

ASIAN VALUES, AUTHORITARIANISM AND CAPITALISM IN SINGAPORE

SOEK-FANG SIM

Abstract

This article takes issue with the widespread belief that capitalist development and material prosperity produce a middle class political culture that spells the end for dictatorial regimes and leads necessarily to liberal democracy. The case of Singapore, which is a very prosperous and highly developed capitalist economy with a large middle class, but whose government undoubtedly retains a strong authoritarian element, demonstrates that the link between capitalism and democracy is not at all automatic. The Progressive Action Party (PAP), which has since independence formed the government of Singapore, has successfully avoided the path to liberal democracy through its deployment of a discourse of "Asian Values" (AV). The article makes extensive use of the concept of hegemony, derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci. The PAP has secured its hegemony through the use of discourses of "Asian Capitalism" and "Asian Democracy." Because of their function in de-legitimising potential sources of counter-capitalistic contradictions and counter-authoritarian dissent, "Asian Values" enables the re-amalgamation, and even strengthens the mutual dependency, of authoritarianism and late-capitalism in Singapore. This article traces the evolution and inner structure of Asian Values discourses and uses the results of extensive fieldwork to demonstrate how this discourse has succeeded both in surviving the economic problems of the late 1990s and in marginalising alternative and oppositional opinions.

Soek-Fang Sim is a lecturer
at the University of
California, San Diego,
email:
sfsim@weber.ucsd.edu.

Singapore: An Undismissable Counter-Example

Grand claims have been made about the superiority and inevitability of liberal democracy. It is believed to be superior because it provides a check on authority and is a more perfect embodiment of equality and freedom than other polity. It is also believed to be an inevitable consequence of various phenomena. Fukuyama (1992) believes that increasing institutional and ideological convergence would lead to the triumph of liberal democracy globally and the end of history. Paul (1992) and Rodan (1993) believe that the inevitability of liberal democracy stems from the contradictions of late capitalism — namely the emergence of middle-class liberalism and the widening of social inequality leading to the demand for welfare provision.¹

While this “end of history” thesis may be observed to be true in many countries, this is certainly not the case in Singapore. What makes Singapore such an irrefutable counter-example is that, firstly, according to these “end of history” theories, Singapore should *especially* have become a liberal democracy since it has in abundance all the necessary conditions and prerequisites for the “transition”/“evolution.” Singapore’s economic success and development is indisputable internationally, which makes Singapore an especially visible and un-dismissable counter-example.

Singapore has outperformed all other Asian Newly Industrialising Economies (NIEs) and is an extremely successful late-capitalist (information) society. It has the highest average rate of GDP growth (9 per cent annually) in the world (Castells 1988, 1) and it is ranked as the world’s second freest economy (after Hong Kong). It has the highest foreign reserves per capita in the world (Paul 1992, 6) and a GNP that surpasses some Western European countries’ (Castells 1988, 1). For almost a decade, it has been the world’s busiest port and, until 2001, it boasted the world’s best airline.

This success was achieved through exposing itself to international competition. With no agriculture and a small domestic market, economic growth has been entirely dependent on international trade and investment. Despite having the world’s highest savings (Vogel 1989, 1049; Castells 1988, 3-7), its industrial production is wholly foreign owned. Because national survival (and government legitimacy) is tied to Singapore’s competitiveness internationally, industrial and political harmony becomes necessary for Singapore to be “one of the safest and most profitable locations in the world” (O’Leary and Coplin 1983; Lim and Pang 1991, 72). Singapore’s economy is so aligned with the interests of multi-national corporations that Singapore has been described as “an offshore centre for foreign capital” (Yoshihara 1989, 71) and “a stable and efficient vehicle for the Western exploitation of South-east Asia” (Mirza 1986, 73).

Socially, Singapore’s living standards are second only to Japan in Asian. With English as the first language in school and as the national working language, Singapore is deemed “soft-shelled” and highly vulnerable to Western influences. Living in a prosperous urban environment with high English literacy, Singaporeans are active media users with a high exposure to foreign media. Despite being the smallest population in Asia, it is the largest single-country market for Far East Economic Review and the second largest market for Asian Wall Street Journal (Lee 1988).

Yet, despite being so economically and socially developed, and despite its economy and society being so liberally exposed to international trends, Singapore

remains “authoritarian.” For economist Friedman, Singapore “has the forms of democracy but the reality is dictatorship” (in Paul 1992, 1). Hitchcock (1994, 10) considers it noteworthy that Singapore, “in many ways the most advanced country in the region after Japan,” is listed in the company of Vietnam, China, North Korea and Myanmar as states that do not endorse a Union of Civil Liberty.

Singapore is significant as a counter example also because, not only is it not a liberal democracy, it shows no sign of becoming one. Castells (1988, 78) observed that, “although clearly authoritarian, Singapore is not a dictatorship but a hegemonic state, in the Gramscian sense... it is based not simply on coercion, but also on consensus.” It is because the People’s Action Party (the PAP, Singapore’s one-party government) is based on hegemony rather than coercion that it is admired by other governments. Its ability to push through tough policies without incurring crippling political costs is envied by Taiwan and Hong Kong (De Bary 1998, 3). Its unique combination of openness and regulation is also praised and studied by Chinese Premiers Deng and Jiang (*Straits Times*, 13 July 1992). British PM Blair also highlighted Singapore as the best illustration of the parallel achievement on economic success and social cohesion (*Financial Times*, 10 November 1996). It is precisely because the PAP is hegemonic rather than authoritarian that Singapore is consistently ranked as the world’s top 5 countries for political stability and its current regime is described as being “likely to continue *indefinitely*” (O’Leary and Coplin 1983, 21). In other words, the end of history or the triumph of liberal democracy is nowhere in sight.

The third feature that makes Singapore a significant case is that it not only bypasses the liberal democracy trajectory but also unrepentantly initiates and proclaims as culturally legitimate its own cult of “Asian Values, Asian Democracy” (complete with admirers and fans such as Malaysia, China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar). The Asian Values (AV²) discourse not only criticises the inferiority and irrelevance of Western democracy but also the West’s representation of itself as democratic and all Others as un/pseudo-democratic. At the same time, by calling them “Asian Values,” the discourse acquires an aura of cultural legitimacy and regional solidarity against the West, while transforming the Singapore case into a model for an alternative trajectory that invites identification and imitation by other Asian nations.

Singapore’s significance can be appreciated when we consider most states accept the hegemony of (liberal/Western) democracy — whether by emulating it or justifying its absence. In Asia, Singapore could have easily followed Japan and S. Korea towards liberalism, or the Philippines and Thailand towards popular (radical) democracy. The difficulty and ambition of the “Asian Democracy” project should not be underestimated. Huntington (1991, 108) noted, “if he had wanted to, a political leader far less skilled than Lee Kwan Yew could have produced democracy in Singapore.”

If it is so difficult to resist the evolution towards liberal democracy, why does the Singapore government persist in doing so? What is the meaning and goal of the AV project? Through analysing government campaigns and popular discourse (in-depth interviews, jokes and rumours), I will identify the goals and strategies of the AV project, investigate its success or hegemony and finally, reflect on the “genuine” basis of the PAP’s hegemony and speculate on what would constitute moments of hegemonic crisis.

The Meaning of “Asian Values” and the Logic of One-Party Rule

Late-capitalism is supposed to produce contradictions that will trigger the transition to liberal democracy. These contradictions exist in Singapore as they do in other societies. Economic prosperity widened social inequality, deepened class faultlines, and provided an environment for the flourishing of liberal discourses. Materially comfortable and accustomed to consumerist choice in late-capitalism, middle-class citizens developed liberal inclinations and began to demand political choices (Rodan 1993; Kuo and Chen 1987, 369). At the same time, increasingly visible social stratification precipitated demands for state welfare to reduce income inequality Paul 1992, 8-10; Clammer 1985, 190).

