

## *SOJOURN Symposium*

***On Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore by Chua Beng Huat. Singapore: NUS Press, 2017.***

Review essays by Garry Rodan and John R. Clammer, with a response from Chua Beng Huat.

**Keywords:** Singapore, communitarianism, state capitalism, inequality, social democracy, liberalism.

### Review Essay I: Garry Rodan

This book is a major intervention in the debate about how to understand Singapore's political regime, as it powerfully exposes the limitations of ascendant liberal pluralist critiques of authoritarianism. Those critiques have been heavily weighted towards documenting and lamenting the liberal democratic shortfalls of Singapore's political regime. Chua Beng Huat, too, is critical of authoritarianism, but challenges the ideological conceptions of liberal individualism and market capitalism as the basis of so many critiques. Culturalist approaches rationalizing authoritarianism are also emphatically rejected. Instead, Chua analyses the interrelated historical, ideological and social bases of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). He harnesses this approach to highlight and explain what he depicts as the PAP's systematic aversion to both liberal individualism and free market capitalism, and to argue that social democracy remains integral to the political success of the PAP.

There is no previous book with quite this focus and argument, even though Chua is not the first — and this is not his first work —

to challenge liberal political and economic accounts of Singapore's development. However, Chua's argument is far more concerted and detailed in exposing and challenging the assumptions of liberal pluralist approaches to understanding the nature of the political regime in Singapore and its durability. Agree or disagree with Chua's argument, the depth and coherence of his analysis compels engagement with it. It is an essential starting point for any serious debate over the foundations and forces driving the Singapore political regime.

*Liberalism Disavowed* starts with two chapters situating Singapore both in the global ideational and structural contexts of capitalist development during and after the Cold War. These chapters tell of struggles between liberal individualism and collectivism, both in Singapore and the West, as capitalism evolved. Chua's point is that Lee Kuan Yew and colleagues understood that market forces alone would not address the problems of Singapore's development. According to Chua, hostility to liberalism was, from the outset, married to an alternative conception of social and economic governance that reflected some of the objectives and values of social democratic collectivism subscribed to by purged opponents of Lee.

Subsequent chapters analyse the unfolding dynamics and tensions of this political project. In essence, they argue that social democratic aspects of the Singapore development model have underscored the PAP's political legitimacy and electoral success, while departures from these aspects have generated an electoral backlash. Especially important and distinctive to this account is the way that Chua documents and analyses the challenges of reconciling social democracy with authoritarian rule and capitalist development. The very meaning and forms of social democracy, he argues, are subject to revision by the PAP over time. Contradictions emerge, as between ideologies of 'meritocracy' rationalizing political elitism and egalitarianism usually championed under social democracy elsewhere. Chua offers a rich and insightful account about this process, one that fits squarely with his central thesis of the PAP's antipathy towards liberalism.

Chua shows how social spending and social welfare do not just rise as the PAP attempts to shore up its political legitimacy but are also defined by assorted strategies of social engineering. Moreover, he explains how the capacity to do this is structurally facilitated by the resources generated through state capitalism. This is most detailed in the material on public housing, for which Chua is already well known. Public housing has recently confronted major challenges in the face of rapid immigration and other pressures though. Chua therefore substantially updates and elaborates on his earlier work on this aspect of state capitalism. Separate coverage of the internationalization of state-owned enterprises (SOEs) and sovereign wealth funds complements this analysis.

Chua has previously written on multiculturalism in Singapore, but not quite in such a disciplined and systematic account of how the PAP state blunts liberal individualism. His account here of how and why collective membership and group solidarity prevail over notions of individual citizenship is especially illuminating. He provides fascinating details about the ways that race group identity is promoted to reduce the prospect of such identity being mobilized against the PAP. Again, though, such an outcome requires periodic institutional renovation, including through the state-sponsored racial self-help welfare organizations that Chua analyses. Language and housing policies have also been necessary to manage or resolve tensions inherent to the PAP's construct of group multiculturalism. Repeatedly, though, the result is the suppression of liberal concepts of multiculturalism in particular — not multiculturalism *per se*.

