

***Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore.* By Chua Beng Huat. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Softcover: 223pp.**

This well-written and insightful volume is the culmination of Chua Beng Huat's academic work on state and society in Singapore and brings together many of his path-breaking arguments that have significantly shaped our understanding of the country.

A society that is unlike any other in the world has emerged in the tiny Southeast Asian city-state which sits at the tip of the Malay Peninsula. Under the rule of the People's Action Party (PAP), a pragmatic leadership has significantly shaped the political system and ensured sufficient popular legitimacy to remain in power for more than half a century. Crucial to the government's support has been the public housing programme which provides housing for the majority of the population. Following Chua's proposition that Singaporean leaders were opposed to liberalism, the author discusses the city-state's formative years, the illiberal political system, the massive public housing programme, state ownership in the market, the politics of "race" and the limited steps towards cultural liberalization.

Chua begins by laying the groundwork for the PAP's rejection of liberalism, which he sees as rooted in the unique decolonization and nation-building process following the non-violent end to British colonial rule in 1963. After the PAP had gained power in 1959, a schism soon emerged within the left-leaning party and the faction around Lee Kuan Yew ultimately gained control. In the process, the PAP government not only eliminated any political opposition but also constrained the once powerful unions, reigned in the media and eventually used libel suits against its most vocal critics. Once the PAP had gained absolute power, its singular mission became national "survival" and it relied on performance legitimacy to fortify its hegemonic control. Chua argues that due to electoral setbacks in the 1980s and 1990s, the PAP moved closer to communitarianism. This involved a greater emphasis on redistribution which became increasingly urgent as Singapore's inequality surged in the 2000s. As a consequence, democracy was supposedly redefined to the extent that members of parliament no longer represented particular interests of their constituents but society as a whole and that the legal system shifted to an illiberal form of rule of law in which individual freedoms were sacrificed for the greater good of society

(pp. 67–71). Chua thus concludes that “What we have in Singapore at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a PAP-dominant, single-party government which ideologically espouses communitarianism, politically continues to maintain the formal features of an electoral democracy, and continues to pursue economic growth, full employment, and the improvement of material life for Singaporeans—efficiently, effectively and without corruption” (p. 73).

Clearly, the Singaporean regime has rejected many aspects of liberalism and curtailed individual rights and freedoms. Nevertheless, it would be an exaggeration to assert that Singapore has fully disavowed liberalism or even developed a clear communitarian alternative to democracy that only maintains the formal characteristics of electoral democracy. This is obvious in the official discourse which has been ambivalent about the regime’s ideological basis. For instance, in an interview with Fareed Zarakia in 2015, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong stated: “We are a multi-party liberal democratic system. The outcome is not what you would like to see, but that is what Singaporean voters have decided.” This is in line with Chua’s observation that “The most important institution sustaining the legitimacy of the PAP government is the electoral parliamentary system” (p. 177). So what to make of this claim to liberalism in the prime minister’s statement? The reality is that Singapore’s leaders have failed to develop a consistent communitarian ideology and have instead sought to transcend ideology by adapting whatever provides sufficient support for the regime and the elite that depends on it, even if this has entailed defending liberal ideas which for instance underlie the electoral system, the legal system or the drive for economic development.

While Chua highlights public housing and the strong role of the state in the economy as examples of the PAP’s rejection of liberalism, ironically the operation of both of these institutions incorporate elements of economic liberalism. In terms of public housing, the government has not only sought to provide affordable housing for the majority of Singaporeans but has also developed higher quality housing for wealthier Singaporeans. Moreover, flats can be sold on a resale market which, due to the limited supply, has driven up housing prices. In order to attract the wealthy to move to Singapore, the government has lowered taxes on the rich including eliminating the estate duty and capital gains tax while it has increased the costs for average citizens through, for instance, Goods and Services Tax (GST), which is presently 7 per cent. Health care has also become a commodity, and while the state

keeps costs relatively low, individuals have to pay their own routine medical bills. As a consequence, the rich are able to afford better treatment options than the majority of the population.

In addition, government-linked corporations — which Chua calls state-owned enterprises — operate according to market principles, which sets them apart from similar companies in other countries. Companies are motivated by profit and political control is weak. Moreover, in many areas, the state has relied on a process of privatization, liberalization and deregulation which has fundamentally restructured the economy away from the traditional model of the developmental state. In the process, public services have also been privatized to make them more profitable. For instance, public transport has been subjected to market competition between two players. Even the Civil Service College, which trains bureaucrats, has to compete with other educational institutions.

Last but not least, the need to remain competitive underlies the push towards attracting foreign talent to Singapore. A third of Singapore's population consists of foreign migrants and temporary residents. At the same time, Singaporean leaders have asserted that there is “no free lunch” for Singaporeans, who are constantly being urged to upgrade their skills. As a consequence, Singaporeans are forced to become self-reliant designers of their own life, which fosters individualism. Naturally, it weakens any attempts to promote real communitarianism. In other words, the PAP is not inherently opposed to liberalism but rather takes an opportunistic stance by adopting liberal tenets when it suits the ruling party. While Chua's valuable book thus provides interesting insights into the government's repeated rejection of liberalism, it neglects the role that liberalism still plays in Singapore which, in the opinion of this reviewer, does not amount to anything close to a complete disavowal.

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