

## *Book Reviews*

*Neoliberal Morality in Singapore: How Family Policies Make State and Society.* By Teo You Yenn. London and New York: Routledge, 2011. 166 pp.

Singapore has been through remarkable economic and social transformations over the past half century, elevating it to its current status as one of the world's wealthiest countries. Family policies over the early part of this period were designed to lower fertility from unsustainably high levels, and then abruptly reversed in the early 1980s (somewhat belatedly, in the wake of one of the world's most rapid fertility declines) to that of raising fertility. The Singapore public dealt with the sudden reversal of slogans emphasizing the benefits of small family size to ones extolling the virtues of having more children with remarkable equanimity — reflecting a perhaps surprising faith in the omniscience of the government's planners.

The key argument of this book is that, although Singapore's family policies have been rather ineffective in accomplishing their goal of achieving more marriage and raising the nation's fertility rates, they do have important latent effects that transcend the state's explicit goals. "What is produced through family policies are institutionalized relationships and ethical meanings that link citizens to each other, and state to society" (p. 21). Teo argues that there is a tendency towards the naturalization of gender and ethnic differences as "cultural", thus integral to the so-called traditional family. The general acceptance of the need to protect traditional culture sets limits to the people's critique of the state.

Over the past three decades, there have been many interesting inconsistencies between the rhetoric and reality of these family policies. While the state's version is that its policies are communally

oriented rather than individually oriented, the reality is that family policies are primarily between the state and individual family units, thus setting up conditions for policies that are more neoliberal than communitarian. Teo argues that the prioritizing of economic growth by the Singapore state necessarily disrupts the traditional family. Through its promotion of women's engagement in the workforce, building of housing infrastructure to re-house the population from traditional housing forms to high-rise apartment living, promotion of English over other languages, and its intense population control policies, it has altered the structural conditions of family life. "The Singapore state has in fact been highly destructive of the traditional family, and intentionally so" (p. 34). Though state interventions in the family are aimed at encouraging some forms of supposed traditional behaviour, this has always been strictly in the context of the modern demands of economic development. This was equally true of the anti-natalist period and the pro-natalist period.

While Teo's book utilizes a broad canvas in discussing governmentality, explained using broader Foucauldian conceptions of "government" as the regulation of a wide range of individual conduct in multiple realms of society, albeit with incoherence and gaps involving consent and dissent, adherence and resistance, much of the book focuses on the reactions of Singapore citizens to the state's family policies through intensive interviews with ordinary Singaporeans. Based on these interviews, she argues that Singaporeans think about the family in remarkably sociological (if sometimes rather shallow) terms. Gender and racial stereotypes abound in the Singaporean conception of the family — for example, women and men have different responsibilities to the family; Chinese are seen as "modern", with a very low birth rate, Malays are seen as "traditional", with early marriages, more out-of-wedlock births, and higher fertility.

Methodologically, this study of state-society relations employs both a careful study of the paraphernalia of regulations, speeches, ministry websites, press releases, and the like, in order to see how the state shaped Singaporeans' lives; in-depth interviews were also

conducted with sixty Singaporeans to better understand how they negotiated family policies in their lived experience. These were recruited through snowballing techniques, with an emphasis on respondents who had had some experience with the public housing process (not a very restrictive criterion, since over 80 per cent of Singaporeans live in government-built housing). The respondents were roughly representative of Singapore's ethnic mix; most were upwardly mobile, largely in white-collar jobs, but not including the small elite who live in condominiums and "landed property". The respondents were questioned along lines beginning from their family-building decisions and practices and moving on to questions directly pertaining to the state and what people thought about it. The strong emphasis on analysis of detailed interviews with a range of Singaporeans and what these interviews revealed about state-society relations is one distinctive aspect of this study, but that alone would not make for a revealing and thought-provoking analysis. The strength of the study is not just in this methodological approach but also in the strongly sociological lens that is applied in interpreting the information thus gained (though I would expect that the study will also be of considerable interest to political scientists).

According to Teo, her interviews exposed a strong and positive orientation towards the notions of "culture" and "traditions", and people's belief that the state is a sincere defender of these in the face of inexorable change. Related to this is the belief in the "naturalness" of gender and ethnic differences, and also in the "naturalness" of government policies to ameliorate the perceived difficulties of living in traditional ways in the face of economic development and globalization. The Singapore state's way of framing the world is essentially that economic development is inevitable and desirable, but that to avoid a certain cultural poverty associated with the West, and perhaps a sense of rootlessness, the Singaporean family and culture must be protected. Broadly speaking, this depiction is accepted by the Singapore populace. Family policy, therefore, far transcends the institution of the family, in that by producing particular Singaporean subjects with specific orientations towards the state, family policies

shape people's conceptions of the purpose and process of politics and political change.