Faced with such contradictions, a popular solution in the West was the “third way” (Giddens 1994), which involved the weakening of capitalist instincts and the affirmation of community (socialism/collectivism/communitarianism). In the US and Europe, there were different degrees of compromise between the left and the right. Under “new liberalism” (in Europe), these contradictions were partially resolved institutionally through welfarism (Hall 1986, 64-65). To a lesser extent, even the USA had to compromise its capitalistic logic by providing social security to its citizens. These liberal reconfigurations of the economy were also reflected in the reconfigurations of political structure. States generally conceded to the liberalisation of society and accepted liberal (plural) democracy as the preferred mode of political organisation, with little attempt to arrest individualism and to prevent social and ideological fragmentation.

This trajectory was unacceptable to many Asian (one-party) governments. To understand why many Asian governments are unwilling to blunt or compromise the capitalistic impulse and why they insist on keeping liberalism at bay, we have to understand the logic behind the maintenance of one-party rule in Asia.

Government legitimacy in many Asian one-party democracies is based upon economic growth³, which is fuelled by capitalistic expansion. To sustain economic growth and legitimacy, governments must be able to attract foreign investments through being the world’s freest economies — i.e., being the most business-friendly economies with the least worker protection and the weakest labour unions. They must be able to present themselves as being the economies where the logic of capitalism runs purest. As such, many Asian one-party governments find the “third way” or any weakening/compromise of the capitalist logic unacceptable.

Additionally, any subscription to welfarist ideologies could promote liberal values since individuals are deemed to have the right to make demands on the state. Such liberalisation, if unchecked, could over-legitimise individualism and, carried over to the field of politics, set the stage for ideological fragmentation.

This brings us to another logic of one-party rule: single party governments can only legitimately claim to represent a consensual nation since an ideologically fragmented nation would require multi-party representation. Ideological fragmentation must be averted at all costs, so that the single ruling party is seen as the nation’s only option.

To protect its one-party rule against threats of liberalisation and welfarism, the PAP labelled these tendencies as dangerous “Western” values, the antidote to which

was the “Asianisation” of society, where communitarianism is promoted as an alternative to welfarism and plural/liberal democracy.

“Asian capitalism”, or what is elsewhere called “old liberalism” (Hall 1986, 61-64), is the preferred option. Competition and social inequality continue to be legitimised by meritocracy, and social welfare is privatised and administered through (ethnic) communities, not through the state. Within the AV discourse, individuals, families and (ethnic) communities should be self-reliant and place nation above self. Rather than “selfishly” making demands on society/state, good Asians should provide for their needy family/community members. In China, Taiwan and Singapore, communitarianism has been mobilised to legitimise “Parents Maintenance Bills,” where working children are obligated to support their aged, retired parents. In Singapore, “community” is stretched beyond family to include ethnic community: a small portion is deducted from an employee’s monthly salary for donation to his/her ethnic “community self-help organisations” (Chua 1995, 34).

Communitarianism is also mobilised against ideological pluralism in support of “Asian (one-party) Democracy.” By emphasising consensus over conflict, political contestation and “opposition for the sake of opposition” — an unspoken democratic value — are represented as anti-harmony and unsuited for an Asian society. Communitarianism encourages citizens, as good Asians, to privatise and subordinate their individualism/difference, and to communitarianly put national interests (as defined by the PAP) above self. In this way, ideological alternatives are de-legitimised and ideological fragmentation averted.

Communitarianism de-legitimises counter-capitalistic (welfarism) and counter-authoritarian (democratic) values and enables the re-amalgamation of capitalism with authoritarianism through recasting capitalism and authoritarianism as “Asian Capitalism” and “Asian Democracy” respectively. Through AV, capitalism and authoritarianism become mutually reinforcing: authoritarianism protects capitalism by enabling it to be un-compromised by welfarist demands, while capitalistic success “protects” and provides economic legitimacy for authoritarian governments.

There are some implications and residual questions when AV is understood as an ideological response to contradictions in late-capitalism, rather than as a set of cultural values. Firstly, the fact that governments feel the need to “Asianise” their citizens exposes the myth of communitarian Asia (Pye and Pye 1985; De Bary 1998). In fact, “Asian values” were so clearly absent in Singapore society that they had to be imported. In 1982, 8 foreign Confucian scholars were invited to design a school curriculum (Chua 1995, 159; Hill and Lian 1995, 202) after local (Buddhist) monks’ proposals were criticised for being “unpractical” and for failing to select “desirable national values” (Kuah 1991, 32). Perhaps the best evidence of anti-community values is the phenomenon of the sharp contrast between clean private toilets and dirty public toilets. In the 1990s, the Singapore government was so frustrated by citizens’ lack of civic-mindedness that it launched a “Keep Public Toilets Clean Campaign.”

Additionally, the AV project encouraged only certain types of communities — “safe” communities that did not attempt to usurp the government’s credibility as the only (legitimate) representative of *national* interest. Racial⁴ identification was encouraged until racial groups began to contest the government. Consequently, the project to Confucianise citizens was abandoned in the late 1980s when the government realised that its campaigns over-legitimated race as a source of coun-

ter-ideology (Cf. Hill and Lian 1995, 205-206; Chua 1995, 31-32; Tamney 1996, 35). Such politics of racial homogenisation of particular groups (e.g., through the "Speak Mandarin Campaign") and differentiation (into "Chinese," "Malay" and "Indian") echo the British colonial strategy of "divide and rule". Rather than being directed towards ideological contestation, such "communitarianism" strove to contain dissent through racialising citizens by constituting them as ethnic — thus subjective and partial — individuals in multi-racial Singapore.

Secondly, seeing AV as an ideological response to social contradictions help us understand why its substantive meaning is necessarily confusing and contradictory. To some extent, the ideological contradiction within AV mirrors the impossibility of combining capitalism with community: "if you drive the notion of enterprise far enough, you undermine any sense of tradition, or organic belongingness to society" (Hall in Tamney 1996, 184). As an attempt to ideologically unite society without compromising capitalism, AV must simultaneously encourage communitarianism (community before self) without discouraging competition (self before others). It is vital to remember that AV was invoked to deal with the side effects of late-capitalism — at no point does it discourage or detract from the dominant ideology of capitalist development or encourage citizens to prioritise community over competition. It is precisely because communitarianism is opposite to competitiveness that it serves as a useful supplement to repair and enable the continued operation of the dominant ideology of meritocratic competition. It aims to make capitalism more caring and the nation more cohesive.

Thus, rather than understanding "Asian Values" as either communitarianism or Confucianism, I would argue that it is more effectively understood as consisting of an umbrella dominant ideology of Confucian meritocratic competition with a sub-dominant ideology of communitarianism. The dominant ideology of Confucianism fuels capitalist development by motivating subjects to compete and raise themselves over others within the social hierarchy, thereby earning itself the label of the "Asian (Protestant) Work Ethic." Confucianism's emphasis on competition makes it *anti-community*, not unlike market liberalism, and it comes close to Thatcher's idealisation of liberal capitalism: "there is no such thing as society, there are only individual men and women and their families."⁵

Confucianism can be considered communitarian if the family *is* the community. Besides the absence of civic-mindedness indicated by the anecdotal evidence of clean private toilets and dirty public toilets, Liang (in De Bary 1998, 140-141) also remarked that China lacked group life and attempted to add a sixth Confucian relationship to promote group relations — the only "non-hierarchical" Confucian relation. Confucianism guides relationship with *immediate*, not *imagined* others. Confucian subjects are not exhorted to include unrelated others. I would argue that it is in fact vital that Confucian groups are exclusionary; it may be difficult otherwise for subjects to feel competitive with each other. Confucian subjects feel no lateral solidarity, which Anderson identifies as a prerequisite for the development of a sense of *imagined* community. Given this considerable difference between Confucianism and communitarianism, we can see that its conflation in the myth of communitarian Asia is an ideological effect that is crucially sustained by a refusal to distinguish between family ties and community ties.