The message of Chua's detailed analyses of different core institutions is that authoritarianism has to adapt to survive, but in a sophisticated manner, and not without resigning some new political space to critics. In this vein, he portrays the expansion of gay politics in Singapore as both a signifier of the liberalization of culture and as the expansion of space for civil society. Similarly, the emergence of social media is seen to have radically transformed the relations between media and politics, rendering control of the press increasingly more symbolic than real. Yet, ultimately, it is the ability

of the PAP to deliver on material conditions — through improved public transport, more affordable public housing, increased social spending and welfare — that Chua sees as underwriting its reasserted political hegemony in the 2015 General Election. Concessions to cultural liberalism are a comparative sideshow.

Chua's account of how and why liberalism has been marginalized in Singapore is not just new, but provocative in projecting it as a continued central ingredient in the successful reproduction of the regime. The book has broad significance for debates over the relationship between authoritarianism and capitalism, especially in highlighting the historical foundations on which political regimes rest.

This book also invites debate over Chua's understanding of social democracy as an abiding theme of PAP ideology. Notwithstanding his acknowledgement — indeed his argument — that there are contradictions in the PAP's antipathy to liberalism, these contradictions are so extensive as to cast serious doubt on the PAP's social democratic credentials. Is the PAP 'ideologically' committed to ameliorating the social outcomes of the market and/or advancing the rights of citizens to act collectively to that end? We might need to scrutinize even more closely the structural dynamics within which the PAP's discursive practices have evolved.

Important as Chua's account of the intensification and diversification of state capitalism through SOEs and sovereign wealth funds is, this does not seem to consider the implications for coalitions of interest and power within the PAP party-state. Has this direction in state capitalism militated against some of the earlier PAP emphasis on egalitarianism through social policy? Indeed, paradoxically, did it also lay foundations for greater receptivity within the PAP to economic liberal policies contradicting social democracy? How might his framework accommodate such questions?

To be sure, the Singapore state has played a decisive role through subsidized public housing in providing for a key basic need of Singaporeans. Yet the record of redistributive measures beyond that is modest, even meagre, by international comparisons.

Between 2010 and 2016, for example, the World Economic Forum (WEF) consistently ranked Singapore as the second-most competitive economy. For the same period, though, Singapore fared badly in the WEF's Inclusive Development Index (IDI) measuring economic performance in relation to social inclusion, labour compensation and fiscal transfers. In the 2017 IDI, out of thirty advanced economies, Singapore ranked twenty-ninth in social protection, twenty-second in fiscal transfers and twenty-fifth in access to education and skills. Public sector spending has also been comparatively low. The 3.9 per cent of GDP spent on health in 2015, for example, is significantly less than other developed countries in the West and parts of East Asia (Low 2014, p. 132; Rahim and Yeoh 2019, pp. 97–99).

Meanwhile, the PAP has adopted a host of liberal economic policies enforcing market principles on Singaporeans, whereas in other countries — liberal and social democratic — political interventions have been in greater accord with ideas of social equity and justice. Continued PAP resistance to a legislated minimum wage and the absence in Singapore of a publicly funded old-age pension seem incongruous with social democracy. In the latter case, Singaporeans are predominantly required to rely on their personal savings through a compulsory superannuation scheme in which employees and employers — but not government, on any significant scale — routinely contribute. In an ingenious twist of neoliberal economic policy, these necessarily uneven personal savings can be drawn on to support private medical and educational expenses. This amounts to a partial privatization of basic needs.

In general, rising inequality as measured by the Gini coefficient coincided with greater recourse to liberal economic policies in Singapore from the 1990s through to 2007 (Ng 2015). In this period, the PAP also increasingly emphasized communitarian values. Are communitarian values then an alternative to economic liberalism, or quite compatible with them? Chua's answer would be helpful. Why, too, is it that inequalities — while still unacceptably high — are lower in so many developed liberal democracies, often with lower per capita GDPs than Singapore? Does this pattern reflect, in part,

the relative absence of genuinely independent and influential trade unions in Singapore? Might the pluralist representation so derided by the PAP be a factor?

Certainly, as Chua indicates, the PAP has significantly boosted spending recently on social safety nets targeting the aged and unemployed — especially following the PAP's dip in support at the 2011 polls. However, funding is still nowhere near proportionate to need. Furthermore, the government's 'many helping hands' approach to social safety nets continues to envisage a key role for families and private charities. The PAP selectively harnesses liberal economic individualism to its own social policies.

