, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's first prime minister from 1959 to 1990, characteristically explained:

Supposing we had oil and gas, do you think I could get the people to do this? No. If I had oil and gas I'd have a different people, with different motivations and expectations. It's because we don't have oil and gas and they know that we don't have, and they know that this progress comes from their efforts. So please do it and do it well. We are ideology-free. What would make the place work, let's do it (quoted in Apcar et al., 2007).

The PAP government's day-to-day operations are pragmatic in the way that they adopt solutions that are identified as "natural," "necessary" and "realistic" (Chua, 1997a: 59), consistent with a technically efficient approach to using scarce resources optimally and unencumbered by wasteful ideological demands.

In his maiden parliamentary speech in 2009, Nominated Member of Parliament Viswa Sadasivan observed how:

It has often been said that Singapore does not have an ideology – that pragmatism is our mantra and modus operandi. But if we examine our National Pledge closely, it is our national ideology – a set of inalienable values, precepts that demand adherence in the face of the lure of pragmatism. It is designed to serve as the moral compass for us as a people – we lose it, ignore it, or misabuse [sic] it to our peril (Sadasivan, 2009).

Sadasivan's 50-minute speech identified various policies and institutions that had, over the decades, diverged from the four tenets enshrined in the national pledge composed in the 1960s: citizenship; "united people, regardless of race, language or religion;" "democratic society based on justice and equality;" and achievement of "happiness, prosperity and progress." He urged the House to reaffirm its commitment "to the nation building tenets as enshrined in the National Pledge when debating national policies, especially economic policies."

The speech caused a stir in parliament. Lee Kuan Yew took issue with many of Sadasivan's points, asserting how "it was dangerous to allow such highfalutin ideas to go un-demolished and mislead Singapore." On the matter of treating everyone equally regardless of race, for instance, Lee explained that the Constitution expressly stated the government's duty "not to treat everyone as equal. It's not reality, it's not practical. It will lead to grave and irreparable damage if we work on that principle.

So, this was an aspiration.” Lee wanted to “bring this House back to earth” and to “remind all what’s our starting point, what is our base and if we don’t recognise where we started from and these are our foundations, we’ll fail” (Lee Kuan Yew, 2009).

It may appear puzzling as to why the strong state dismissed “highfalutin” national ideals when its own tasks must include maintaining a strong sense of nationhood for legitimising obedience to authoritarian policies and for bridging widening socio-economic divides due to Singapore’s participation in neo-liberal globalisation. In fact, the state has often resorted to lofty pronouncements of its own about national identity, values, belonging and obligations – most spectacularly in the Confucianisation, Asianisation, civic-religious and “National Education” experiments of the 1980s and 1990s. Lee’s outburst, however, betrayed – perhaps strategically demonstrated – the state’s jealous protection of its exclusive right to initiate and shape any “idealistic” discourse on nationhood, preventing alternative accounts from being volunteered by unsanctioned individuals or condemning such accounts as foolish and dangerous in order to reassert even more strongly the established discourse. The crudely rhetorical use of pragmatism by the state to demolish as unrealistic, impractical and dangerous the high-minded utterances of unauthorised individuals – while admitting without discomfort its own idealistic rhetoric – is necessarily selective, strategic and instrumental.

Fifteen years earlier, when he wanted to introduce a new formula for raising the salaries of ministers and top civil servants to levels that were among the highest in the world, Lee explained, “If a thing works, let’s work it, and that eventually evolved into the kind of economy that we have today. Our test was: Does it work? Does it bring benefits to the people?” (Lee, 1998: 109). Pragmatism in Singapore is often publicly articulated as “do what works,” a shibboleth that has the forceful effect of closing off any further attempt at inquiry or debate. Lee has had no patience for the high-mindedness of others, particularly if it conflicted with his own philosophy, his particular understanding of the world, and even seemingly minor aspects of his life’s work (see Tan, 2009b). He has worn pragmatism as a badge of honour; those who disagreed with his views, even if articulated from a thoroughly pragmatic basis, were unauthorised to wear it. In the *International Herald Tribune* interview, Lee asserted:

We are pragmatists. We don’t stick to any ideology. Does it work? Let’s try it and if it does work, fine, let’s continue it. If it doesn’t work, toss it out, try another one. We are not enamoured with any ideology. Let the historians and the Ph.D. students work out their doctrines. I’m not interested in theories per se (quoted in Apar et al., 2007).

Pragmatism Opposed to Idealism, Utopianism and Totalising Approaches

The pragmatist in Lee Kuan Yew displayed contempt for the rigid and uncompromising pursuit of ideals, high principles and timeless values. He regarded this as a debased quality associated with childish *naïveté*, the academic ivory tower built from elaborate concepts and theories, the unrealistic expectations of the inexperienced, the quixotic ramblings of the irresponsible or the egotism and hypocrisy of high-mindedness. Chua (1997a: 62) observes how “philosophizing on grounds of principle was antithetical to instrumental pragmatism.” Geoffrey

Hawthorn (1998: 5) criticises this sort of pragmatism, arguing that the “real difference between the West and east Asia is less a difference of principled beliefs than a difference between a world in which people have principled beliefs and a world in which they do not.”

Politically, this – at times boorish – dismissal of ideals has been useful to the PAP government for deflecting criticism or opposition based on specific ideals, such as freedom, equality, democracy and human rights, even if some of these ideals are represented in national symbols and foundational rhetoric like the pledge. Opposition parties that canvas on the platform of making Singapore a more genuine multiparty democracy in practice are described as being out of touch with what the people are really interested in – the “bread-and-butter” issues – or else as stooges of foreign interests who hope to see Singapore fail (Chee, 2001). Foreign and local critics who wish for more accountability and transparency in the business of government – even if they tactically avoid framing them in liberal democratic language – are dismissed as uninformed about or insensitive to Singapore’s special circumstances which render such ideals irrelevant, unsuitable and even dangerous (Apcar et al., 2007; Tan, 2009b).