Thirdly, and finally, the persuasiveness of AV is necessarily tied to economics. Not only is communitarianism subordinated to the dominant ideology of competi-

tion, it is itself an economic argument, since the superiority of communitarianism and Asian (consensual) Democracy is “proven” by miraculous economic performance (Lodge and Vogel 1987). This has significant implications for its effectiveness: of what use is it during an economic crisis, when the government most needs it?

De-legitimising Dissent: A Fragile Nation and Its Dangerous Citizens⁶

Over the decades of PAP rule, strategies of maintaining one-party dominance have shifted. Aware that it can no longer rely on coercion or censorship (if Singapore is to remain a media hub), the PAP sought a new strategy for securing ideological dominance in an age of pluralism. In seeking a new strategy for a new hegemony, Lee Kwan Yew, Singapore’s first PM, drew inspiration from the Vatican:

The Vatican maintains Catholic unity around the world by clearly communicating its official or doctrinal position... Catholics may read other views ... but they make a distinction between the official view and the other views. Whether or not they accept the official view is a different and separate matter. In the same way, Asian governments will require the official view to be carried in the media, along with other views over which they have no control (Lee 1998).

Instead of keeping out alternative opinions, the PAP aimed to keep the official voice above the din of democracy. This was to be achieved through institutionalising party values as a normative “middleground.” By establishing a moral centre that defines what is moral/immoral, legitimate/illegitimate or Asian/Western, dissenting opinions need no longer be censored. They can be subordinated to the Asian goal of (consensual) nation building, allowing the PAP to achieve pluralism without fragmentation. The moral centre easily achieves this because it does not demand citizens’ identification, merely their deference. Lee acknowledged the rhetorical nature of the centre: it does not matter if citizens identify with official opinion, it is sufficient that citizens use/reproduce it as a frame of reference in interpersonal life, that it constitutes the “middleground” in which social interaction takes place.

While it may be relatively easy to devise and conceptualise national ideologies, it is not always easy to ensure their relevance or centrality to citizens’ everyday life. It is therefore important to consider not only the conceptualisation of AV but also its materialisation.

AV is disseminated and made relevant to citizens’ everyday life through conflating party survival with national survival. The persuasiveness of “Asian Capitalism” and “Asian Democracy” depends crucially on the PAP’s ability to sustain the myth that Singapore needs the PAP and its (Asian) values to survive (economically), and that there are no alternatives. This is a meta-myth that is sustained by other myths, such as the construction of Singapore as a fragile nation threatened by its citizens. Together, these sub-myths establish the PAP as the guardian of the Singapore nation against all sorts of threats. With the increasing realisation that the “West” is within and inevitable, that Singaporeans are indelibly Westernised — a PAP minister recalled a British Army major praising Singaporeans as a “well-colonised people” (in Ang and Stratton 1997) — the PAP not only has to protect the Singapore nation from the dangerous West but also protect Singapore from Singaporeans.

Interpellating Citizens as Cultural Soldiers: The Fragile Nation and the Singapore Dream

Many factors conspire to make the imagination of a Singaporean nation difficult. Singapore was and remains an immigrant society without a stable community. Today, 25 per cent of the workforce is foreign, while the problem of the “brain drain” (the emigration of local talents) persists. The fact that even ministers are willing to migrate “if the price is right” makes the government wonder whether economic recessions would trigger mass migration. As an island of immigrants from various parts of Asia, it is difficult for Singapore to be imagined as a culturally homogenous nation. Regional geo-politics also makes it impossible for Singapore to claim “Malay” values (because of the local Chinese majority) or “Chinese values” (because of importance of Malaysia in the immediate region).⁷

These historical and geo-political factors are used to sustain the myth of the fragile nation. In every official information booklet on Singapore, Singapore is described as a small English-speaking multiracial city-state with no natural resources. Locally, this connotes that Singapore is highly susceptible to racial unrests, global economic trends and Western values. Historical accounts of Singapore’s birth as a nation typically recall how independence, granted overnight, came as a shock in 1965. Even when freed from colonial rule, independence had been unimaginable, and Singapore’s leaders tried to avoid it through a merger with Malaysia. These geographical and historical accounts emphasise the infirm boundary and status of Singapore as a nation-state and heighten the sense of Singapore’s fragility as a nation.

The most homogenous representation of nation that the PAP could conceive of was a multi-racial model based on three homogenised ethnicities — a model left over from the colonial “divide and rule” policy. This imagination of nation emphasises cultural fragmentation rather than national unity represents one out of a series of attempts to “escape ... its hybrid fate, the perceived curse of its impurity” (Ang and Stratton 1997, 12-14) and “pollution” (Clammer 1985, 165). Unable to imagine itself as an *organic* nation with a homogenous culture, Singapore constructs its identity upon its lack. It sees itself as a *problematic* country whose national identity is projected into the future. Rather than being a proud and self-confident nation, Singapore exists only through psychosis, as an existentially anxious nation (that awaits the salvation provided by the PAP).

The sense of national fragility is heightened through the staging of media spectacles (Birch 1993; Clammer 1985, 27), which enables leaders to present themselves as possessing the means of resolving them. Such doomsday “scenarios” — a pet word of the current PM Goh — create “an atmosphere of psychosis” (Regnier 1991, 230) that facilitates citizens’ acceptance of government policies. According to one minister, “one of the things we can do to get a little further down the road a little faster is to raise the spectre of total disaster as the alternative... sooner or later they [the citizens] will change” (Betts in Hill and Lian 1995, 34). This makes the myth of the fragile nation an excellent tool for the interpellation of citizens as soldiers in the total — military, economic, social, civil and psychological — defence of Singapore.⁸

Singapore’s fragility finds a remedy in the PAP’s capabilities in leading the nation. Historically, throughout various political upheavals, Lee Kwan Yew has been mythologised as “the Father of Singapore.” It was he who took on the burden of

independence and he is a hero without whom there would be no Singapore. Furthermore, PAP maintains an impeccable image of incorruptibility and dependability. The PAP's decades of successful economic leadership is used to "prove" that it is a moral and efficient party (as opposed to the dishonest opposition) and thus it is Singapore's only option. In this way, the PAP installs itself as the national guardian and its (Asian) values are the core/"shared values" upon which national survival depends.

Despite Singapore's fragility, citizens are encouraged to dream the Singapore dream (of material prosperity) and to become a stakeholder. The Singapore Dream, by fusing personal desire and national goals, makes the PAP and its AV even more essential to national survival. By encouraging citizens to dream a dream that only the PAP can bring to fruition, authoritarianism (AD) is rendered tolerable, even necessary.

Over generations, PAP's strategies for ensuring citizen's economic satisfaction have shifted. First-generation leaders primarily secured economic legitimacy through material prosperity during the early boom years. Second-generation leaders are currently faced with a maturing economy and a stratified society, which is one where the "Singapore Dream" is no longer relevant or accessible to all its members. As such, economic satisfaction has increasingly to be achieved ideologically; regardless of economic performance, citizens must be persuaded that the PAP is Singapore's best/only option (for economic survival). The hegemonic challenge then is to keep the Dream alive for all, since it is *belief* in the Dream, rather than its achievement, that is the foundation for the PAP's economic legitimacy.

For those lacking the qualifications to dream for themselves, the Dream is sustained by a belief in meritocracy. Many older citizens see the Dream as personally irrelevant but hope that their children might attain it. Government scholarships are cited as proof that in Singapore, hard work is justly rewarded. This meritocratic myth is perpetuated through the constant media showcasing working-class students being awarded scholarships. Additionally, the government embarks on campaigns to encourage citizens to lower their expectations ("be pragmatic"). Citizens do not dream the Dream unless they know they have the qualifications to achieve it.

