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Singapore's Future

Beyond the entrapment of Eurocentric Modernity

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Modernity is understood by the West as a process of historical transformation that took place in Europe and later in the United States. The new culture that evolved encompasses concepts of freedom, human rights and individuality as well as the rule of law. Opportunism as well as faith in Western modernity fuelled the belief that all cultures should be made in the image of the West. This surge in confidence was brought about by the advent of superior technology and economic development. The hierarchical Eurocentric modernity was the ideology and justification for civilizing missions towards the non-Western *other* as well as aggressive colonial conquests and numerous imperial undertakings. Many postcolonial studies have now identified the morally irresponsible, racist and imperialistic rules imposed by European countries especially since the mid nineteenth century. It is therefore important to put on record that democratic applications of modernity in the West were only successfully practiced within the boundaries of Western nation states, and did not apply in any effective manner to the non-Western other. How has this Eurocentric modernity affected Singapore? And how can Singapore escape its entrapment?

Singapore had a smooth political transition of power from the British to the PAP government in 1959. Painful confrontation was avoided. Singapore had inherited the colonial modernity without serious questioning. To resolve the many challenging issues in the post independence decades, the government has established increasingly close economic and cultural ties with Euro-America and has accepted without serious contestation the fundamental essence of Eurocentric modernity. Hence, Singapore's colonial and post-colonial analysis and discourses today are still mild, uncritical and marginalised.

The turbulent changes in the cultures, values and lifestyles of the younger generation and disadvantaged minorities since the late sixties in the West had incited both Lee Kuan Yew and Mahathir Mohammed to voice their serious concern. Both Prime Ministers responded firmly with their concepts of Asian values, which were received with much cynicism and critical comments from many including concerned Asian scholars. For me, my defence of Asian values has always been that as a culturally based given, it cannot be wished away. A leading Indian intellectual, Ashis Nandy said:- "I am wondering that if the Asian values are not to be taken seriously by the Asians then who will? Then what will the Asians live by? It would be interesting if Asians could live by the European values but they cannot. They suffer from a peculiar disease called Asianness."

The core values of a traditional society form the essential building blocks of its modernity. We must acknowledge the vast differences between civilizations, each with its own cultures and traditions. Each great culture is made up of multiplicities of traditions including a huge folk domain. Over the centuries, different cultures continue to influence each other, sometimes in a very dramatic manner. Asian intellectuals must recast the present widely accepted Western-based perceptions of modernity in order to reclaim the historical legitimacy of our own modernity. A pluralistic perception of history and modernity is now generally accepted. The modernity of each society must evolve from within its own cultural environment. In this way, multiple modernities will arise, each one profoundly different from the other. "The future of our world will be one in which all societies will undergo change, in institutions and outlook, and some of these changes may be parallel, but they will not converge, because new differences will emerge from the old."¹

The East Asian crisis, which started in 1997, was mainly caused by unrestricted speculative capital flow. After several painful years, most countries have substantially recovered, as many countries have greatly improved the efficiency and standard of governance in key sectors of their local economies. East Asian countries have clearly proven that national control is an essential factor for rapid economic growth and achieving broad improvements for the community. Direct intervention by the authorities is often effective and necessary. “Asian capitalisms will emerge from the current crisis altered unpredictably rather than remade on any Western model.”²

In recent years, the anti-neoliberal globalization agenda has shifted to what can be done to harness globalization so that its benefits are inclusive and its processes are more transparent and equitable, and to protect the essentiality of local communities.³ At the 2003 WTO meeting, a group of developing countries known as G22 – a coalition of poor populous countries, including China, India, Brazil and South Africa – united to condemn the hefty farm subsidies in the US and European Union. As the G22 is a solid and well-informed political force, it has to be treated with respect and seriousness.