Crucially, the PAP resists the concept of social and economic rights — individual or collective. These rights and underlying values have been emblematic of European social democratic movements over the last century. However, the PAP's paternalistic political culture is not compatible with such rights claims. They pose a threat to the authority and interests of Singapore's technocratic politico-bureaucratic elite to chart and control what they see as the right mix of state and market.

For social democrats, formal political rights cannot take precedence over social and economic rights, but nor are they incidental to them. This especially includes collective political rights of workers and others to press for equity and social justice. Yet the PAP has been regularly deemed to have fallen short in its observance of Singaporeans' rights to freedom of speech, expression, association and peaceful assembly detailed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

In short, attributing a social democratic motivation to this model of political economy may be imposing more ideological coherence than is necessary for the case. Technocratic politico-bureaucrats have amassed growing power and influence through state capitalism in Singapore, which has underscored the provision of public goods. This might not fit the classical story of liberal markets and politics, but then Chua's book suggests that this is precisely why the PAP has enjoyed so much political success. Such a provocative and insightful

point may unsettle liberal optimists, while enriching future debate about the relationship between capitalism and political regimes.

### Review Essay II: John R. Clammer

It has often proved difficult to make Singapore sound interesting in comparison with its neighbouring Asian societies — too small, too urban, too sterile, too authoritarian, or simply just too managed. Similarly, a lot of the literature on the tiny island state has oscillated between either — often justified — criticism on the one hand, or hagiography on the other. One of the virtues of this book is that it makes Singapore interesting, by locating its post-independence history, politics and social organization in a serious theoretical framework. The particular trajectory of Singapore as an independent state — its celebrated housing policy, its rise from a colonial backwater to a highly successful capitalist economy, its multiracialism, the lack of corruption and its more recent positioning of itself as a communications hub for Southeast Asia and beyond, and the authoritarianism, censorship, hounding through the courts of opposition politicians and other social critics, the huge defence budget and its status as effectively a one-party state politically — are here examined in a systematic and engaging way. The central trope of the book is the rejection of liberalism by Singapore's ruling elite since independence, and what are supposed to be its social correlates, and, in particular, individualism and the rights to individual freedoms where these challenge the hegemony of the — existing — state apparatus and its supportive ideology.

Through the lens of this central theme, Chua examines closely and fluently the post-independence formation of the political structures and attitudes, that, while diluted today to some extent, still provide the frame within which Singapore society and its cultural expressions are forced to operate, and the policies and practices that were the outcome of what might be termed the 'Singapore Ideology' on a number of key areas. These include

the ‘re-definition’ of democracy, the disrupting of private property rights while instituting a massive social housing project that quite literally defines the skyline as well as many of the spatial and social dynamics of everyday life in the city state, the creation of an extensive apparatus of state capitalism through a large network of state-owned enterprises and two well-financed sovereign wealth funds, the creation of a significant — but not much discussed — armaments industry, the policy of official multiracialism and its effects on education, housing, social integration, language use and notions of identity, and the close management of culture, including numerous instances of censorship and banning of plays and other cultural expressions while promoting certain forms of ‘high’ culture through the provision of state-of-the-art concert halls and other venues. Hence the attempt to make Singapore not only into a “smart” city but also a “creative” one (pp. 162–63). The frame for all of these, Chua persuasively argues, is the rejection of liberalism, and its replacement not only with what he calls “communitarianism”, not only as a rejection of “Western” values (many of which are in fact enthusiastically embraced in Singapore) but also as establishing the role of the state as the nanny-in-chief, expecting loyalty in exchange for a corruption-free political system (while paying themselves very large salaries), and the provision of social and infrastructural facilities unrivalled in any other Asian country except Japan — public transport, schools, parks, clean markets and so forth. In light of this, Chua sees no prospect of the dominance of the PAP declining in the foreseeable future. They have indeed delivered the goods, but at a price.