For middle-class citizens accustomed to prosperity and desirous of social/personal freedom — those citizens who are overqualified to dream the Dream — the challenge for the government is to prolong the relevance and primacy of economic over all other goals. The ceiling for what constitutes economic necessity ("bread and butter issues") is raised, thereby delaying the moment when non-basic (i.e., non-economic) dreams become relevant. Democracy becomes a distant goal to be contemplated only when national survival is finally secured.

De-legitimising Dissent: Good Citizens, Dangerous Citizens

Besides gaining consent to the relevance of AV for economic goals, threats to ideological unity must also be managed. While first-generation PAP leaders largely relied on coercion, this "administrative state" style has become obsolete and second-generation leaders have sought to manage dissent ideologically through AV.

Depending on the particular formulation of AV, dissent has been de-legitimised in different ways. The earlier multiracial formulations discouraged participation

and aimed at privatising dissent, but the later communitarian versions have sought to subordinate dissent by specifying a middleground (moral consensus), as defined by the PAP, within which political contestation occur.

Multiracial Formulations of Asian Values and the Privatisation of Dissent

Multiracial discourses constructed citizens as dangerous (partial and self-interested) subjects and de-legitimise the credibility of their opinion, so as to secure their complicity to self-censorship. Should citizens not self-censor their biased opinions, multiracial AV also legitimised the delimitation of their access to the public sphere by partitioning spheres of competencies, limiting public sphere access to the objective “expert” government.

Through the Bilingualism programme and the Religious Knowledge curriculum, citizens were constituted as subjects who were intrinsically flawed, who could transcend their racial (biological) bias within a multiracial Singapore. Their entrance into the public sphere (or the public dissemination of their racially coloured opinions) was deemed likely to produce communal politics and endanger multiracial harmony. Citizens were constantly reminded that they are a threat to the fragile multiracial nation and encouraged to privatise their (ethnocentric) dissent.

The racial identification of subjects enabled the demarcation of spheres of competences. Through constructing (subjective, biased) lay citizens as opposed to the (objective, neutral) expert government, AV legitimised the limitation of public sphere participation to expert citizens. OB (out-of bounds) markers were used in the 1980s to delimit what constituted appropriate topics and styles of public discussion. A distinction was also made between civic and civil society, where the focus shifted away from issues of culture and politics to civics and municipal issues. Civil society — society that is relatively autonomous from the state — is discouraged in favour of civic society. What is achieved with this glide from civil to civic, as with OB makers and racialisation, is the subordination of inferior, biased civilians to objective expert politicians. The government says clearly that politics is for politicians and that if citizens want to “politick,” they should join political parties.

Although AV originally aimed to de-legitimise “Western” dreams, it also de-legitimises “Eastern” dreams. Any dreams that detract from official visions can be dismissed as too “Westernised” (dreams that are dreamt by “bananas”, who are yellow outside, white inside) or “racially chauvinistic.”⁹ This strategy is used against popular opposition politicians during elections. Yet, such labels are efficacious only if citizens believe that the opposition is a genuine national threat. Much ideological work has to be done outside elections to saturate the label with symbolism and reality so that it strikes sufficient fear in citizens’ heart to secure their consent to coercion of the opposition. To this effect, the daily project of representing “racial” citizens as dangerously biased, and reminding citizens of the historical reality of racial riots, is crucial in setting the scene and inducing latent fears which can then be stoked during elections to legitimise coercion.

While multiracial AV was effective in de-legitimising dissent, it also produced the side effects of (racially) fragmenting the nation. It also over-racialised citizens, to such an extent that Singaporean Chinese became more Chinese than China nationals (Benjamin 1976, 121-129; *Straits Times* 15 November 1998). It tended to over-

legitimate race and religion as sources of counter-hegemonic discourse, and encourage the emergence of ethnic groups that contested the government.

Furthermore, these two strategies of de-legitimising dissent can work insofar as citizen accepts both the illegitimacy of their opinions and that they are indeed too racially flawed to be worthy of public participation. Rather than neutralising or subordinating dissent, these two strategies rely on citizens' willingness to privatise their dissent. Where social faultlines have become so developed that it is no longer possible to keep them out of the public sphere, new strategies of dissent management must be found — strategies that do not repress or deprive dissent of publicity, but that contain dissent *within* the public sphere.

"Asian values" as "Shared values" — the Subordination of Dissent

Many scholars observe that some formulations of AV were easier to materialise than others. In particular, it is argued that the earlier multiracial formulations were more easily institutionalised than more recent discourse of "Shared Values," whose secular, national (non-ethnic) features - the moral injunction of communitarianism - de-links it from popular identities. For these scholars, "Shared Values" has been described as "a discursive artefact" (Chua 1995, 33), a disembodied, un-institutionalised ideology (Clammer 1993, 42), and as a pure ideological project (Hill and Lian 1995, 219).

I would argue to the contrary that "Shared Values" is indeed institutionalised, although it is grafted onto sites that are not usually identified as "institutions." To a large extent, Lee's Vatican-inspired "middleground" or moral centre strategy crystallises the underlying logic and goal of AV. I would argue that the success of AV should not to be measured by behavioural changes (brought about by administrative institutions) — that was the strategy and goal of the first generation "administrative state" phase of PAP governance (Chan 1985, 74). Rather, Lee clearly asserted that it would suffice that AV serve as a strong normative centre ("preferred reading") that alternatives have to contend with, and thus reproduce even as they seek to challenge it. The success of AV lies not in the securing of identification but rhetorical compliance (in public). This is an effect that is effectively achieved through the construction of the social gaze of an imagined moral majority that citizens internalise and by means of which they discipline themselves.

"Shared Values" emphasises national unity based upon secular supra-ethnic values of communitarianism. Within the "Shared Values" discourse, subjects can no longer be discredited as intrinsically/racially flawed and be barred from publicly disseminating their views. Dissent can no longer be managed through privatisation, but has to be contained at the level of the public sphere, because within the "Shared Values" discourse subjects are constituted as communitarian Asian citizens with an active interest in, and concern for, society. The meaning of political participation is transformed from a threatening act of (racial) egoism or chauvinism to a natural extension of citizen's care for society. No longer able to dismiss dissent as "chauvinist," new strategies of managing the SV subject must be found.

The "Shared Values" project attempted to de-legitimise dissent by encouraging responsible communitarian behaviour. Through reminders of national duties (i.e., society's expectations or moral gaze), citizens are encouraged to conform and privatise/silence their selfish demands on society. Should citizens insist on publicis-

ing their demands, the discourse of communitarianism represents such dissent as the voice of the “vocal minority” and subordinates it to the voice of a constructed “silent/moral Asian majority.”

The “Shared Values” project de-legitimises dissent by emphasising consensus over contention. As communitarian “Asians,” citizens may speak but should not insist, and should communitarianly defer/subordinate themselves to the wishes of the silent/moral majority (a group that only the PAP has the power to represent). “Opposition for the sake of opposition” — a democratic value — is seen as anti-harmony and anti-Asian, and its proponents are seen as “rebels without a cause.”

“Shared values” is more than an ideological project; it makes possible the emergence of new media organisations and journalistic practices under the banner of “Asian journalism.” To secure the co-operation of the media, many Asian governments (Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia) invited the media to play a “nation-building” role rather than a (“Western”) fourth estate role. In the name of Asian journalism, new Asian TV channels have been launched to provide news from an “Asian” perspective, and the nature of “Asian journalism” has been hotly debated in Singapore.

One such debate took place between Singapore’s main English daily, the *Straits Times* (ST), and Singapore’s main Chinese daily, the *Zaobao* (ZB). ZB charged ST with opposing the government for the sake of opposition (ST 21 December 1996), adding that ZB does not see the government as a necessary evil and “do[es] not suffer from a psychological burden of needing to be critical to be seen as credible or professional.” ST justified its critical stance by arguing that it provides what the people want, retorting further that “a patriotic press is not an uncritical press” (Fernandez and Leong 1995). The influence of the “Shared Values” discourse is clear here: its promotion of consensus over conflict and the media’s nation-building role encourage the conflation of love for nation with love for government/party — a position ZB occupies — and overshadows the more pertinent question of whether investigate journalism also benefits society.

