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Book Review: Kenneth Paul Tan, Singapore: Identity, Brand, Power

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Singapore: Identity, Brand, Power casts light upon the case of the outlier Singapore, an outlier case in light of the key premises of modernization theory, and how an elitist, capitalist state achieves to maintain its authority through the lens of Gramscian hegemony. Modernization theory had predicted that industrialization, economic growth, and higher levels of literacy lead to the rise of a middle class which is more tolerant, cosmopolitan, advocate and defender defensive of the rule of law, and perhaps most importantly, provides a social and cultural force for democratization (Lipset, 1959; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005). The theory presented a universal blueprint which suggested that with economic growth and development, democratization is quasi-automatic, although this has been revised recently (Inglehart, 2018; Inglehart and Welzel, 2009).

Dr. Kenneth Paul Tan discusses the Singaporean exception. The small city-state is not only an exception of blending,as a multi-cultural, cosmopolitan 'global city-state', and nation-state with a high level of income. Singapore also is also an exampleception of an advanced economy that falsifies nullifies the core prediction of the modernizsation theory: economic growth and development leading to democratizsation. The book, besides a discussion of Singapore's exception, elaborates on the challenges to the 'Singapore story' stemming from a rise in income inequality, malfunctioning meritocracy, and rising geopolitical tensions in Southeast Asia.

Tan examines contemporary Singaporean politics in light of "[t]he increasingly multivocal and contested nature of the Singapore narrative" (p. 2). This narrative has several dimensions. First, the state is the dominant actor. In Singapore, state means the government. The government means People's Action Party (PAP). Thus, the state cannot be conceived of without PAP. Since independence, PAP's privileged position has never been challenged except in the 2011 general elections when its approval rate declined, although it recovered in the next elections in 2015. Singapore is a democracy in theory, less competitive elections. PAP drives legitimacy, as many other one-party governments around the world do, from elections and performance in the form of delivering welfare, security, and efficient and effective policymaking (p. 7). Economic growth is one of the key pillars of Singapore's success, and thereby a source of legitimacy. Capitalizing on such success, the state has the moral upper hand. This moral authority, Tan discusses, rests upon a discourse built around a permanent threat to survival, meritocracy, and pragmatism.

Both external and internal security has utmost importance to Singapore's survival in a fragile part of the world in which the small city-state is surrounded by two giant neighbors: Indonesia and Malaysia. In this geopolitical context, Singapore relies on soft power with a reconciliatory, engaging, and pro-active manner to manage threats to its external security. Internal security, on the other hand, prioritizses maintenance of inter-communal harmony through public housing, language lessons, and curricula in schools targeting nation-building.

The permanent survival discourse prioritizes the state as the sole, eminent guarantor of security and stability "[a]s a fragile success that can easily shatter without the

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care of a capable government" (p. 13). This discourse also leads to an understanding of constant alertness with a tendency to "'[o]ver-responses', and an 'over-wrought imagination'" (p. 14). Meritocracy concerns cultivating ground for an equitable environment for all to flourish as each relies on talent and hard work. Finally, pragmatism relates to undogmatic, practical, adaptable, rational, realist, and materialist orientation of the state.

Tan demonstrates that these key sources of moral authority are not without contradictions. Borrowing from another Singaporean colleague, Low (2014) argues that meritocracy brings about anxiety, excessive competition, and inequality, all of which hamper social harmony. Low argues that meritocracy has taken a 'trickle-up' shape. This erodes equality of opportunity, contributing to the rise in inequality.

The dominance of the state in Singapore is no less problematic. Depoliticised civil society cannot compete with the state's dominance. Tan argues that groups organize around issues such as LGBTQ rights, national heritage, and history (pp. 42-44). While this could be perceived as rising social mobilization around post-materialist issue areas, this also points to a critical gap between the state and society. This is because a depoliticized society appears to create space for self-expression rather than mobilizing politically, competing the elite authoritarian government. As such, disconnect between a materialist state and post-materialist society occurs in the form of a lack of effective communication, which could, in turn, erode trust between the state and society.

Then comes pragmatism. Undogmatic, the adaptable state achieves economic development with a remarkable performance. Singapore can flexibly copy the best practices implemented elsewhere with economic growth serving one of the key sources of legitimacy. Given its achievements, the state presents itself as a success model by marketing Singapore as a model of development at the international level. Pragmatism certainly facilitates an efficient supply of public goods, as Singapore is admired for public housing, water management, and experience in industrial zones. Pragmatism also serves the state well at the international level. Singapore enjoys amicable relations with two superpowers, the United States and China.

Yet pragmatism has an ugly face that is closely related to meritocracy and the state-dominated state-society relations. What emerges from Tan's book is that pragmatism is the core of Singapore's success, but more importantly its many failures. The elitist state has created a pro-business economic structure while co-opting, pacifying labor (see Coban, 2016) to which inequality-breeding meritocracy serves both at school and in professional life. Tan cautions that pragmatism is used as "[a]n ideological fig leaf for market fundamentalism… [with which] comes greater inequalities of income and wealth" (p. 62). Pragmatism utilized in that sense certainly has the potential to lead to social, economic, and political instability. Hirschman and Rothschild (1973) argued that tolerance for inequality rises as an economy grows, but it begins to decline as growth reaches a certain extent. When this is accompanied by meritocracy, adding serving to the rise in inequality, the state may find itself in stormy weather. Tan makes a compelling case for a loss of mutual trust between the state and society, while hegemony through ideas and legitimacy derived from material welfare might not secure a loyal societal base.

What Tan could have done better was to adopt a deeper understanding of the main role of the state in a capitalist society as he adopts a Gramscian approach to the role of the state. Poulantzas (1973: Ch 3.1) claims that political power rests upon a balance of flexible consensus in the capitalist state. The political conjuncture determines the degree of flexibility; consensus is sustained without interference in economic interests, and the balance is maintained through repression of discussion about political power. What is missing in the current debate about Singapore's political economy is a discussion of class struggle. The key role of the state in Singapore is to make class struggle invisible in a country where inequality is very high. Admittedly, this particular role of the capitalist state can be observed all around the world, however, it becomes more pronounced in

an elitist mode of governance. Pragmatism-oriented, inequality inequality-generating meritocracy is a class struggle of its own sort in modern Singapore. This means that the authoritarian elitist, capitalist state maintains its hegemony by acting pragmatically and flexibly when societal demands for economic rights forces it to do so, while it does not allow societal forces to contest the political power of the state. With this, the state seeksachieves to disguise class struggle, while it appears to be a responsive state to societal demands. In the meantime, the survival discourse helps it preserve dominance in state-society relations as well as not adopting a post-materialist approach even at a very high level of income level, which should have satisfied concerns for material survival. Making the class struggle invisible through the survival discourse, pragmatism, and meritocracy upon which a nation- and state-building myth of a Singaporean version of 'imagined communities' rests, the state (PAP) re-creates the conditions of the persistence of the establishment. Whether this will continue under the conditions of disconnect between a materialist state and post-materialist society is the greatest challenge of Singapore in the coming years.

All in all, Kenneth Paul Tan draws an up-to-date, insightful, critical and detailed analysis of Singapore's past achievements, current politics, and implications for the future. The book is an excellent discussion starter for scholars, policymakers, and those who are interested in current Singapore politics and policy implications for other Asian countries such as China.

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