The book is balanced by the fact that Chua not only documents in accurate detail the political, economic and social ‘peculiarities’ of Singapore but also grasps the nettle when discussing the means that have made this possible: early repression and use of the courts, the complete failure of the attempt to introduce a kind of ersatz Confucianism as a basis for a scheme of Asian Values — and even such absurdities as the attempt to create a national costume, and dreadful nationalistic songs — and the effects of censorship on



cultural life. While I think that Chua takes a very fair stand on these issues, I do think that the book could have been strengthened even more with a little more discussion of a number of themes. For me, these would include the Singapore government's attitudes to human rights and their universality, the Asian Values debate that briefly flourished and then thankfully vanished, the position of immigrants of varied classes and backgrounds who now constitute a substantial proportion of the population and who have in many cases quite literally built the country, the continuing ambiguities about the role and status of culture and cultural policy, and very significantly, the position of the new middle class, which cuts across ethnic lines. The conservatism of that class which Chua notes is, I think, more complex, nuanced and contested than he allows, and might well be a source of change, as it has been already in the pushing of the boundaries of cultural expression.

Let me elaborate a little more on these. Liberalism is often associated with the protection of human rights. The curious thing about Singapore is that the government is not for the most part a systematic violator of human rights, yet has long maintained a rhetoric of opposition to universal or fully applicable application of human rights, arguing from such positions as the need to modify rights to take into account cultural differences, to argue for the superiority of some kind of communal rights over individual ones — a clear difference from liberalism — and hostility to any idea of gay or lesbian rights, having suggested in the past that homosexuality is a 'Western disease'. There have certainly been cases in the not too distant past: one thinks of the absurd 'Marxist plot' of more than two decades ago when a number of social activists were arrested, as were their lawyers, many of whom were effectively tortured and whose highly edited 'confessions' aired on prime-time television. Newspapers and magazines have been banned and their local circulation curtailed — such as the highly regarded *Far Eastern Economic Review*. Opposition politicians have been harassed and sued, often over trivial matters, and courts have rarely if ever ruled against the government. Nevertheless, unlike some not-so-far-

away neighbours, people do not ‘disappear’ and bodies of political opponents do not show up floating in the sea, and censorship in the arts has definitely declined in recent years.

Many of these changes can, I think, be traced precisely to changing class structure — the expectation of the new middle class (actually not so new) for more cultural space, opportunities for political expression, economic liberalization, and freedom in general. Certainly, these demands have not translated into opposition to the PAP which has successfully created the material and educational conditions out of which the middle class has arisen, but that is not to argue for an inherent conservatism. Much more than that is going on in all those HDB and, particularly, privatized Housing and Urban Development Company (HUDC) housing estates. The other great culprit is of course globalization. Singaporeans travel, study abroad, can — or certainly could — buy books banned in Singapore at the Kuala Lumpur airport. And there is the desire to make Singapore a smart-city, a cultural one and indeed a ‘world city’ economically and as a communications hub, where virtually every Singaporean is now wired (actually wireless). All of which mitigates against maintaining any kind of closed or soft-authoritarian society. This is very much signalled by one important aspect not discussed in any detail in this book — notably the cultural sphere and the way that it is leading liberalization, if not liberalism in the political sense. An important aspect of the globalization of Singapore society is, of course, the contentious issue of immigration, and the now very large percentage of residents who are not, or did not begin as, Singapore citizens. The detailed sociology of this is important, not only as a source of globalizing trends — cultures, music, foods, art — but also as the genesis of a new kind of class structure in the country — the highly skilled professional, the construction worker, the Filipina maid, the foreign student. Singapore was to a great extent quite literally built by immigrants, recent ones as well as the early arrivals. Not all, probably a small minority, come from societies in which liberalism is the dominant political ideology, but when you let people in, you cannot keep ideas out.

The virtue of this book is that it seriously engages with many of these issues. But its relative or absolute silences also indicate the intellectual and social spaces where work remains to be done. Doing that work, and recasting Singapore as not simply a self-serving opponent of liberalism, but as a rapidly changing society in constant and unavoidable negotiation with the ‘outside world’ that now resides within it, suggests an exciting and unconventional intellectual agenda for Singapore studies in the future.

### Author’s Response: Chua Beng Huat

Before responding to the comments of Professor Garry Rodan and Professor John Clammer, I must immediately register my gratefulness for the kind words and the labour they have generously given to review my book. The symposium also provides an opportunity to update and supplement some points in the book since its publication. First, I would like to say something about my motivation for writing this book.