In two short decades, China has proven the ability to achieve continuous spectacular economic growth and to re-define the roles of capitalist globality in the context of her own national priorities. At a recent World Economic Forum, Bill Gates had high praise for China and her current generation of leaders who has created “a brand-new form of capitalism that benefits local consumers more than anything has in the past.”⁴

Learning from the experience of British imperialism, U.S. has attempted to achieve her global hegemony by exercising economic domination through coercion and subversion. This process has been described as “the original sin of simple robbery”.⁵ In the last two decades, globalization and the rapid development of I.T. have caused major upheavals in the economies as well as cultures, values and life-styles on a global scope and scale. It is not surprising therefore that U.S. has now encountered serious contestation towards her global objective, as “the opening up of global markets in both commodities and capital created openings for other states to insert themselves into the global economy, first as absorbers, but then as producers of surplus capitals”.⁶ These places of capital accumulation must now also include selected newly developing centres in the East Asia

region. They practice increasingly sophisticated spatio-temporal fixes for their own surplus capital. A good example is Singapore's Temasek and Government Investment Corporation (GIC) which have recently demonstrated the prowess of Singapore external investments.

Hong Kong, Singapore, South Korean and Taiwan all began their development process with volatile social and political situations. Though segments of society were initially repressed, social movements surfaced strongly since the mid-eighties. In these countries economic growth and income redistribution kept pace with democratic liberalization, except in Singapore, where the firm grip of the government persists. Castells has therefore argued that "the myth of social peace as a major component of the development process [of the four tiger economies] in East Asia does not stand up to observation."⁷ Furthermore, to meet the dynamic turbulent conditions of the 21st century, Singapore needs to make drastic changes without further delay.

Since the mid-1990s, Singapore has embarked on efforts to restructure its economy, to free rigid mindsets, to broaden intellectual space, to encourage open debates and to energise creativity. This process was interrupted by the Asian economic crisis and the SAR epidemic as well as the over-cautiousness of policy-makers to move away from the well-trying success formula. In my opinion, the present challenge demands a fearless great leap forward and a paradigm shift in order to discard the entrapment of the outdated Eurocentric modernity (much of it has already been discarded in the West). Singapore needs to create pluralistic and tolerant contemporary postmodern culture, value and life-style which are firmly embedded to our multiracial-culturalism and hybridised cosmopolitan modernity.

With minimum bureaucratic baggage and political insider's sensibility, I wish to share with you the myth and realisable images of Singapore's future from the postmodern outsider perspective. I will now briefly comment on five key issues. They are:-

1) Meritocracy and multiracialism 2) Globality 3) Modernist planning 4) Tourism and 5) Contemporary culture.

1) Meritocracy and Multiracialism

Meritocracy and multiracialism have served Singapore well and should be continued. However, we need to broaden the search for talent and creative people beyond the criteria of academic achievements. This is particularly relevant in the arts, where the gifted and innovative artists, designers and writers etc. should not be evaluated by the same academic yardstick. To many academics, professionals, and bureaucrats challenging assignments and job satisfaction often outweigh status and higher monetary remuneration. It is important that meritocracy must not deteriorate into elitist arrogance, intolerance and snobbishness.

Since 9/11, the Islamic community has become an important focus of much national attention. The catching up to standards of other ethnic communities has been a successful on going exercise. The recent impact of national re-structuring and upgrading have affected many in the lower-income and unskilled workers. Of these, a disproportional high numbers are from the Malay community. In the meantime, the growing plurality of contestation and ideological interpretation reflects the complexity confronting Muslims everywhere. According to a Singapore Islamic scholar:- “Muslim politics in Singapore requires a careful balance between the administration of Islam and allowing space for Islamic society to reform itself from within. This may entail less centralization and more space for greater pluralism within Islam.”⁸

2) Globality

With the rapid development of I.T. , a re-conceptualization of global cities is necessary. As cross-border transactions of all kinds including NGO activities grow, so do the networks binding particular configuration of cities to common global functions. To quote Saskia Sassen “There is both consolidation in fewer major centres across and within countries *and* a sharp growth in the numbers of these national centres that become part of the global network as countries deregulate their economies”.⁹ Furthermore, the denationalization of strategic institutional areas need to be counteracted and balanced “by forces that establish horizontal ties, grounding cities and their economies in a larger regional context”¹⁰. Hence Hong Kong’s economy is firmly anchored to its large highly developed hinterland of over 30 million population and its pivotal position in global

exchanges of capital between China and the world. Hong Kong will therefore continue to be a key and dominant global city-region. It is in this context that Singapore must urgently review the need or advantage to increase her population very substantially to 6 – 7 millions, as the policy will have far reaching consequences. A transparent and vigorous open public discourse on this issue will be most desirable.