Anti-Utopian pragmatism dismisses the social, cultural and political value of being able to imagine alternative realities and better worlds, and to formulate strategies of transitioning from the status quo to these better realities and worlds. Chan and Evers (1978) argue that the PAP government of newly independent Singapore – in spite of its own social democratic party foundations – rejected a “progressive identity” based on ideological and Utopian foundations such as socialism, in favour of an “ideology of pragmatism.” In fact, in response to criticism from other social democratic parties around the world, the PAP leadership put together a highly polemical book of essays in 1976 defending their “socialism that works” – a supposedly pragmatic approach that was consistent with a non-communist and democratic Singapore (Nair, 1976).

Chan and Evers (1978) identify multiracialism as an example of the government’s ideology of pragmatism. Although S. Rajaratnam, one of the pioneers of the PAP, is said to have advocated for a Singaporean identity that would transcend ethnic identities, his proposal in the early decade of independence was rejected by colleagues who believed that ethnic identities were far too primordial and fixed to be convincingly replaceable by a synthetic national identity. Rajaratnam, interestingly, has often been described as the party’s “ideologue” (Kwa, 2006). Almost four decades later, in response to Sadasivan’s argument to treat all Singaporeans equally, Lee strongly re-articulated his longstanding view that Singaporeans should be treated differentially according to their ethnic affiliations, a view based on his elitist and racist beliefs that attempting to transcend these “natural” differences is not realistic: “it’s not practical.”

There have been several racially-conscious policies and laws that have emerged from this dominant thinking. The Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs), for instance, combine single-member electoral wards into super-constituencies represented by teams of parliamentarians whose members must consist of a designated minority candidate. Secondly, racial quotas restrict the allocation and sale of public housing apartments, as they once did the primary school admissions policy. Thirdly, self-help groups that enjoy substantial support from the state have been instituted to

serve each official racial group separately. Fourthly, the government has established special elite schools to promote Chinese language and culture. Through various public speeches over the decades, Singaporeans have come to know about the limits to Malay-Muslim Singaporeans' prospects in the armed forces, the importance of maintaining the racial composition of Singapore society where the Chinese make up 75% of the population, and Lee Kuan Yew's view that Singapore is not ready for a non-Chinese prime minister (Hussain, 2008). This deeply racialised understanding of society has filtered into everyday life. In the popular media and public sphere more generally, racial stereotypes abound, often casting racial minorities in disparaging terms (Tan, 2009a).

Arguably, pragmatic insistence on the constraints of the present (what is, rather than what ought to be, or even what can be) may simply be tactical exaggerations of practical limitations in order to justify an unwillingness to change when change threatens interests. By constantly emphasising racial difference and the threat of interracial conflict, for instance, the "realists" in the PAP government can adopt Hobbesian modes of reasoning to justify their positions of power.

Pragmatists are averse to the generalising and universalising intentions of high theory and theorising in general. Lee Kuan Yew (1998: 109) explained how he had "read up the theories and maybe half-believed in them. But we were sufficiently practical and pragmatic enough not to be cluttered up and inhibited by theories." In general, Singapore's public policy practitioners tend strongly to disavow theory, ignoring the way theoretical fragments and ideas are often historically embedded in today's practice: For instance, the specificities of capitalist theory, embedded in pragmatic policy making and the common sense more generally, go practically unnoticed or else are deliberately obscured.

Chua describes pragmatism as an "operant" concept "governed by ad hoc contextual rationality that seeks to achieve specific gains at particular points in time and pays scant attention to systematicity and coherence as necessary rational criteria for action," contrasting it with "utopian rationality [that] emphasises the whole and at times sacrifices the contextual gains to preserve it, if necessary" (Chua, 1997a: 58). Elsewhere, Chua observes a "crisis mentality" in a government that reacts through "pre-emptive interventions" which produce "unforeseen circumstances" that sometimes require drastic U-turns. The government, Chua (1997b: 131) argues, "characterizes possible course-changing as the positive result of its 'pragmatic' flexibility in policymaking and administration, rather than due to confusion or contradictions."

Policy making that is contextual and discontinuous in these ways can degenerate into *ad hoc*-ism, where the choices of autonomous policy makers may lack overall consistency, come into conflict and even produce unexpected consequences that will have a negative impact many years down the road. The 1990s, for instance, are full of examples of how the government vacillated from kinder and gentler policies, meant to encourage an open and consultative space for public participation, to more menacing actions, aimed at silencing alternative and oppositional voices. Casualties of the more menacing among these included novelist Catherine Lim who was publicly reprimanded for writing commentaries in the local broadsheet *The Straits Times* that were critical of the government, American academic Christopher Lingle who was charged with contempt of court for writing an article in the *International*

Herald Tribune that questioned the independence of certain judiciaries in Asia (without actually naming Singapore), and political scientist Bilveer Singh who was rebuked for claiming in the *Jakarta Post* that a majority of Singaporeans were poor. State censorship, when applied pragmatically, can appear arbitrary. For instance, in 1994, the government placed a *de facto* ban on two art forms (forum theatre and performance art) only to lift the ban ten years later, when it needed to present a liberal face to attract creative talent. These and many other examples of the state's ambivalent and switching behaviour expose the internal contradictions within the ideology of pragmatism and they provide ideological and political resources for challenging the state's hegemony.

In the best cases, a balance is struck between flexibility and a long-term planning approach. Senior public servant Tan Gee Paw is quoted as saying that "in the civil service, you need to plan so far ahead that you may not even see the results in your career" (quoted in Peh and Goh, 2007). Neo Boon Siong explains how this ability to plan confidently for the long term without taking "short cuts" or making false promises can be traced to the PAP's confidence about staying in power for the long term, since there has not been any strong political opposition (quoted in Peh and Goh, 2007). One example of how this long-term approach has been tempered by pragmatic flexibility can be found in Singapore's urban planning experience. The Master Plan of 1955, a legal document, drew up guidelines for land-use zoning, detailing the density and intensity of land use. The 1971 Long Range Concept Plan, produced with the help of the United Nations Development Programme, integrated broad prescriptions for land use with details for developing transportation, new towns, schools, community spaces and recreational facilities. Since the 1990s, the government's Urban Redevelopment Authority has divided the city into fifty-five neighbourhoods, each with its own Development Guide Plan (Ooi, 2004). Plans are regularly reviewed: once every five years for the Master Plan, and once every ten years for the Concept Plan. There are even mid-term reviews.