The weakness of this strategy is that it is completely reliant on citizens’ and the media’s willingness to co-operate, without the state being able to punish non-conformity. The only “punishment” that could be levied upon non-conforming citizens is “shaming,” but this is difficult to implement without the keen and active participation of a genuine (rather than constructed) moral majority.

A more coercive strategy is the trivialisation/subordination of dissent as the voice of the “vocal minority” rather than as the (representative) voice of the silent majority. The Singapore21 is a project that employs many sophisticated strategies for containing dissent. The Singapore21 project aims to rally citizens to the PAP’s vision for Singapore in the twenty-first century. It is a clear attempt by the PAP to secure a new consensus, and to rally the citizens behind an updated Singapore dream.

Dissent is de-legitimised through several strategies. Firstly, clashes in opinions and values are framed as dilemmas. For example, the demand for a less competitive and more democratic lifestyle is pitted against the worry of official sympathisers that Singapore will lose its competitiveness internationally if it slows down. Furthermore, these “opposite” camps are often framed into an either/or dilemma, where economic prosperity and democracy are seen as mutually exclusive rather than mutually enhancing.

Secondly, the PAP appoints itself as a neutral arbitrator who rules in favour of the majority. However, pro-democracy voices are typically represented as voices of the “vocal minority” to be pitted against the concerns of the “silent/moral Asian majority.” The “reality” of this “silent majority” is made real through statistical surveys, where the weight of the middle/norm is most convincingly captured with visuals of bell curves and charts (cf. Foucault 1979; Burchell et al 1991).

Finally, the demands of the vocal minority are also presented as idealistic and unviable, while the silent majority’s preferences are seen as commonsensical/reasonable and more “middleground.” The vocal minority may also be chastised for failing to offer “constructive criticism,” which implies that their participation is desired only if it is constructive towards the goal of the majority.

The various formulations of AV sought to subjectify citizens — to represent them as subjective, dangerously partial and individualistic (anti-community). Depending on the particular AV formulations, the source of dangerous individualism may be traced genetically/biologically to race, culturally to religion or, more straightforwardly, secularly to anti-communitarianism.

What such subjectification (or rendering subjective/partial) of citizens achieve is the subordination of individuals to society and the establishment of a moral, almost neo-Confucian, hierarchy, where citizens are reminded that they are “parts” within a bigger whole, that they are lay citizens as opposed to qualified expert politicians. Such subjectification also promotes the formation of moral (Asian) subjects as opposed to ethical (liberal) subjects (cf. Rose 1996, Foucault 1979). These are subjects who are governed not by personal ethical belief or conviction but by moral expectations and the society’s gaze. While anti-smoking advertisements in many societies attempt to convince smokers of the ills of smoking, an anti-smoking advertisement in Singapore featured a sexy girl looking into the camera and saying, “I wouldn’t kiss a chimney.” The consequence of such subjectification strategies is that (male) subjects, rather than quitting, smoke in selective contexts (e.g., not in the presence of women they want to impress). Similarly, the media often liken Singaporeans visiting Malaysia to “birds out of a cage,” indicating that the good citizen’s behaviour is contextually dependent on the presence of a moral community and its gaze.

Such subjectification legitimises the PAP government as the only impartial supra-ethnic, supra-factional agency that can protect the Singapore nation from Singaporeans and legitimises many discursive and material obstacles to citizens’ participation in the public sphere. Indeed, public sphere participation appears to be reserved only for ideal citizens. What is interesting in Singapore’s case is that “the ideal Singaporean citizen” cannot exist. Theoretically, the unification/installation of a single (Habermasian) public sphere is often criticised by feminists and other critiques to exclude *certain* race, gender and class groups (cf. Fraser 1992). In multiracial Singapore, the ideal citizen excludes *all* citizens since Singaporeans cannot be good citizens without being racial(ised), i.e., without being racially biased, dangerous citizens threatening to a fragile nation. Through de-legitimising non-abstract, local (ethnic) inflexions of citizenship, the Singapore public sphere is made a safe place where racial, class, gender and other dangerous politics of difference (“vocal minorities”) cannot find voice.

Contrary to Birch’s (1993) thesis, I would argue that AV makes for the subordination rather than the incorporation of dissent. Citizens often feel so un-con-

sulted that they challenge the government to name a policy where it had recapitulated on a decision because of popular opinion. Yet, its apparent “tolerance” of pluralism and faithfulness to the will of the (silent/moral) majority lends the PAP government an aura of democracy, and allows the PAP to legitimately proclaim itself as not only the guardian of multi-racial harmony, but also the guardian of democracy and the interests of a consensual nation.

To maintain contemporary one-party dominance, the PAP sought to construct a normative centre — one where the PAP and its values are seen as necessary for the survival of Singapore, and where alternatives are perceived as unviable. This embedding of AV into society’s gaze, rather than through administrative policies, allows authoritarianism to be inserted organically into personal and inter-personal life, enabling hard governmental authoritarianism to soften into societal/popular authoritarianism. The institutionalisation of AV as a moral centre sufficiently performs what Perlmutter (1981, 174-179) observes as a necessary feature of successful ideological authoritarianism. For him, the success of authoritarian states in evolving into ideological one-party states depend on whether they can turn ideology into successful organisational and political arrangements *in all aspects of citizens’ life*. By ensuring that dominant ideologies that may be privately meaningless remain central/relevant in the organisation of citizens’ everyday life, AV is an ideology par excellence for the perpetuation of one-party ideological dominance because it allows for one-party hegemony to be achieved, as Lee insightfully points out, not through identification or belief but through rhetorical compliance.

The Nature of PAP Hegemony

Through fieldwork and in-depth interviews, my sense of the field is that citizens hardly ever speak out in support of government policies or values, and that most have complaints towards the state. While this may be dismissed as a “natural” or common phenomenon, it can also be taken as an indication of functioning hegemony, because it indicates that certain ways of life have become so taken for granted that their side effects are seen simply as “side effects” rather than “fundamental problems”, and are simply tolerated as a necessary inconvenience.

This brings us to the question — what is hegemony? Is hegemony indicated by identification rather than habitual acceptance, tolerance or even compliance? Is hegemony indicated by the acceptance of official attitudes or the reproduction, willing or unwilling, of official frames or criteria that influences what is considered relevant or irrelevant/unthinkable?

I would argue that reality of hegemony is best indicated by how, despite dissatisfactions, citizens see the PAP as Singapore’s only option and perceive there to be no viable alternatives. This is in line with Leys’ argument (1990, 127) that “for an ideology to become hegemonic, it is not necessary that it is loved; it is merely necessary that it have no serious rival.” If this is so, the extent of a government’s hegemonic success may be glimpsed from the intensity/severity of complaints, because they indicate how, despite acute awareness of problems (or “side effects”), alternatives remain unthinkable.

The nature of PAP’s hegemony is highly complex and multi-faceted. Citizens may accept/tolerate authority, not because they believe in “consensual politics”, but because they consider the PAP to be the least-worst package deal. Their rea-

sons for accepting/tolerating the government vary over a wide range: from the coercive (repression), ideologically coercive (paranoia, shaming), to the consensual (economic satisfaction, belief in communitarianism). As such, the PAP's hegemony is not one where there is total consent, but one where the government successfully secures citizens' co-operation in subordinating dissent. Such consent to coercion is secured through convincing citizens that authoritarianism is necessary for economic growth, and that it is worthwhile to exchange political freedom for economic prosperity.