In recent years, neoliberalism has emerged as the concept of choice for the analysis of contemporary nations, and Singapore has not escaped this framing. If the essential characteristics of neoliberalism are free market, minimal state, including the withdrawal of social welfare provisions by the state and, therefore, the emphasis on individual responsibility and resilience, then clearly the frame sits very poorly on Singapore’s PAP government. As a capitalist society, emphasis on individual effort is inevitable; this is embedded and entrenched in the idea of meritocracy, a mantra of the government. Terms like ‘self-resilience’ are but a re-scripting of the idea that ‘no one owes us, Singaporeans, a free lunch’. However, the Singapore state is hardly a minimal state, and the domestic economy is not a free market with minimal state economic intervention.

Since the 2008 global recession, there is now a common refrain that the global liberal order is in crisis. This has created discursive and ideological space for alternative ideologies to liberalism. This new

possibility seems to be most prominently, if not exclusively, taken by extreme right-wing political sentiments in Europe and America; globalization that is spawned by liberal capitalism has turned into anti-immigration and xenophobia, particularly Islamophobia. The abject economic and political failure of the former socialist economies has left the political left unable to seize the opportunity to reassert and claim their ideological space and respond to the issues, such as income inequalities and declines in social welfare provisions, which have traditionally been their preoccupations. However, 'socialism' as a critique of capitalism remains an important and valuable concept that should not be discarded along with the failures of the experiments with socialist economy thus far.

With this larger global context, one of the motivations of this book is to recover some of the 'socialist' elements in the social democratic beginnings of the PAP — a history that appears to be buried under the promotion, including by the PAP government itself, of Singapore as a success story of global capitalism.

Secondly, many analysts, including domestic critics, of the PAP government appear to still be stuck in a very reductionist critique of its authoritarianism, partly because of a fixation with its longevity in parliamentary power and, partly, still haunted by the authoritarianism of the late Lee Kuan Yew. Embedded in this authoritarian critique is a simple, and one could say insulting, image of Singaporeans as an electorate which is either living under fear of many imagined prosecutions and/or as ideological dopes who buy into the various myths propounded by the PAP leadership. Yet, if we examine the electoral results of past general elections, we will discover that the popular support for the PAP has ebbed and waned depending on the issues at hand, starting with the popular rejection of the graduate mother policy in 1984 and, more recently, during the 2011 General Election (GE), when the PAP received the lowest popular electoral support in its history, causing many Singaporeans to invest emotionally in the possible beginning of a 'New Time' in Singapore politics, only to be disappointed by the 2015 GE results, when the PAP recovered its ground by securing close to 70 per

cent of the popular vote. The swings in electoral results clearly show that Singaporeans have been savvy voters, at least since the mid-1980s, who know how to use their votes to assert their values. This development alarmed the late Lee Kuan Yew sufficiently for him to coin the idea of a 'freak election'.

Against the reductionist critique of authoritarianism and the fact of an increasingly politically, economically, culturally and socially complex Singapore, I attempt in the book to explain the longevity of the PAP in parliamentary power through the institutionalization of selective social democratic elements in contemporary Singapore, most notably the national public housing programme and, less obviously, the heavy presence of the state in state-owned enterprises, locally called government-linked companies or GLCs. This state capitalist sector is often criticized by free-market capitalists for encroaching into the economy at the expense of the private sector. However, the profit of state capitalism has become an increasingly important revenue stream for the running of Singapore, which keeps the tax burden of individuals and businesses low and serves as a channel of social redistribution.

Shifting from the materialist to the ideological, with the rise of capitalism in East Asia, especially after China marketized its economy, the idea of the 'social' in social democracy began to take on an 'Asian' accent, as the embodiment of the 'communitarian', to be distinguished from the 'communal', which the PAP government rhetorically reserves for 'ethnic chauvinism'. This reformulation of the social is particularly useful in the PAP government's strategy of governing race through multiracialism. In this context, multiracialism is a political concept, not a cultural one. It emphasizes the equality of racial groups as the essential basis for 'racial peace and harmony', the maintenance of which requires, ironically, the unequal treatment of different racial groups on different issues, at different times. All three policies are disruptive of central features of liberalism put in place in the early years of the PAP government, which reflected its then ideological embracement of social democracy. It is my contention in the book that the effective and efficient maintenance

of these three policies, in addition to the pursuit of macroeconomic growth, are the fundamental bases of the majority of Singaporeans' continuing popular electoral support for the PAP and, thus, the party's continuing domination in parliament into the foreseeable future.