A second example can be found in Singapore's economic planning experience. In his study of Singapore's Economic Development Board (EDB), a government agency created in 1961 to formulate and implement policies to attract foreign capital, Edgar Schein (1996) discusses several paradoxes in its corporate culture, chief of which is what he calls "strategic pragmatism." Schein (1996: 23) describes EDB as being "very clear about its long-range goals but, at the same time, [it] remained tactically very flexible in working toward these goals and nimble in solving the day-to-day problems of their clients." While strategically pragmatic policy makers have a clear long-term vision and sense of mission, they do not rely simply and bureaucratically on force of habit, groupthink, standard operating procedures, one-size-fits-all programmes, or other master documents in the decisions that they make. Ideally, they are attentive to detail, context, specificity and diversity, and they exercise a measure of creativity.

Pragmatism's Adaptive and Mimicking Nature

Strategically pragmatic policy makers demonstrate a willingness to change and adjust when things no longer appear to be working, abandoning policies that no longer work or adapting them to changing circumstances. In this way, pragmatic

policy making can be quick to respond to unexpected threats and opportunities, a quality that is valuable in a fast-changing world. Minister Teo Chee Hean (1994), in his hyperbolic criticism of excessive public debate, explains how

We are not playing chess where the pieces remain static while we debate and deliberate at length. We are playing football. Stop moving and the rest of the world will run rings around us ... let us not paralyse ourselves in perpetual conflict and debate.

In an important address given just a year after Singapore became independent, then-Prime Minister Lee had already argued for the importance of being a “realistic,” forward-looking society, “ever searching for new solutions, new ways to achieve old targets” (Lee, 1966). Henri Ghesquiere (quoted in Mahbubani, 2009) observes how “the Singapore Government tinkers, almost obsessively, with its development strategy to cope with new challenges to its competitive position as soon as they emerge on the distant horizon. Yesterday’s virtue can become tomorrow’s obstacle.” In a book that celebrates Singapore’s pragmatism as “dynamic governance,” Neo Boon Siong and Geraldine Chen (2007) provide an analysis of copious interviews with key personnel in the Singapore government. They conceptualise the government’s “critical governance capabilities” in terms of its ability to “look ahead,” “look across” and “look again” (Neo and Chen, 2007: 39-46).

The government considers itself to be far-sighted and adopts a pre-emptive “nip-in-the-bud” approach to problem solving. But it has also shown a tendency to react very strongly when potential problems are spotted, especially when spotted and articulated by top political leaders. In order to please their political masters, there has been a tendency among some public administrators to overreact, often producing extreme policy solutions to completely subdue the anticipated problem, extreme policies that do not generally receive the benefit and moderating influence of public scrutiny either through genuine citizen consultation mechanisms or through an adequately representative parliament. From 1968 to 1981, the PAP held every seat in parliament. Since 1981, the largest number of seats lost by the PAP in any general election was four (out of 81 seats in that year). Political scientist Natasha Hamilton describes an “insulated process of policymaking” that responds not to the bottom but to the top, adding that she “can think of very, very few government initiatives that got derailed or even delayed because of objections from outside the Cabinet” (quoted in Peh and Goh, 2007). In fact, Minister Teo describes Singapore’s pragmatism as a “sober” and “firm” approach to implementing sound policies based almost entirely on their technical merits, which he contrasts with pragmatism in the US as policy making that is overly subjected to popular politics (Lin, 2010). In his mischaracterisation of the profoundly pragmatic basis of American democracy, Teo resorts to a popular caricature of democratic gridlock and chaos in the USA. He takes this to be a patent sign of its inferiority to an equally caricatured image of Singapore’s pragmatism that features elite, technical and purely rational policy making.

The controversial policy to peg the salaries of ministers and top civil servants to the highest private sector salaries was debated in parliament in the mid-1990s but passed without much opposition, since the unicameral legislature, fused – in Westminster-style – with the executive government, also consisted of an overwhelming majority of

PAP members who were well disciplined by the party line. Justifications offered for this policy included the importance of being able to attract Singapore's most talented into the public sector and the need to ensure that top politicians and public servants are paid enough to reduce the temptation to accept bribes to supplement relatively low salaries. Indeed, the Hong Kong-based Political and Economic Risk Consultancy considers Singapore to be the least corrupt nation in the Asia-Pacific region (*The Straits Times*, 9 March 2010). These multi-million-dollar salaries – the president and prime minister each earn salaries in the region of S\$4 million a year – are an indication of how much the logics of the public good and the profit motive associated with the state and capitalism respectively have penetrated each other. For one thing, disproportionately high ministerial salaries will almost certainly change the motivation for entering politics and public service. In a system that continues to believe in the importance of maintaining a strong state that is not effectively limited by checks and balances, future governments may become more able and willing to abuse their power, since there will be large sums of money at stake. Pragmatic adaptations, if left undisciplined by the tough scrutiny of democratic institutions (not mobs as often depicted in PAP rhetoric about democracy), can lead to hasty, poorly calibrated and – especially in the long term – dangerous policies.

Singapore's pragmatists often learn and adapt best practices from other countries' experiences, rather than starting from scratch. Teams of officials are commonly sent on overseas trips to study the most successful institutions and organisations in specific fields. Consequently, as former top diplomat Kishore Mahbubani (2005: 150) explains, "Singapore's economy can be seen as a unique experiment to combine the best of available systems in a flexible, pragmatic, and unorthodox way – suited to its particular circumstances." But Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong more recently suggests that:

Up to now, Singapore has had the benefit of following and adapting best practices by others who are ahead of us . . . But as we move closer to the leading edge, we will have to break new ground ourselves, find fresh solutions, and feel our own way forward (quoted in Peh and Goh, 2007).