Hegemony on "Asian Democracy"

Except for one interviewee (out of 32) who saw the opposition as "traitorous," no one spoke up against the idea of democracy or political contestation. Especially among younger interviewees, democracy and political contestation was definitely an imaginable, "thinkable", and even attractive ideology. Indeed, many young interviewees are not persuaded that their opinions are illegitimate (that they are ethnically biased "bananas" or "inadequate Malays"). They actively look for alternative information (rumours, jokes, tabloids) to bolster the credibility of their opinions, and develop sophisticated strategies (of "self-belittling") to negotiate talk (about "sensitive topics") in public. In the media, well-educated young citizens often challenge "Asian Democracy" or "consensual politics" and show a preference for a consultative consensus, where the government follows rather than leads popular opinion. Tired of having their suggestions disappear into a "feedback blackhole," these citizens demand pre-policy consultation.

Despite this seemingly strong support, especially from young citizens, for counter-authoritarian values, their clamour for more political space is often constrained, firstly, by their acceptance of government stipulated limits. Rather than challenging "who defines what is legitimate/illegitimate," many (especially among the less-educated coffee shoppers) choose to privatise their dissent, and address their dissatisfactions to semi-public audiences (such as in the coffee shops).

Secondly and more importantly, the desire for democracy is often compromised/subordinated or postponed in deference to the goal of economic prosperity.¹⁰ There are two opposite camps that share this position. Older citizens, especially pre-state immigrant citizens, consider political contestation relevant only when there isn't "enough to fill the stomach." When there is no economic suffering, citizens, as laymen, should "leave politics to the politicians." They are aware of the authoritarianism of the PAP, but argue that it is an irrelevance, since the PAP is doing a good job: "The way the government is controlling finance is the best in Southeast Asia.... Our politicians shoot down opposition with lawsuits ... Let's not talk about this ... we are able to build up so much because we have good clean government."

A second camp similarly believes in the current irrelevance of political contestation, but because political contestation or democracy is deemed as something which will become relevant only when a minimal level of material security has been achieved.

While both groups have opposite beliefs about when democracy or political contestation is relevant — during economic suffering or prosperity — what is important is that both groups accept that the moment is not *now*. For both groups, democracy is de-legitimised/subordinated, even if temporarily, to the goal of economic prosperity.

Indeed, looking closer at the transcripts of interviews with members of these two groups, there is some evidence that the “right” moment for political contestation will never arrive. During the Asian economic crisis, not only was the PAP’s legitimacy un-dented, it even managed, to Hong Kong’s envy, to rally citizens to “tighten [their] belts” and accept harsh policies aimed at restructuring the economy. The consensus that the PAP has done a “good job” throughout its four decades in power is unchallenged. Even the opposition accepts this, preferring to criticise the *side effects* rather than the ideology or the performance as a whole. In Singapore, opposition parties aspire to become a supplementary party, not the dominant party. The notion of the opposition ever being able to form a government remains unimaginable to citizens, indicating that as an ideological construct, “no viable alternatives” has secured complete consent.

Neither would the “right” moment arrive when there is enough economic prosperity. This is because the PM’s provides an endless supply of ever higher, just out-of-reach economic vision for Singapore, thereby raising the criteria of what constitutes the “minimal” standard of living¹¹ beyond which non-economic goals like democracy become relevant. The relevance of democracy is also postponed indefinitely through the encouragement of status competition. This is perhaps the best way to ensure that citizens will never be contented with whatever material success they achieve and that there will never be a right time for the consideration/relevance of democracy.

Hegemony on Asian Capitalism

A recurring theme throughout fieldwork was the presence of a strong normative centre (“the rigid path”) that exerts pressures on citizens to succeed competitively and materially (rather than communitarianly). Every interviewee spoke out about the ills of being “too materialistic”, even while trying to justify their own participation in the competition for material rewards. Against the wishes of many citizens, the centrality and dominance of the PAP’s Confucian work ethic and economic ideology (the Singapore Dream) continues to be reproduced. They serve as frames through which citizens make sense of how society perceives them — whether as successful or not — and as a standard against which failure must be justified. Clearly, the “Asian Capitalism” values of meritocratic competition and material success have been hegemonic through the imagined/internalised gaze of society.

If one of the indicators of hegemony is how, despite severe dissatisfactions, citizens continue to tolerate a way of life without alternatives being thinkable, then Asian Capitalism is highly hegemonic or taken for granted. Many young citizens complained that there is a “rigid path” in Singapore society that everyone is expected to follow for the achievement of material success. Interviewees complain that this “rigid path” allows “no second chance” and is full of “invisible pressures,” leaving one “no room to breathe.”

What is stifled is not merely personal and social liberty but also one’s human nature. Jokes about Singaporeans inevitably have as a punchline the stereotype of Singaporeans who are so used to following government instructions that they lose their human nature: “Two men and a woman are marooned on an island. If they were British, the two men would share each other. If they were French, the two

men would share the woman. What would they do if they were Singaporeans? Answer: Wait for instructions."

Many interviewees thought it hypocritical, "unnatural" and against human nature to ban Singlish ("bastardised English") since "even judges and lawyers talk like that." Another interviewee was irritated that citizens were not allowed to express their human emotions: "Why are we always discussing how to cope with and welcome foreign talents? Of course, it is hoped that we will welcome them, but it is human nature, if they are here to snatch your rice bowl, you will be unhappy!"

The intensity of citizens' exasperation with what they see as unreasonable government regulations is best glimpsed by a joke. Citizens claim they would not be surprised if pigeons were fined for shitting on the streets. This indicates that citizens have given up trying to understand the government's justifications for its actions, they will simply obey its incomprehensible demands.

Another indication of how hegemonic Asian Capitalistic values of competition and material achievement are is citizens' rationalisations of the negative effects of "kiasuism" (over-competitiveness). All interviewees were aware of "kiasuism" and struggled to distinguish between good/bad/"super-hyper" kiasuism. Such rationalisations allow citizens to see themselves as not being ugly Singaporeans: as individuals who compete for socially meaningful but personally meaningless success, as individuals who have "sold out." Such rationalisations indicate how deeply hegemonic the dominant ideology is. Despite its inconveniences, and the meaninglessness of the dominant ideological values of competition, interviewees struggle to keep to them, considering them as evil but *necessary*.

Asian Capitalism appears to be more hegemonic than Asian Democracy. Asian Democracy did not succeed in de-legitimising counter-authoritarian (democratic) values; it only succeeded in postponing their realisation. Asian Capitalism, on the other hand, successfully renders counter-capitalistic ideologies (welfarism) as unthinkable and undesirable. Without exception, all interviewees consider welfarism irrelevant for the present and for *all time*.

Welfarism would never become relevant insofar as it is deemed as an inferior system that generates crises they "witnessed" in media coverage of Thatcherite Britain. These images of welfarism are accompanied by very deep-seated misunderstandings about how welfarism works. Each time I return to Singapore, the extent to which citizens, even those politically aware social science graduates, could so easily dismiss welfarism never fail to surprise me, no matter how I try to prepare myself for it. A typical response from these graduates is: "how can we afford health and education if we pay 50% tax?" In the coffee shops, welfarism is not even thinkable. The coffee shop slogan, "it's better to die than to go to the hospital" (hospitalisation bills can "kill"), protests the costs of health care without demanding state assistance. The un-thinkability of welfarism is a testimony of the PAP's ideological success. Despite the PAP portraying itself as a loving father/guardian, the thought that the PAP should provide for its obedient and "beloved" children remains unthinkable.

Welfarist values cannot secure hegemony insofar as citizens perceive the system to be meritocratic and that failures are explained individually (especially morally, e.g., "laziness") rather than structurally. Among all 32 interviewees, the he-

gemony of meritocratic beliefs of self-reliance and fair distribution is unchallenged: *citizens believe they must be self-reliant and upgrade their skills if they want a better material life*. Even those who criticise meritocracy do so without rejecting it. They criticise its implementation without criticising its principles. In fact, their criticisms of the imperfect functioning of meritocracy are often “constructive” and useful in assisting the government to ensure genuine meritocracy.