Singapore will continue to strengthen and broaden its range of global functions, adding to the present success of its financial centre and transportation hub, Singapore can actively develop other global functions such as a major centre for the arts and design, where its innovative and creative energies must be strongly embedded in our local and regional peculiarities. Singapore must go beyond the superficial show-casing the subsets of western museums, artistic creation and performances. Every effort must be made to provide intellectual space and opportunities for our creative individuals to actively contribute and participate in this process. For example, we should appoint our own world-renowned artistic director, Ong Keng Sen to curate an Asian cultural festival and Alvin Tan to curate an Asian drama event.¹¹ In architecture, Singapore most dynamic and innovative designer Tang Guan-Bee has yet to receive a commission for a sizable public project.¹²

3) Modernist Planning

Eurocentric modernist planning theories and practices such as Le Corbusier's sanitized urbanism and automobile city are now widely discredited. Global capitalism has undoubtedly accelerated the pace and scale of ruthless destruction especially in central city areas. Over the last few decades, systematic clean-ups and rebuilding have destroyed much of Singapore's urban fabric and visual memories. Singapore's urban environment is orderly, efficient but boring. Unlike other Asian cities, it offers no surprises, chaotic excitements or unexpected discoveries. On Singapore, world-renowned architect/urbanist Rem Koolhaas lamented:- "It is pure intention: if there is chaos, it is authored chaos; if it is ugly, it is designed ugliness; if it is absurd, it is willed absurdity."¹³ However, it is necessary to acknowledge the impressive success of Singapore in urban management, in providing basic infrastructure and public transportation and in introducing many innovative urban instruments from Area Licensing Scheme to public land auctions.

As a city-state, it is vital that the physical infrastructure and spatial arrangements must continue to function and respond effectively with the increasingly rapid re-structuring exercise towards our collective new visions of the nation. In the context of present theories of Cultural Studies, the dynamics of Asian urbanism must be analysed beyond the current division of disciplines and must be firmly grounded in both local contextuality and postmodern pluralistic contemporariness. The present dominant mindset of the hierachical grand modernist planning narrative is unsuitable in solving today's complex and ethically inspired challenges. I am therefore convinced that for Singapore to move ahead, we need a major ideological shake-up and vigorous critical discourses for many who teach, advise, theorise and practice dogmatic modernist planning and architecture of yesteryears.

4) Tourism

Singapore has been successful in achieving a steady growth in the number of tourist arrivals. However, the length of stay has been decreasing, as the city-state faces difficulties to generate sufficient interest from its good shopping and an Asian gourmet paradise. Surprises and the unexpected in many cities have always been great attractions to visitors. However, after decades of tabula rasa – a clean slate urban development strategy – there is little left in Singapore to explore. The Singapore Tourist Board (STB) has for many years made various attempts to provide new interest from theme-parking of historical sites, heritage museums and traditional festivals. Singapore is now increasingly being perceived as a theme-park island. This has failed to impress particularly the cultural tourists and the adventurous younger generations. Riding on the wave of rapid tourism growth in the Asian region, Singapore should be able to double its tourist numbers to 15 million by year 2015 with or without the casino¹⁴. However, will the tourists stay longer? The increasing importance of cultural tourism everywhere must be recognized. Singapore should offer a vibrant, exciting and affordable Asian cultural and artistic experience in a fragmented and unregulated manner all over the island. At the same time, we must support, preserve and facilitate what Leonie Sandercock called *memories, desires and spirits*:- the phenomenon of urban postmodernity.¹⁵ Positive results will take time and need a major shift from the present mindset.