Let me now turn first to John Clammer's comments. He suggests that greater attention could have been placed on several issues; apart from the question of the substantial presence of immigrants, both temporary and permanent, the other issues can be broadly subsumed under the rise of the middle class, which he rightly states, "cuts across ethnic lines" — universal human rights, and the role and status of culture and cultural policy. While more details can certainly be provided, these 'middle class' issues have been covered in the book in the Introduction and in the chapter on cultural liberalization. It is noted in the book that the so-called Marxist Conspiracy has long been dismissed as bogus even by the mainstream media (p. 44), and the control of the press has become largely dysfunctional because of the proliferation of 'news' in social media. The LGBT discussion must now be updated. Since October 2018, the gains made by LGBT groups have reached the point in which the repeal of Section 377A, a Victorian law that criminalizes sex between men, is being publicly supported by significant public figures, including Ambassador-at-large Tommy Koh and former Justice of the Supreme Court and Attorney General, V.K. Rajah. The PAP government has been avoiding the issue by insisting that public opinion has not reached the stage where repealing the law would be acceptable to the majority. One cannot help but be sceptical, because it has always prided itself for taking 'tough but unpopular' decisions which it deems necessary. The delaying of the decision has the consequence of the continuing politicization of the issue, something which the government would arguably want to avoid.

To my point that a very significant segment of the professional middle class is unlikely to vote against the PAP, as they derive their livelihood directly or indirectly from the civil service and the extensive network of government-linked companies, Clammer rightly suggests that the expanding Singaporean middle class, with higher education,

travel and access to global media, is not monolithically politically conservative. He further points out that it is the liberal middle-class segment that is “leading liberalization” in the cultural sphere. I have pointed out that in spite of their dependence on government grants to survive, local theatre groups have disproportionately borne the responsibility of social critique and have constantly struggled against and pushed the boundaries of censorship (p. 162). However, it is also argued in the book that the PAP’s political dominance has not, thus far, been affected by the continual liberalization of the cultural sphere. I should note that in Rodan’s reading, cultural liberalization is but a sideshow, politically. One could not be blamed for suspecting that some culturally liberal Singaporeans might be sufficiently anxious about their material ‘good life’ to quietly support the PAP at the ballot box.

Now to Garry Rodan’s comments. He has raised several questions which in different ways ask whether the current PAP government could still be considered a ‘social democracy’. Let me respond to specific issues before answering this conceptual question.

Against the idea of generalized social redistribution of part of the profits of state capitalism, he raises instances of under-financing of specific areas of social welfare, evidenced by various global indexes. I will have to say that I am generally sceptical towards global indexes, whether it praises or chastises the performance of the PAP government, largely because in order to derive the index, too many local specificities have to be relaxed, leaving much room for disagreement from any particular government to its ranking on the index. A recent instance illustrates this. The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index released by Oxfam in October 2018 placed Singapore at 149 in a list of 157 countries, behind Myanmar (138), Timor-Leste (132) and Vietnam (99), even behind Ethiopia and Afghanistan. The lack of commitment is supposedly due to the low income tax rates of a maximum 22 per cent, relatively low social spending of 39 per cent of the national budget on health, education and social protection (compared to 50 per cent in Thailand and Korea), and absence of a minimum wage and other labour

regulations. The Oxfam index, as a measure of relative spending among the nations compared, is probably correct; however, it says little about how efficaciously money is spent.

Empirically, just by comparing the quality of everyday life in Singapore against those of Myanmar, Timor-Leste and Vietnam, questions about the ‘meaningfulness’ of the Oxfam index will inevitably be raised. One can even imagine the sense of indignation, if not anger, felt by the PAP government. Its response is entirely to be expected; higher spending does not automatically translate into greater commitment to reducing inequality. More importantly, the achievements of Singapore, empirically, in quality of healthcare (extremely low infant mortality rate and longevity), education (consistently scored highly in international comparisons), job creation (persistently low unemployment rate) and housing (90 per cent homeownership) are the envy of other nations. Unsurprisingly, the Minister of Social and Family Development states, “That we achieved all these with lower taxes and lower spending is to Singapore’s credit rather than discredit” (Channel NewsAsia, 9 October 2018). Having said that, specific issues of social redistribution deserve further discussion.