Welfarist values also cannot secure hegemony insofar citizens are interpellated into the web of status competition, and aspire to raise their material situation above that of others. That capitalism is fuelled by inter-personal competition has unique implications for what constitute status symbols. “Asian Capitalism” is characterised by high investment and high savings (unlike Western capitalism’s high investment and high spending). While needing to display material wealth, status items must both be costly (high spending) and wealth generating (high investment/savings). Not surprisingly, the status symbols in Singapore are the 5Cs (car, condominium, career, cash, credit), all of which have high “re-sale” values, unlike concert attendances, expensive holidays or designer clothes.

To reiterate, the hegemony of Asian Capitalism and Asian Democracy is less one of identification than one where alternatives are made unviable. There is clearly a resonance between what citizens and the government consider necessary (for economic survival). Because economic well being is seen as more fundamental than personal or political freedom, the latter aspects of national life become secondary and are subordinated to the imperative of economic growth. This explains why, despite non-identification with “consensual politics”, and despite a mounting desire for political choice, citizens are willing, to quote local journalists, “to trade political freedom for economic rewards.”

The nature of the second-generation PAP hegemony may be more accurately described as “consent to coercion” if we take into consideration citizens’ complicity in tolerating authority. That Singaporeans are “famous for complaining” (according to local pop songs) indicates not only the magnitude of their dissatisfactions but also their complicity — they are aware of what they are trading when they vote the PAP. In accepting the PAP, they obviously make carefully weighed decisions, and agree to tolerate coercion in exchange for economic prosperity. Citizens’ tolerance of Asian Democracy produces an effect that is hegemonic — by conforming to the centre’s value despite dissatisfactions, citizens perform a type of rhetorical compliance, and lend an aura of consensus to official values.

Furthermore, citizens’ continued subscription to material and status competition ensures the continued relevance of economics as the key national goal and the continued relevance of economic performance as a relevant criterion for judging governments. Citizens’ compliance with the centre’s values, no matter how rhetorical, strategically perpetuates the PAP’s economic legitimacy and with it, its hegemony.

These insights bring us to a question. If citizens’ tolerance of PAP’s authoritarianism is conditional upon economic satisfaction, if the authoritarian nature of Asian Democracy is intolerable without some anticipation of economic prosperity or “more good years” (PAP’s election slogan), if the legitimacy of Asian Democracy is dependent on Asian Capitalism, does it mean that an economic crises would also pose a hegemonic crisis?

Economic versus Ideological versus Hegemonic Crisis

To anticipate the conditions under which hegemonic crises arise, we need to have a clear understanding the basis of the hegemony. Here I want to consider approaches based upon different views of what constitutes the basis of hegemony and how it is sustained.

There are many scholars who see economic performance as the key basis of government legitimacy, and who identify an economic crisis as a hegemonic crisis. The political legitimacy of many Asian Democracies in Asia is premised upon good economic performance. The downfall of dominant governments in Indonesia and Taiwan during the economic crises is cited as evidence that popular legitimacy is premised upon economic growth. In Eastern Europe, citizens were willing to stay in the “pre-democracy” stage in fear that the transition to market democracy would mean the loss of job security (Dobbs 1992, 11-12). Even in the economically prosperous USA, political scientists argue that the shape of the economy is a very good indicator of whether the incumbent party will win the presidential elections (*Voice of Democracy* on CNN, 6 January 2001).

The Singaporean case is an important exception that helps crystallise the genuine basis of economic legitimacy. During the economic crisis, the PAP was able to convince citizens that the crisis was “regional” and thus beyond the control of the government, while also convincing citizens that despite the “regional” crisis being beyond its control, the PAP was Singapore’s only hope out of the economic storm. The Singapore case demonstrates the incomplete correspondence between economic performance and legitimacy, and reveals that economic legitimacy is as much an ideological project to secure citizens’ *economic satisfaction* as actual *economic performance* (Cf. the debate between Hall 1988; Leys 1990; Jessop et al 1988). Gramsci (1978, 145) himself noted that “a company of [soldiers] would be capable of going for days without food because it could see that it was physically impossible for supplies to get through; but it would mutiny if a single meal was missed as a result of neglect or bureaucracy.”

That economic legitimacy has relative autonomy from actual economic performance does not help us anticipate hegemonic crises. Of course, hegemony is ultimately historically contingent and always contested, but this should not keep us from trying to identify some minimal conditions for the maintenance of party hegemony.

In trying to identify moments of hegemony crisis for the PAP, the question, “under what situations would liberal democracy and welfarism begin to be seen as legitimate?” precipitates certain types of answers based upon material conditions — economic prosperity or crises. While it is correct to assume a link (even if a relatively autonomous one) between ideology and materiality, this question is problematic because it assumes that ideology is static. An ideological crisis is not necessarily a hegemonic crisis because the PAP can always reinvent itself. If popular opinion favours liberalism and welfarism, the PAP’s ideology can be reinvented correspondingly to recapture as much ground as its new ideology allows, e.g., instead of one-party rule, the PAP could preserve dominant-party rule.

However, even this clarification of the basis of PAP hegemony (as ideological flexibility) is not sharp enough. This is because elite hegemony is not necessarily undermined by mass alienation. In Singapore, citizens are “famous for complain-

ing” but their dissent is pushed underground and not allowed the opportunity to gain public credibility and mobilise support. Without the leadership of (organic) intellectuals or a section of the elite who turn against their own class interest, dissent may not be able to coalesce and secure legitimacy. If we recall Leys’ argument that for an ideology to be hegemonic, it is not necessary that it be loved but that it has no serious rival, then hegemony is less about maintaining ideological popularity than the silencing or de-legitimising ideological alternatives (from elite sources). If Zaller (1992) and Hallin (1986) are right that public opinion/dissensus mirrors elite opinion/dissensus, then hegemony is highly dependent on the maintenance of ideological unity *within the elite* rather than within society.

This insight allows us to appreciate just how tailored the AV project is to the maintenance of one-party ideological dominance, and just how astute the PAP leadership is. Understanding that hegemony is not about popularity, Singaporean PMs Lee and Goh have never allowed themselves to be “coerced” by the electorate (Chua 1995, 154-5) or recapitulated on what they consider sound economic decisions for the sake of popularity. Lee is unremorseful about the PAP’s elitism (“Never mind what the people think. That’s another problem”; Lee 1986). Hegemony is not sustained by identification but by rhetorical compliance (due to the perception of no viable alternatives). As such, the AV project’s ability to secure citizen’s co-operation in de-legitimising ideological alternatives and preventing social fragmentation in the name of communitarianism makes it a social technology *par excellence* for the sustaining of one-party ideological dominance.

Notes:

1. These claims had to be refined when Newly Industrialising Economies (NIEs), despite achieving miraculous economic growth, failed to “evolve” into liberal democracies. One camp revised their claim to argue that authoritarianism and centralisation was necessary for *young* states to kick-start their economies but maintained that contradictions in *late*-capitalism would trigger the “evolution” or “transition” into liberal democracy (cf. Castells 1988, 3-4; Rodan 1993). Another camp concede that liberal democracy is not inevitable (Dahl 1966; Dahl 1973, Pye and Pye 1985), although many continued to use liberal democracy as a universal standard to point out “true” versus “pseudo” democracies and to identify factors that “complicate the forward march of (liberal) democracy” in pseudo-democracies.

2. “Asian Values” and its acronym “AV” are used to respectively connote “Asian-ness” and to denote a government project.

3. Bass (1993, 77-78) observes that Latin American governments tend to be founded on “pseudo-democratic” electoral legitimacy while Leninist Eastern European governments represent themselves as protectors of proletariat/mass interest. By contrast, East Asian governments appear to be protectors of global capitalism (cf. Park et al 2000; Mizra 1986; Yoshihara 1989).

4. I use the word “race” rather than “ethnicity” deliberately to underlie the genetic assumptions in many of the Singapore government’s policies.