Lee's argument is supported by the many examples of overseas officials who visit Singapore with the express wish to learn of its success stories and to replay them in their own countries. Mahbubani (2009) quotes former British Prime Minister Tony Blair who told him that "when he travels around the world and discusses development challenges with leaders, many of them cite Singapore as one of the models for their development." For Singapore, copying and importing practices from others has – at least in theory – been an effective means of accelerating its own development while saving on the costs and avoiding the risks of experimentation. But when asked if other countries can copy the Singapore model, Lee Kuan Yew's reply in the *International Herald Tribune* interview appeared pessimistic – Singapore can be pragmatic and succeed by being pragmatic because its people, unlike those from many other developing countries, have been driven by an acute sense of its historical vulnerability and lack (Apcar et al., 2007).

Obviously, pragmatic copying and importing of policies and programmes need to be done judiciously and with sensitivity to the local context. In Singapore,

pragmatism has in some cases encouraged the indiscriminate mimicry of other global cities, in terms of urban planning, iconic structures, architecture, entertainment facilities, consumer brands and lifestyle options. In order to facilitate the flows of foreign talent and capital, global cities need to be equipped with the standard and globally recognisable brands, stores and other facilities. Like any other global city, Singapore has an iconic opera house (costing S\$600 million), a skyline of some of the tallest buildings in the world, a giant Ferris wheel (the “Singapore Flyer”), waterfront developments, casinos and a rejuvenated downtown where old commercial and residential buildings have been converted into boutique hotels, discos, offices and affordable spaces for artists and arts groups to operate out of. Without full consultation with the private and people sectors, it has been easy to bulldoze over local places and practices that are authentic or at least meaningful, all in the name of achieving world-class standards. For example, the old National Library building was torn down in spite of a swell of public objections; in its place, a road tunnel was built that saved five minutes of travel time (Siew, 2007). Pragmatism, then, can have a homogenising effect that relegates questions of unique and authentic identity to superficial decoration of a basically identical global-city template.

Pragmatism’s Focus on Technical Means to Achieve Given Ends

Pragmatists are willing to adopt any means as long as the ends are successfully achieved through these means. “The ends justify the means” is the basic principle behind Singapore’s results-orientated policies and decisions. Often, this means that the focus is on exercising technical and instrumental reason to formulate and implement solutions, while the outcomes and goals are kept beyond the horizon of critical reason. Technological rationality is fully dominant over moral-political and aesthetic modes of rationality. Chua (1997a: 68) argues that: “The overriding goal of PAP pragmatism is to ensure continuous economic growth. This singular goal is simultaneously the singular criterion for initiating and assessing all government activities, in terms of how an act will aid or retard this growth.”

One implication of this is that the most important public administrators will be economists or those who think like economists, involving choices based on a calculus of cost and benefit, and assuming that people will respond rationally to reward and threat. A second implication is that public administrators should be selected, deployed and promoted on the basis of their mastery over the tools and techniques of policy making; they should approach policy making as technocratic problem-solvers whose job is to provide seemingly “value-free” technical solutions, and not to get mired in metaphysics and ethical questioning. When combined with an attitude among the elite that Ezra Vogel (1989) described as “macho-meritocracy,” this technical mastery that many policy makers believe they firmly possess often translates into an arrogant intolerance of alternative views expressed by the general public and even independent experts whose opinions, they also believe, should count for less since they cannot see the “big picture.”

A third implication is that value-neutral technocrats may find that they may have to dress up their policies with ideals, values and principles that enjoy popular appeal, in order to gain widespread acceptance of these policies and to ensure their successful implementation. This pick-and-choose approach to policy making has extended

beyond the use of economic tools, as Ian Austin (2001) argues, to the appropriation of culture as political-economic resource. Culture can be seen as a synthetic technology for capitalism that motivates, supports and justifies the desired productive and consuming behaviours. It is pragmatism, then, that explains the government's interest in constructing and re-constructing an official culture and value system – a Singapore “ideology” as it were. They do this by appropriating “Western values” such as rugged individualism and “Asian values” such as thrift, diligence, group-orientation and respect for authority that are imagined and strategically drawn up to describe the ideal Singapore worker-consumer-citizen. The state also excludes unsuitable values, such as “Asian” superstitiousness, Confucian contempt for merchants and soldiers, as well as Western liberal notions associated with individualism, freedom, equality and mistrust of government.

Clearly, these liberal values also contradicted the PAP government's authoritarianism, which partly explains why the government invoked an essentialist and self-orientalising language of Confucian values in the 1980s and Asian values in the 1990s to counter its liberal and human rights critics, mostly based in the West. In this sense, the “Confucianisation” and “Asianisation” were really part of a thoroughly modern ideological project that employed the “traditional” as cultural materials for the economy. Today, it is a pragmatic project. It picks and chooses useful and harmful values for the nation-state's survival and prosperity, marks them off arbitrarily as “Asian” and “Western,” and then promotes and demotes them respectively under these labels to generate an “authentically” Singaporean culture conducive to and supportive of Singapore's performance within the context of neo-liberal global capitalism and, simultaneously, the government's political legitimacy.

While economic growth appears to be the overriding goal of pragmatism, it is also a goal that is intimately associated with – and, in some instances, even subordinate to – a more fundamental and much less publicly-expressed goal of the PAP government, which is to maintain the one-party dominant state with the PAP solidly in power. Economic growth figures are, in this sense, ideological when they provide the government with the most material justification for its dominance – the argument that Singaporeans must continue to support the “macho-meritocratic” economist-technocrats that make up the PAP government if they want to continue enjoying their comfortable and affluent lives as fetishised in economic growth figures, since it is only this elite group that can formulate and implement sound policies and provide foreign investors with reasons to be confident. For instance, at the PAP convention in 2009, Lee Hsien-Loong (2009) declared that he was confident that by the time of the next elections, “we will have a full slate which can form a strong, clean and able Government to take us forward for the next twenty years. This will instil confidence in our long term future, among both investors and Singaporeans.”