On old-age pension, it has long been noted that the individualized social security saving system, the CPF, contains no collective redistributive function and, as Rodan argues, this seems “incongruous with social democracy”. However, this issue has to be considered in conjunction with the public housing ownership scheme. The very high rate of ownership of 99-year leaseholds on subsidized public housing is facilitated entirely by allowing the homeowners to make a pre-retirement withdrawal from their CPF savings. The flat is thus an asset that can be monetized to fund the homeowner’s retirement needs. The idea of housing as an asset-based welfare system has become increasingly common in developed nations since the late 1980s. However, in these latter cases, it is part of the neoliberal withdrawal of the state from social welfare responsibility. In contrast, the public housing scheme has been provided from the very outset of the new nation as a means of giving ordinary citizens a stake in



the national economy. As analysed in the chapter on public housing in the book, having encouraged the entire nation to invest in the public housing sector, the PAP government has to also bear the responsibility of ensuring the stability of the housing market and the value of the flat and its subsequent monetization. The HDB has worked out various ways in which this can be done. An ingenious way is to implement the 'lease buy back' scheme, which allows the homeowner to sell a portion of the 99-year lease, which will not be needed, at the prevailing market value back to the HDB in return for an annuity of monthly income.

On the issue of a minimum wage, the PAP government has been stubbornly resistant to the idea, and now to the idea of a universal minimum income, arguing that minimum income is not the solution to low wages for the low end of the labour market. It observes that, empirically, a high minimum wage often discourages employers from taking on workers; furthermore, a minimum wage does not always work towards raising income for low-wage workers. There are examples from which its argument can be drawn: Korea, under the current liberal president Moon Jae-In, has increased the minimum wage only to be faced with an increase in the national unemployment rate, and in Taiwan employers have used the minimum wage as the 'maximum' wage to pay young workers, contributing to its low-wage regime. In place of a minimum wage, the PAP government has instituted a wage supplement scheme that tops up wages of low-income workers to a certain level, arguably to retain and/or generate employment. This transfers the burden of wage increase from the employer to the government, which amounts to the public subsidizing capital. To the extent that social democracy has an explicit interest in full employment, would one consider this state-mediated 'negotiated' labour arrangement appropriate to social democracy?

In the current context of global capitalism where the extreme concentration of wealth and intensification of inequalities have become the norm across all nations, Singapore is not spared. There has been no shortage of media coverage and discussion on social and economic inequality, with contributions from the public and

the government, especially since the publication of the book *This is What Inequality Looks Like* (2018), by local sociologist Teo You Yenn. In general, the PAP government has not veered from its long-standing preferred strategy of not imposing a cap at the top but to keep 'levelling up' the bottom. Since the 2011 General Election, when income inequality emerged as an election issue, there has been a proliferation of changes to social welfare programmes and schemes, such as the \$8 billion Pioneer Generation Scheme, which subsidizes healthcare for the aged. The government has also directly intervened to increase the wages of cleaners and security guards, who are among the lowest, and often the oldest, wage earners in Singapore.

The PAP government's defence of its policy is to look past relative structural inequality and demonstrate that there has been 'real' income increases in the middle class and the lower-income wages, in contrast to the stagnation of middle-class income and declining income at the bottom in other developed countries. Its primary concern is to maintain the possibility of upward social mobility across generations; the preferred metaphor of incumbent deputy prime minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam is an upward-moving escalator that carries all passengers. Taking the long-term view on inequality, an essential process to ameliorate the likelihood of 'calcification' of class structure is to improve the 'fighting' chance of children of low-income families by providing public education as early as possible in a child's lifecycle. Expanding resources on early childhood education targeting low-income families are being provided by the government.

However, the long-term view consistently displaces the immediate question of those who are currently in poverty. The ongoing public debate on inequality seems to judiciously avoid the word "poverty". The poor is constituted by those who are permanently unemployable for reasons of age, chronic illness and many female-headed single-parent families; all work-related assistance schemes are therefore irrelevant to them. They are provided with meagre public assistance that is barely sufficient for daily needs, without surplus

for any individual or family emergencies. This is because of the PAP government's long-standing ideological stance against direct cash provisions, which it sees as 'handouts' and as a moral hazard that saps the work ethic of the population. The late Lee Kuan Yew marked the beginning of this ideological position when he visited Hong Kong in the early 1970s and saw how the people laboured under a colonial regime that provided them with nothing. Upon returning to Singapore, the PAP government began to move away from its 'social democratic' welfare provisions. This has been the ideological position of the successive generation of PAP leadership.