This core argument of the book is put forward in the introductory chapter. The next chapter sketches briefly the political, economic, and demographic development of Singapore in its still relatively short period as an independent nation state, and the enormous upsets to family life inherent in housing and language policies, as well as educational and labour policies. She argues — correctly, I believe — that the state's turn from anti-natalist to pro-natalist policies in the 1980s is evidence that the Singapore state is an aggressive modernizer rather than a protector of tradition, albeit current policies are painted in traditionalist terms. The failure of pro-natalist policies is hardly surprising in the context of the dramatic shake-up of family life, and the *de facto* prioritizing of individual economic success, that has been part and parcel of the government's modernization and economic development strategy. For many, marriage and child-raising are excessively costly in this context.

Why have the radical changes in people's family lives and the state's "overtly ethnicized and gendered orientation toward the familial" (p. 40) not become the basis of strong contention? This is the key issue the rest of the book addresses.

A key element of Singaporean policy is the continuing strongly gendered implications of its policies. Women are encouraged to be economically active at the same time as they are exhorted to have more children; moreover, the care of the dependant elderly is implicitly in their hands, as the logical outcome of a familial "filial piety" model of eldercare in the Singapore context, albeit one that will come under rapidly increasing pressure as the proportion of elderly nearly trebles over the next twenty-five years. Not surprisingly, Teo's female respondents struggled with such issues. She observes that eldercare issues in Singapore cannot be understood separately from the enormous dependence of the elderly on the young, resulting among other things from the inadequacy of savings acquired by the elderly in less affluent economic times to bide them over in old age; from the much lower educational levels of the Singapore elderly, particularly

women, than those of their children and grandchildren; and from the breakneck pace of technological change that has left many of the elderly stranded, as it were, without access to the technology that is part of the everyday reality of the young.

Neoliberal morality is the term Teo uses to cover a number of things, including the shared reality of negotiating the rules and regulations of family policies along with other Singaporeans, and the sense that these shared realities are part of what distinguishes them as fellow Singaporeans. She observes that complaints about specific aspects of state intervention in family matters are widespread, but that there is much less dissention from the general notion that state intervention in family matters is acceptable and indeed desirable in the Singapore context. A certain neoliberal logic is shared by the state and by Singaporean citizens: the inexorability of global economic forces, the limited agency of states, and the importance of individual motivation and competition in the marketplace. By and large, it is assumed that the state is acting in good faith to address the challenges facing Singapore, and indeed there is a shared understanding that state interventions in family matters are imperfect but unavoidable.

According to many critics of neoliberalism, in the United States it has led to massive inequalities within society that are not only economic but social and political, marked by a lack of social bonds between society and the state as well as among citizens. Teo argues that in Singapore, the rise of neoliberalism, though also characterized by growing inequality, has not seen the same kind of alienation and erosion of notions around society's greater good; while there is certainly tolerance of greater inequality, according to the Singapore version of "neoliberal morality", the state is held accountable as upholder of some moral good beyond market fundamentalism. But — she asks — will this be enough to check trends toward growing inequality and retreat from social responsibility?

This book is a stimulating departure from assessments of Singapore's family policies in terms of their degree of success in attempting to match family formation intentions of individuals with the collective demographic needs, to one in which family policy is

placed in a much broader framework of state-society relations. The failure of family policies to achieve their ends in recent times has not resulted in major challenges to the policies. Grumbling and expression of dissent in relation to family policy is muted because of the sense of shared purpose, in which the general stance of the government in defending tradition while serving as a modernizing force is supported. Perhaps more could have been made of the self-perception of vulnerability and insecurity in the nation-building narrative in Singapore, following the break with Malaysia; in this context, a social compact has been built between the citizenry and a government that, as an “aggressive modernizer”, has been spectacularly successful in raising national prosperity while following the rhetoric (and to a limited extent the reality) of maintaining tradition. This, together with consensus on the need for more marriage and higher fertility to ensure that the Singapore of the future can build on the successful development story of the past half century, seems enough to explain many of the paradoxes with which the book deals.

Teo has provided a tightly argued and stimulating treatment of family policies in Singapore and their acceptance among the populace through her analysis of the findings of interviews with ordinary Singaporeans. Much more than this, she has developed it into a key element of a sophisticated treatment of state-society relations in Singapore. This is a welcome addition to the literature on society and governance in this unique city state.

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