Just as Singapore's construction of Confucian and Asian values were a pragmatic resort to essentialist expressions of identity in order to deflect the criticisms of liberal democracy, so too is the pragmatic goal of economic growth offered as an ideological justification for the continued dominance of the PAP government. What exactly this economic growth means for the lives of ordinary Singaporeans – whether indeed they even benefit directly from it – is not available for critical assessment.

Pragmatism's Disregard for Intangible and Unquantifiable Values

Pragmatists tend to dismiss soft, qualitative evidence, principled arguments and concerns about the intangible as inadmissible in any public policy enquiry or debate. Chua (1997a: 70) notes how pragmatism “admits only ‘concrete’ evidence of a statistical type” and tends simply to “translate quantitative measures into qualitative judgements, without any sense of philosophical and methodological discomfort.” For instance, after Lee dismissed Sadasivan’s “highfalutin” speech in parliament as “false and flawed [and] completely untrue,” he tried to settle the debate by asserting that: “We’re here today, we have this building, we have all these facilities, and all around us is evidence of our accountability. Without being accountable, we would not have been re-elected and there would have been no Singapore of today” (Lee Kuan Yew, 2009).

If only the concrete and countable are admissible in arguments within the public sphere, then externalities that are harder to identify and quantify will be ignored and decisions will be made in incomplete knowledge. This is likely to result in sub-optimal outcomes in the larger perspective and longer term. In his discussion of heritage conservation in Singapore, Kwek Mean Luck – though himself a high-flying public officer – identifies this exclusive regard for the quantifiable as a serious limitation of pragmatism as a working ideology. Kwek observes that heritage conservation was rejected in the 1960s and 1970s but embraced in the 1980s (too late, he suggests) due to the same pragmatic ideology of economic value, on which the earlier rejection was based. Rationalising the government’s suboptimal volte-face, Kwek (2004: 120) explains how:

what is unquantifiable at the time of the decision-making is left out of the equation, even though it has an economic impact. Where this occurs, what appears to be a rational economic decision in the face of a limited set of factors may turn out quite different when the totality of factors reveals itself in due course.

Since quantification is a central meaning in Singapore’s pragmatism, and since all decision-making situations are likely not to present the full and usually unquantifiable implications of any one choice, Kwek questions the adequacy of pragmatism itself as a working ideology.

So what could be a viable alternative to pragmatic cost-benefit calculations in policy making? Even if externalities, intangibles and future benefits – such as heritage and ecological values, emotional, aesthetic and spiritual nurturance, as well as social capital – are recognised, how should they be counted and compared with other more concrete demands? The answer may lie in relinquishing an over-reliance on precise rational calculation, in favour of a more strategic, broad-minded, engaged and empathetic decision-making practice. But this would require an expanded and enriched public sphere where people can confidently and fearlessly express what they value, be taken seriously in this and be encouraged to empathise with others who may have conflicting interests. Creating a policy space for consensus-building will not guarantee that consensus is reached on every matter, but it can set up the conditions for people to begin to hear different voices, the extent of divergence in views and why

a government might eventually move in one way or other. This makes particular decisions more legitimate in the eyes of even those who disagree with them.

If the government had taken seriously the emotional voices of Singaporeans protesting the demolition of the old National Library building, then they might have realised how important the building was as a source of national belonging and how significant a gesture it would have been to respect the wishes of so many earnest Singaporeans, sending to them a signal that the government understood their needs. Instead, a macho-meritocratic government dismissed as trivial and short-sighted the requests of ordinary Singaporeans. Ironically, the government ends up adopting a theme-park mentality in re-building lost heritage and inventing national slogans to forge a sense of nationhood. Puzzled as to why Singaporeans do not respond positively to these things, the government publicly laments the materialism and apathy of its citizens. In its rigid and state-centric commitment to a narrow technical policy-making calculus in the name of pragmatism, the government ends up betraying the open-mindedness, flexibility and inclusiveness that more sophisticated forms of pragmatism are meant to promote.

Pragmatism and the Ideology of Neo-liberal Globalisation

Self-proclaimed pragmatic policy makers and political leaders say their work is not based on, guided by or legitimised through any grand narratives such as the progressive and emancipatory narratives of Western theory including classical liberalism and Marxism. Mahbubani (2005: 126) notes how American politicians often get caught up in ideological wars and observes how

One of America's greatest strengths is its spirit of pragmatism. But this pragmatism is evident mostly in its day-to-day work, at the micro level. Americans should consider being a little less ideological and a little more pragmatic at a much higher level.

On the other hand, an unsigned commentary piece posted on the popular blog site *The Online Citizen* makes a similar assumption about the dichotomy between ideology and pragmatism, but criticises the way Singapore's leaders have embraced the latter without regard for the positive value of the former.

The ruling PAP in engendering an overcompensating desire to rid ourselves of ideology in the name of pragmatism; have robbed Singaporeans and even most of our political leaders currently in Parliament from forming inalienable values and precepts, which are critical in the forging of a true nation. In the end, an over-emphasis on pragmatism limits the possibilities which we might otherwise dare to imagine and aspire to (*The Online Citizen*, 2009).

Whether ideology is understood in its descriptive, positive or pejorative sense (Geuss, 1982), ideology and pragmatism are not mutually exclusive, as Mahbubani and the blogger both seem to assume (though for different purposes). Ideologies are language-like frameworks – with their own vocabularies and grammars – through which reality is made sense of and explained, and ideals prescribed and

communicated. Singapore's pragmatism, as a distinctive way to make sense of the world and to act within it, is therefore unavoidably ideological. Paradoxically, a pragmatism that takes an obsessively consistent anti-ideology position might be viewed as yet another ideology that defines itself against the things that it considers to be "ideological" (excluding, of course, itself). Chan and Evers (1978) and Chua (1997a) have, after all, unflinchingly referred to an "ideology of pragmatism."