5. Unfortunately, I could not locate the original source of this quote, although it is readily cited online, e.g., <http://www.univ-tours.fr/capaganglais/PovertyQuotes.htm>.

6. Ubonrat Siriyuvasak suggested in discussion at Bellagio that citizens may feel genuinely contented too, suggesting further that consumption (shopping) can breed a sense of freedom and choice.

7. Attempts to deprive Malays of their symbolic status in the region could be met with regional threats. In 1963, Indonesian President Sukarno organised an armed confrontation against Malaysia for accepting states without Malay majority to be part of its Federation (Turnbull 1989, 274).

8. Cf. www.mindef.gov.sg/dag/cmpb/recruit_handbook.html.

9. That citizens are “Western” and “Eastern” is a direct effect of the bilingualism policy. In Singapore, bilingualism establishes English as first language and “mother tongue” as second language. Should English be a second rather than a first language, the “Asian-ness” of Singaporeans may not be so severely called into question. This subordination of mother tongue under English mirrors the subdominant position of AV and its role as a supplement to the dominant ideology of capitalistic competition — English is the language that will realise the dominant ideology/dream of international competitiveness.

10. There is also the explanation of fear of the consequences of political participation — coffeshoppers are aware of others’ perception of their lack of expert credentials; women and minorities are constrained by moral/social expectations of good citizenship (“good mothers,” “good Malays”); well-educated young interviewees complain they have to master a consensual writing style before they can compete successfully for publication space in the national daily. However real these administrative, psychological and ideological barriers, they do not sufficiently explain why citizens do not contest the government. The obstacles Indonesians and Filipinos face are no less forbidding, yet they are not deterred.

11. It would not be surprising at all if the Singapore Dream of the 5 “Cs” (car, cash, career, credit, condominium) is expanded to include a 6th or 7th “C” such as computer or convertible.

References:

- Ang, Ien and Jon Stratton. 1997. The Singapore Way of Multiculturalism: Western Concepts / Asian Cultures. *New Formations* 31, 51-66.
- Bass, Harold F., Jr. 1993. Change and Democratisation in One-Party Systems. In G. Wekkin, D. Whistler, M. Kelly and M. Maggiotto (eds.), *Building Democracy in One-Party Systems: Theoretical Problems and Cross-Nation Experiences*, 70-84. Connecticut: Praeger.
- Benjamin, Geoffrey. 1976 The Cultural Logic of Singapore’s Multiracialism. In R. Hassan (ed.), *Singapore: Society in Transition*, 115-133. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Birch, David. 1993. *Singapore Media: Communication Strategies and Practices*. Sydney: Longman Cheshire.
- Burchell, Graham, Colin Gordon and Peter Miller. 1991. *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Castells, Manuel. 1988. The Developmental City-State in an Open World Economy: The Singapore Experience. Working Paper No. 31. Berkeley Roundtable on the International Economy, University of California, Berkeley.
- Chan, Heng-Chee. 1985. Legislature and Legislators. In J. Quah, H.C. Chan and C.M. Seow (eds.), *Government and Politics in Singapore*, 71-91. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Chua, Beng-Huat. 1995. *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore*. London: Routledge.
- Clammer, John. 1985. *Singapore: Ideology, Society and Culture*. Singapore: Chopmen.
- Clammer, John. 1993. Deconstructing Values: The Establishment of a National Ideology and Its Implications for Singapore’s Political Future. In G. Rodan (ed.), *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*, 34-51. New York: Longman.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1966. *Political Opposition in Western Democracies*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1973. *Regimes and Opposition*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- De Bary, Wm. Theodore. 1998. *Asian Values and Human Rights: A Communitarian Perspective*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dobbs, Michael. 1992. Is the Old Regime Truly Gone in Russia? *Washington Post Weekly* 9, 38, 11-12.
- Fernandez, Warren and Ching-Ching Leong. 1995. Two Sides to Every Story. *Scribe*. Singapore Press Club. Nov/Dec 1995.
- Foucault, Michel. 1979 Governmentality. *m/f* no.3, July, 5-21.
- Fraser, Nancy. 1992. Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy. In C. Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, 109-142. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Fukuyama, Francis. 1992. *The End of History and the Last Man*. New York: The Free Press.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1994. *Beyond Left and Right*. Cambridge: Polity.

- Gramsci, Antonio. 1971. *Antonio Gramsci: Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Hall, Stuart. 1986. Variants of Liberalism. In J. Donald and S. Hall (eds.), *Politics and Ideology*. A Reader, 34-69. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Hall, Stuart. 1988. *The Hard Road to Renewal*. London: Verso.
- Hallin, Daniel. 1986. *The "Uncensored War:" The Media and Vietnam*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Hill, Michael and Lian Kwen-Fee. 1995. *The Politics of Nation Building and Citizenship in Singapore*. London: Routledge.
- Hitchcock, David. 1994. *Asian Values and the United States: How Much Conflict?* Washington DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies.
- Huntington, Samuel. 1991. *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Jessop, Bob, Kevin Bonnett, Simon Bromley, and Tom Ling. 1988 *Thatcherism: A Tale of Two Nations*. London: Polity.
- Kuah, Khun-Eng. 1991. Confucian Ideology and Social Engineering in Singapore. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 20, 3, 371-83.
- Kuo, Eddie and Chen, H.T. 1987. Towards an Information Society: Changing Occupational Structure in Singapore. *Asian Survey* 27, 355-370.
- Lee, Kwan-Yew. 1986, 1988, 1998. Speeches. Available at <http://www4.gov.sg/sprinter>.
- Leys, Colin. 1990. Still a Question of Hegemony. *New Left Review* 181, 119-128.
- Lim, Linda and Pang, Eng-Fong. 1991. *Foreign Direct Investment and Industrialization in Malaysia, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand*. Paris: Development Centre of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.
- Lodge, George C. and Erza F. Vogel. 1987. *Ideology and National Competitiveness: An Analysis of 9 Countries*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.
- Mirza, Hafiz. 1986. *Multinationals and the Growth of the Singapore Economy*. London: St. Martin Press.
- O'Leary, Michael K. and William D. Coplin. 1983. *Political Risks in Thirty-Five Countries*. London: Euromoney.
- Park, Myung-jin, C.N. Kim and B.W. Sohn. 2000. Modernization, Globalization, and the Powerful State: The Korean media. In J. Curran and M.J. Park (eds.), *De-westernizing Media Studies*, 111-123. London: Routledge.
- Paul, E. C. 1992. Obstacles to Democratisation in Singapore. Working Paper No. 78. Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, Monash University, Australia.
- Perlmutter, Amos. 1981 *Modern Authoritarianism: A Comparative Institutional Analysis*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Pye, Lucian W. and Mary W. Pye. 1985. *Asian Power and Politics: The Cultural Dimensions of Authority*. London: Belknap Press.
- Regnier, Philippe. 1991. *Singapore: City-State in South-East Asia*. London: Hurst.
- Rodan, Garry. 1993. *Singapore Changes Guard: Social, Political and Economic Directions in the 1990s*. New York: Longman.
- Rose, Nikolas. 1996. Governing "Advanced" Liberal Democracies. In A. Barry, T. Osborne and N. Rose (eds.), *Foucault and Political Reason: Liberalism, Neo-liberalism and the Rationalities of Government*, 37-64. London: UCL Press.
- Tamney, Joseph B. 1996. *The Struggle over Singapore's Soul: Western Modernisation and Asian Culture*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Turnbull, C. M. 1989. *A History of Singapore 1819-1988*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press.
- Vogel, Ezra F. 1989. A Little Dragon Tamed. In K. Sandhu and P. Wheatley (eds.), *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*, 1049-1066. Singapore: Westview Press.
- Yoshihara, Kunio. 1988. *The Rise of Ersatz Capitalism in South-East Asia*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.
- Zaller, John. 1992 *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.