Both Clammer and Rodan raise the issue of the lack of institutionalization of universal human rights under the PAP government. Here, Clammer points out that the PAP government "is not for the most part a systematic violator of human rights" but rhetorically argues for "the need to modify rights to take into account cultural differences, to argue for the superiority of some kind of communal rights over individual ones". My own sense of this puzzle is that Singapore as a post-British colonial state in the early 1960s was obliged to include the protection of liberal individual rights in its constitution. But it was also constrained by the political necessity to turn the domestic and geopolitical politics of race into a constitutional multiracialism that stresses equality of race groups. Since then, the PAP government has been operating contingently between the two constitutional demands. Although in practice it tends to lean towards the latter through the rhetoric of maintenance of social stability, which facilitates the rationalization of the occasions in which individual rights are violated, as in the detention without trial of individuals deemed by the minister of home affairs to have "covertly" disrupted social stability.

On the larger question of the universality of human rights, it is the central thesis of the book that the PAP government has categorically rejected liberalism and, along with it, the idea of the universality of human rights that has at its core liberal individualism, as only individuals are 'naturally endowed' with rights. Liberalism and liberal critics will thus always remain the 'constitutive outside'

of the PAP government with the important mission of keeping at bay the temptation of the incumbent government, with its absolute control of parliament, to lapse into more unsavoury measures of social control and political repression.

Now to the large question of whether the PAP government can still be called a social democracy and, *inter alia*, related questions. Over the years the PAP's commitment to social democracy has obviously undergone significant changes, and terms and concepts have also undergone several rounds of re-scripting. For example, while it had unabashedly claimed that under its governance, Singapore was a "Socialism that Works" (Nair 1976), being the title of the book in which the PAP leaders responded to criticism from Socialist International in the mid-1970s, it simultaneously developed the earlier mentioned anti-welfare ideology. Ideologically, in the face of the declining fortune of things 'socialist', it has shifted its conceptualization of the 'social', the 'collective' to the 'communitarian'. On the question of whether communitarianism is compatible with liberal capitalism, state capitalism is in practice parasitical to, rather than a replacement or displacement of, market capitalism. The communitarian ideology, which includes in practice the redistribution of the profit of state capitalism, is also subject to the constraints of market capitalism.

Ironically, the claim to social democracy may be said to have long been undermined by the PAP government from the inside. Its self-identity was never an orthodox social democratic party, insisting that it merely operates pragmatically in the interest of economic development that is essential to the survival of the new island nation. Consequently, the central thesis of the book is not that the PAP government is a fully social democracy; it would be foolish to make such a claim. The claim of the book is much more modest; namely, elements of social democratic values that were institutionalized in the early years of the PAP government remain in place and are continuing to contribute very significantly to its longevity in parliamentary power, amid contingent and changing demands and the desires of increasingly better-educated

Singaporeans to which the PAP government must constantly respond and accommodate.

One final caveat. In writing the book I had been keenly aware that explaining the longevity of the PAP in parliamentary power could be, and indeed has been, read by some as endorsing the government. However, explanation and agreement are quite different and separate issues. I would like to state here that being economically socialist minded, I am in support of both the national public housing programme and state capitalism. And being liberal minded in cultural and political questions, I am quite comfortable as one of the constitutive outsiders who is against unnecessary censorship and repression of the collective rights to freedom of public assembly and freedom to establish civil society organizations.

**Garry Rodan** is Director of the Asia Research Centre and Professor of Politics and International Studies in the College of Arts, Business, Law and Social Sciences, Murdoch University, Murdoch, Western Australia 6150; email: G.Rodan@murdoch.edu.au.

**John R. Clammer** is Professor at Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonapat Narela Road, Sonapat, Haryana, Delhi NCR, 131-001, India; email: jrclammer@jgu.edu.in.

**Chua Beng Huat** is concurrently Professor of Urban Studies, Yale-NUS Liberal Arts College and Professor in the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore AS1 #03-06, 11 Arts Link, Singapore 117570; email: soccbh@nus.edu.sg.

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