Pragmatism is not only ideological in form, but also in substance. The grand "summit" ideologies (such as communism, socialism, liberalism, conservatism and fascism) may have fragmented in the post-Cold War world, but there remain recognisable ideological fragments and derivatives that opinion-leaders and followers combine and recombine in complex ways. Their rhetoric is drawn from nationalisms, religious faiths and civilisational systems, and made to seem coherent and acceptable by all. Austin (2001) argues that the East Asian elites were very conscious of the weaknesses of their state institutions at various points in their history and of how these weaknesses threatened their own political survival that was linked closely to the preservation of their states' sovereignty. As a result, Austin (2001: 7) argues,

modern leaders such as Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew ... have adopted neither liberal nor statist ideology. Instead, they have used both schools' economic tools either separately or simultaneously when and where they have deemed it most likely to secure national sovereignty and rapid economic development.

Political actors who argue in a sustained and uncompromised way for policies and politics that are entirely consistent with summit ideologies of the Left-Right spectrum seem anachronistic. The post-modern world, where Lyotard (1984: xxiv) observed an "incredulity toward metanarratives," is more accustomed to multiple and hybrid languages, and to code-switching practices that draw on what best serves particular purposes at any one time. However, this does not mean that, in a pragmatic world, questions of dominance, exploitation and autonomy are no longer important or even possible. Gramscian notions of ideological hegemony can usefully explain the dynamic and open-ended workings of pragmatism, without losing focus on such questions. Turning to explicit acts of coercion only at the last resort, dominant classes in a capitalist state seek to assume moral leadership by cultivating political leaders, bureaucrats, intellectuals, mass media and civil organisations to form and maintain national consensus among diverse classes and social forces (see Gramsci, 1971: 269). As a complex, unstable and adaptive articulation of originally or potentially contradictory ideological assertions that can shift with changing circumstances and popular consciousness, Gramscian hegemony resembles the conjunctive and adaptive processes of pragmatism, without denying the power relations that undergird them.

In Singapore's pick-and-choose approach to policy making, pragmatism can often be made to appear as a position "outside of" ideology. Pragmatists believe or pretend that they are standing outside of all ideologies to rationally pick and choose the ideological fragments that will constitute good practical solutions to public policy and management problems in specific contexts. When pragmatists attempt to conceal the self-interests and ideological bases of their choices and assertions under the cover of pure rationality, pragmatism becomes even more deeply ideological (in the pejorative "deceptive" sense).

In particular, Singapore's pragmatism disguises its affinity with and usefulness to capitalism, whether in its developmental form or its neo-liberal manifestation. The government describes as pragmatic its strong position against comprehensive state welfare and – in spite of its own historical association with social democracy (Nair, 1976) – against the very term “socialist.” This position is so tenaciously and dogmatically upheld that it comes to be an anti-welfare – even anti-socialist – ideology consistent with and supportive of the ideology of neo-liberal globalisation, which regards heavy welfare expenditure as antithetical to competitive open economies. Instead, the government cultivates a rhetoric of self-reliance coupled with a “many helping hands” approach to assist the truly disadvantaged. This approach works on the basis of partnerships mainly between the government, families and voluntary welfare organisations.

Lily Kong and Jasmine Chan (2000) demonstrate, in their analysis of contradictions in state policies, how even a powerful ideology like patriarchy can survive only if it supports or is compatible with pragmatism, which they, like Chua, relate to the objective of economic growth. In cases where patriarchy and pragmatism contradict each other, economic growth invariably takes precedence. Shamsul Haque (2004: 227-8) argues that Singapore “has most enthusiastically” adopted market-based reforms to reinvent or re-engineer governance in a global context “dominated by market-driven neoliberal ideology.” Singapore's pragmatism, even as it is defined against ideology, is itself deeply embedded in capitalist ideology and is, in this sense, capitalism by an ideologically sanitised name.

Since Singapore's independence, the PAP government's policies have been consistently pro-capital: enacting laws and using instruments of state repression to tame the militant trade unionism of the 1950s and 1960s so that Singapore could attract foreign investors and MNCs (Tan, 1976). Since 1972, the National Wages Council has provided annual wage guidelines. The Council consists of representatives of the government, unions that are ultimately linked to the PAP establishment, and employers, including managers of MNCs. These policies and institutions have sought to socialise Singaporeans into disciplined, hardworking, productive, efficient and docile worker-consumer subjects for a capitalist economy and authoritarian polity. They have also turned Singapore into a politically stable, infrastructure-rich and low corporate tax environment, all supposedly conducive to foreign investment. Even the politically motivated neglect and enfeeblement of domestic capital in the decades following independence (Rodan, 1989: 98) have given way to current policies and programmes to encourage entrepreneurship among small and medium local enterprises.

As a small economy highly dependent on the global network of exchange (Singapore's trade, for instance, is approximately three times the size of its GDP), Singapore has had to abide by rules dictated by proponents of international capitalism. To be able to benefit from access to free trade and flows of foreign investment, this has often meant giving in to neo-liberal pressures for reform, particularly strong in the aftermath of the 1997 Asian economic crisis. Garry Rodan presents a detailed analysis of how this has in actuality been a selective embrace of neo-liberalism, showing where the PAP government has resisted neo-liberal reforms important to the interests of international capital, particularly in the finance sector where government-linked companies (GLCs) continue to dominate. Although he

acknowledges some improvement in the GLCs' practices of corporate disclosure, Rodan (2004: 49) remains critical of Singapore's transparency reforms, especially where "media freedom, political accountability, and citizens' rights to information" are concerned. The relationship between state and international capital in neo-liberal Singapore has, therefore, not been without awkward moments. However, in general, both sets of interests are broadly aligned by ensuring citizens' compliance with the government's authoritarian methods and goals.