5) Contemporary Culture

Contemporary global culture is ever-changing. Its dynamism generates commonality of an universal, value and lifestyle which is particularly attractive to the younger generation. However, it is also firmly rooted in local traditions and actuality of Asian societies, especially in artistic creation and in the close family relationship. In the wider context, lesbians, gays, singles and unmarried mothers all demand not just tolerance but recognition and full rights of citizenship. Alienation and contestation to mainstream ideas and ideology everywhere have caused increasing strains in generational relationship in families, educational institutions, work places and state policies. At the same time, this contemporary culture also embraces multiple identities and deep commitments to universal humanism, generosity and concern for others, as have been clearly demonstrated by the many voluntary responses to the Tsunami disaster. In recent years, Singapore government has made serious efforts to *bridge-the-gap* with the younger generation by providing more cultural and intellectual space and has cautiously accepted pluralistic differences. However, it has yet to recognise that creative rebelliousness, cynicism and critical attitudes against, though not necessary in opposition to, the established order are essential elements of the new culture.

Conclusion

I like Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's idea of defining Singapore as *a small nation with a big heart*. According to a recent ST report, there are "35,000 families living beneath the so-called poverty line here".¹⁶ We need to think beyond just job creation, but also income security for all our citizens. Furthermore, as a wealthy nation, Singapore should also perform its international obligations with a much more generous annual budget allocation to help the poor particularly those in the Asean countries.

The rapid rise of China and India and the escalating development of I.T. and scientific knowledge in the coming decades will generate unprecedented and unpredictable changes on global scale. This is an age of great turbulence and uncertainty. Meeting this challenge demands an enlightened, flexible and nimble mindset, tolerance of pluralistic differences and acceptance of rebelliousness. To foster, develop and nurture

a broad-based creative society, we must go beyond Richard Florida's: rise of the creative class analysis, and venture into the complex and dynamic process of creativity. Let me quote Bruce Mau:- "When the outcome drives the process, we will only ever go to where we've already been. If process drives outcome we may not know where we're going, but we will know we want to be there."¹⁷

¹ Charles Taylor, "Two Theories of Modernity" in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), 182.

² John Gray, "Postscript" in *False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism* (London, Granta Books, 1998), 221.

³ James H. Mittelman. *Whither Globalization? The vortex of knowledge and ideology*. London, Routledge, 2004.

⁴ Bill Gates's speech: "China has created brand-new form of capitalism" at an informal meeting at the World Economic Forum, Davos, on 28 January '05. Website: <http://www.channelnewsasia.com>

⁵ H. Arendt. *Imperialism* (New York: Harcourt Brace Janovich, 1968 edn.)

⁶ David Harvey. "Consent to Coercion" in *The New Imperialism*. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2003) 183 – 212.

⁷ Manuel Castells. *End of Millennium*, Vol. 3 of the Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. (Oxford and Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998). 266.

⁸ Suzaina Kadir. "Islam, state and society in Singapore" in *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies: Facets of Islam*. (Vol. 5, No. 3 December 2004, New York, Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2004).

⁹ Saskia Sassen. "Introduction – Locating Cities on Global Circuits". In "*Global Networks Linked Cities*". New York, Routledge, 2002. 1 – 36.

¹⁰ D. Linda Garcia. "The Architecture of Global Networking Technologies". In "*Global Networks Linked Cities*". New York, Routledge, 2002. 39 - 69.

¹¹ *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre*. Singapore: Times Editions, 2004.

¹² Tang Guan-Bee has recently been identified as a *Mentor to seek out* for art-based architecture in an important recent publication by Prof. Leon van Schaik, entitled: *Mastering Architecture: Becoming a Creative Innovator in Practice*. United Kingdom, Wiley-Academy, 2005. 238.

¹³ Rem Koolhaas. "Singapore Songlines". In *S,M,L,XL*. RemKoolhaas and The Monacelli Press, Inc., New York, 1995. 1008 – 1089.

¹⁴ Wee Sui Lee, "Singapore Expects Record Numbers of Tourists in 2005", AP Report, 20 January 2005. See also World Tourism Organization, "Asia and the Pacific—Going Strong as Ever", available on www.world-tourism.org/facts/2020.html

¹⁵ Leonie Sandercock. "Planning for Cosmopolis: A New Paradigm". In *Towards Cosmopolis*. England, John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1998. 203 – 219.

¹⁶ Theresa Tan. "Special report: Poor in Singapore". In *The Straits Times*. Saturday, 29 Jan 2005. S1 – S4.

¹⁷ Bruce Mau. "An Incomplete Manifesto for Growth". In *Life Style*. London, Phaidon Press Limited, 2000. 88 – 91.