Singapore has had to cope with increased exposure to the risks and excesses of global capitalism, resulting in more frequent impact of economic and financial crisis, amplified by the globally spread impact of disease, natural disasters and terrorism. Pay cuts, retrenchments and pressures for workers to upgrade their skills have accompanied economic crises in an economy that may have developed too quickly. The highest income earners compete for internationally benchmarked salaries while the poorest households have experienced a fall in their incomes. Income inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient for all households, has ballooned from 0.490 in 2000 to 0.522 in 2005 (Singapore Department of Statistic, 2006). In 2007, a *Sunday Times* feature titled "We Can Barely Stay Afloat, Say Low-Income Folk" described a 3.6% rate of inflation (the highest in 16 years), a rise of 20% in food prices, and "soaring" oil prices that had led to rising petrol and electricity prices. The monthly wages of cleaners and labourers, also reported in the feature, had since 1996 dropped from S\$860 to S\$600 (Ee and Suhaimi, 2007). The government now readily admits that there is poverty, but its political legitimacy is most threatened by a sense of relative deprivation in a society where meritocracy can easily degrade into inequality and elitism (Tan, 2008). Where the government continues to resist comprehensive welfare, the poor will need to be helped by innovative public assistance programmes as well as a greater reliance on the charity and voluntary sectors.

Another notable effect of Singapore's deeper participation in neo-liberal globalisation has been rising social tension and pressure on state legitimacy resulting from accelerated levels of immigration. Motivated by economic opportunism, the government has embraced globalisation as a means of gaining access not only to global products and markets, but also to talent, which it believes Singapore on its own does not have enough of, in part a function of low birth-rates. Especially in the last decade, government policies have attempted to make Singapore appear more culturally exciting and tolerant of diversity in order to attract global talent, as well as tourists and the organisers of mega-meetings and -exhibitions (Tan, 2003; Florida, 2002). These policies include the decision to allow two casinos to be built in spite of a longstanding ban and the loud protests of Singaporeans who feared the social costs and moral implications of gambling. Just a few years ago, Richard Florida (2007: 173) noted that Singapore belonged to a list of mostly Asian cities that were unable "to compete effectively for global talent" as they were "challenged by their lack of appeal" and needed "to improve their diversity and tolerance if they wish[ed] to compete at the global cutting edge." Today, more than 40% of people living in Singapore are foreigners.

It is important to note that Singapore's experience of migration has been starkly differentiated into two sets of flows: migrant (or guest) workers who accept lower-skilled jobs that do not pay well and that most Singaporeans are unwilling to do, and foreign (or global) talent who bring specific expertise and skill-sets that many

Singaporeans do not possess but are necessary for higher order economic activity. Lee Kuan Yew (quoted in *The Straits Times*, 2 July 2007) explains:

For Singapore to thrive, we must attract foreign talent and foreign workers. Foreign talent will create more jobs for Singaporeans. Foreign workers will do the jobs that Singaporeans are not willing to do. During a recession, the foreign workers will bear the brunt of retrenchments as in the past, buffering Singaporean workers. The more talent – local and foreign – we have, the more dynamic our economy and the better off Singaporeans will be. The less talent we have, the less our economic vitality with fewer jobs, and more unemployed.

Official explanations for why Singapore needs to be open to foreign talent and workers make eminent sense from a pragmatic point of view. But Singaporeans who feel that their city is becoming overcrowded, who complain that new immigrants are unable or unwilling to integrate into a “Singapore way of life,” and who lament that they are becoming second-class citizens in their own country (where male citizens have to do mandatory military service), may start to feel betrayed by their government.

More mobile Singaporeans – who have come to be called “cosmopolitans” – can register their discontent by making their homes elsewhere. In fact, the government has been highly conscious of a “brain drain” problem since the 1980s, when Singaporeans were choosing to leave the tight geographical, social and political confines of a small, conservative and authoritarian city-state for greener pastures overseas. Then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong (2002) caused public consternation when he described some mobile Singaporeans as “quitters.” For many Singaporeans, it is hypocritical for a government to behave in pragmatic terms and yet expect its citizens to respond to the language of loyalty and patriotism instead of self-interest.

Regardless of these technically and politically challenging consequences of globalisation, former Finance Minister Richard Hu, like many other political leaders and policy makers, presents Singapore’s deep participation in neo-liberal globalisation as a *fait accompli*: “We have no choice but to be open and to compete in the world market to survive and prosper” (quoted in Yeung, 2000: 145). While neo-liberal policies are pursued in earnest, their exploitative, divisive and crisis tendencies are obscured through the skilful use of the ideology of pragmatism and economic growth in ways that still appeal even to those who stand to lose from this arrangement. Consequently, and paradoxically, proponents of neo-liberal globalisation rely on a strong – even authoritarian – state to exert effective ideological and repressive control over society to prevent the build-up of class consciousness, political opportunism and the politics of envy, withdrawal or opposition. Nation-building, in particular, helps to maintain national cohesion in conditions or perceptions of economic and social inequality, which explains why the PAP government feels the strong need to control the national ideology, using “pragmatism” as a malleable label to legitimise its own version and to dismiss the versions of unauthorised individuals.

Francis Fukuyama’s (2004) distinction between the concepts of scope and capacity is useful for attempting to resolve the contradiction in the neo-liberal attitude to strong states. Neo-liberal globalisation requires the state to reduce its “scope” and scale back from some spaces in the economy, but it needs the state to re-regulate

other sectors of social and political life, and to be strengthened in this “capacity,” in order to stabilise the country for the primary benefit of both global capital and the state, locked together in a relationship of interdependence. Using the rhetoric of pragmatism to achieve this is the deepest sense in which pragmatism is ideological in Singapore.

Pragmatism and the Maintenance of Authoritarianism

While the state actively pursues the economic opportunities that arise from Singapore’s embedment in neo-liberal globalisation, it has also to do continuous ideological work to contain and dissipate oppositional energies that could be organised and mobilised around the ideological contradictions and negative consequences of this condition. One ideological manoeuvre links Singapore’s economic prospects to the intensity and quality of foreign investment and talent in its economy. A second justifies the short-term sacrifices that worker-citizens must be ready to make – especially during periods of economic crises – in order to keep Singapore attractive to investors, MNCs and talent. A third ideological manoeuvre links the one-party dominant state (that is to say, the lack of genuine multi-party political competition) with political stability, which Singapore needs if it wants to continue attracting global capital and talent. A fourth manoeuvre, and one that draws on the elitist aspects of meritocracy, privileges Singapore’s technocratic mode of governance over political and democratic modes, so that the practice of administration – portrayed as expert, technical, scientific, rational, value-free and pragmatic – can enjoy protection from political and ideological contestation. This is the principle behind Chan’s (1975) “administrative state,” where a bureaucratic, technocratic and rationalised approach to government has apparently eliminated politics and democracy, leaving behind a depoliticised citizenry to enjoy the comforts and security of a stable and wealthy consumerist nation. Barr (2008: 396) describes Singapore’s claim to being a technocracy as:

a Utopian vision of governance that presumes that the system is able to rise above subjective considerations of politics, ideology and sectional interests by relying on impartial reason and the technical skills of modern, highly trained professionals . . . Rule in a technocracy is based on supposed impartial, objective criteria derived directly or indirectly from disciplines such as economics, management, law, medicine and engineering.

Singaporeans are persuaded to practise self-restraint and to suspend their “short-sighted” wants in the interest of maintaining the peace, affluence, convenience and efficiency of their city, which – they are constantly reminded – must not be taken for granted and gambled away by opposing and obstructing the plans and policies of an expert and paternalistic government that knows better than the ordinary citizen. This sort of reasoning, though highly condescending, can be persuasive, especially to risk-averse and comfortable Singaporeans who have never lived under any other government. By casting politics and democracy as irrational, self-interested and short-sighted, the state can more vividly justify its political and administrative elite’s political insulation and wide scope of influence, supporting this claim with

quantifiable measures of concrete success (see, for example, Economic Development Board, 2009). Since this techno-authoritarian arrangement seems to have “worked” for Singapore, pragmatists will argue, there is no reason to replace it with a more and “unproven” democratic system. By short-circuiting a complex set of causes, reasons and circumstances, these ideological manoeuvres have been able to link depoliticisation to economic success in a simple cause-effect relationship.

Singapore’s pragmatism has been opposed, in particular, to liberal democracy. It is sceptical of liberalism’s idealistic (for instance, the inalienable rights of freedom and equality), totalising (for instance, liberal democracy has its basis in the West, but is imposed on Asian societies as universal), ideological, or even dogmatic nature. And it criticises liberalism as insensitive to Singapore’s needs, resources and vulnerabilities. As Chua (1997a: 192) explains,

[s]ince it admits no inviolate principles, pragmatism as the basis for government will not contribute to democratisation. Instead it may stand in its way because, for democracy to be established, certain principles must be maintained regardless of contingent societal conditions.

Further, the ruling elite’s “macho-meritocracy” views politics – and democratic participation – as a potentially unruly force that can distort rational, technical, expert and co-ordinated decisions made in the public interest by corrupting their purity with self-interests, short-term thinking, ignorance, inexperience, irresponsibility and irrationality. Haque (2004: 29-30) points out that

while the economic sphere of the developmental state has undergone some market-driven reforms, the political realm of the state has hardly changed in terms of shifting toward greater participation of opposition parties and civil society groups in policy decisions.

The most important decisions of national significance are left in the hands of technocratic political leaders and policy makers, often in conditions of jealously guarded confidentiality but sometimes in highly selective consultation with trusted experts, all under the assumption that ordinary Singaporeans would be ill-equipped to discuss such matters. Terence Lee (2002: 110) argues that active citizenship and engagement remain merely rhetorical and “gestural,” without any genuine expression in real public life. These justifications, which effectively exclude ordinary Singaporeans from genuinely participating in public decision making and from the educative benefits of democratic participation, turn out to be self-fulfilling. Singaporeans are regularly described as unready for more democracy, particularly by those who quietly worry that their authority will be threatened by more democracy (see Tan and Lee, 2007).

A depoliticised public administration is ideological because it attempts to disguise its political basis or the political work that goes into maintaining the veneer of an uncontested public life. For example, it takes continuous political and ideological work for the PAP government to be able to show that it is above the fray of politics, the partisan interests of political opposition, and the short-term self-interests of ordinary citizens. Chua (1997b: 127) explains how “every state intervention is necessarily a

political act, even in instances in which the political dimension is submerged ... We should conceptualize this submersion as an effect ... achieved through precisely those strategies of state intervention.” To stay in power, the PAP needs to do a great deal of ideological and political work to discredit politics and democracy (and, therefore, the most identifiably legitimate means by which its authority may be questioned and held in check) and, in all of this, to appear beyond politics.

An example of this can be found during general elections. The PAP has always been sensitive to the electoral basis on which its power and authority formally depend. Typically in an election year, the government distributes to the people its economic surpluses through grants, subsidies and other monetary incentives created from the national budget. While these gestures may provide incentives for citizens to elect and support the PAP, it is pragmatism that enables the government to do this without raising any long-term obligations. It is also pragmatism that enables the government to ideologically “de-politicise” these “political” actions through the technocratic language of a budget statement. And, if this fails to convince, pragmatism still provides ideological resources for the government to claim that it must use whatever means that are available to achieve high economic growth (and its citizens’ continued happiness), which means keeping itself in power so that investors and foreign talent will continue to be attracted.

Conclusion

Pragmatism is an ideological rhetoric that unproblematically frames economic growth as a pre-eminent national goal, the achievement of which can be secured only by maintaining the one-party dominant state led by the PAP government. This is not to say that economic growth is a false goal, but that it is a more fully articulated goal that is publicly more acceptable than any naked claim motivated by the PAP government’s political interests. The value of pragmatism to the PAP government, therefore, is that it can suggest a strong link between economic growth (as understood in the neo-liberal globalisation paradigm) and an authoritarian, meritocratic and technocratic government. The value of pragmatism to global capital and the proponents of neo-liberal globalisation is mainly to be found in the PAP government’s pro-business policies which also include strong social and political control of labour and other emerging social forces that might be resistant to capitalism. The PAP government’s political interests have become practically inseparable from the interests of global capital, and their partnership is obscured and rendered publicly acceptable by the fully articulated and elaborated rhetoric of pragmatism.

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