

Chapter 6:

Inequality in Singapore: The Politics

There is little doubt that the ideology has been consciously formed and articulated to achieve particular ends but it cannot be asserted with similar certainty that the primary intent of PAP ideology is to ensure the survival of the party, although admittedly, an ideology stressing unity would tend to maximise the ruling party's power.

Chan Heng Chee on PAP ideology (1971, p.53).

6.1 Introduction

The increasing stratification of Singaporean society has placed greater and more varied demands upon the regime. Putting it another way, it is probably fair to say that, politically, the Government has more to worry about now than when Singapore society was less stratified. Threats to the stability of the system have emerged from different sections of the electorate at different times, and while it could be that no single group has the capacity to shake up the system by itself, the Government is a lot less in control than it was.

One group that does not worry the Government is the rich. It is quite likely, of course, that a large proportion of this group will be patrons of the PAP, but this notwithstanding, the rich in Singapore will be as troubled by the system as the rich in any capitalist society. The point being, that if individuals in this group were to feel constrained in any way (be it from the over-paternalistic state or the shortage of landed property), they are sufficiently 'transnational' to be able to relieve themselves of the tedium without any great hardship. In other words, while making Singapore their home, the upper classes are wealthy enough to come and go when they please. Many own properties overseas (Republic of Singapore 1995b, pp. 61-62) and semi-regular trips to

these residences may be preferable to a more permanent move which entails foregoing the benefits of a generous taxation system.²⁷⁷

Meanwhile, the choices for the poor and the middle class are starker. The former want to break out of poverty, while the latter want greater political space. Unlike the rich, however, there is no easy escape route for these groups, and the Government has had to be more sensitive to their demands. But rather than address these complaints in any direct sense, the PAP leadership has elected, in its characteristic technocratic way, to temper discontent by getting people to change their behaviour to suit the Government, not *vice versa*. In short, the strategy has been to appeal to Singaporeans' 'Asianism'. This has involved popularising the idea that Singapore is a society that functions in a special way, one quite different from a conventional democracy. The beauty of this 'Asian democracy', as it has been increasingly described (see Neher 1994, or George 1993, for example), is the fact it has some popular resonance. From the PAP's point of view, the main benefit to be derived is that it serves to legitimate the PAP's conservative regime, while presenting liberal alternatives as inherently inferior. A second related benefit is that the issue of the poor is not allowed to coalesce as a political issue. These are aspects that will be explored later in this chapter. It is appropriate first, however, to examine the evolution of the so-called 'Asian values' debate.

6.2 The Asian values debate

When, after centuries of economic backwardness, a number of Asian countries accomplished, in just a few decades, what it took their Western counterparts more than a hundred years to accomplish, a number of commentators began to theorise about the notion of a model of development that was peculiar to Asia.

²⁷⁷ This said, in 1988 alone, 4707 families emigrated from Singapore (Elegant 1989), and a subsequent study found that emigration was a serious consideration among many young, well-educated, high-income Singaporeans, largely because of what they considered to be an over-regulated society (Chiew 1990).

While there are a number of variations to this theme, one of the most popular is the idea that economic success occurred because of a set of values that are unique to Asian societies.

However, as this section of the thesis will demonstrate, this is an argument that is difficult to substantiate for a variety of reasons. Not least of these is the fact that, following humiliation and defeat by the Western imperialist powers in the 18th and 19th century, many Asian states began a process of self-examination and change. As it turned out, industrialisation proved to be an attractive proposition and a number of states began to embrace Western economic, political and social systems and to study and produce Western science and technology. The important point to note is that it was only during the late 1980s that Asian values came to occupy centre stage.

There are a number of possible explanations for this (re)discovery of Asian values. First, with the rapid economic growth in East Asia, in contrast to the sluggishness of Western economies, it might be understood as an expression of confidence among Asians and an awakening of Asian people's cultural identity in protest against the dominance of Western civilisation. Indeed, some commentators have taken this further and predicted that the East will replace the West in the next century as the dominant civilisation.²⁷⁸

However, while it is certainly true that Europe and the United States have played the prominent role in world affairs over the last two centuries or so, leading many Western nations to mistakenly believe that the aggressive export of their social system, developmental model and values to other countries is

²⁷⁸ This is a view arguably fuelled by Samuel Huntington's now infamous *Foreign Affairs* article (Huntington 1993). In this essay, entitled 'The Clash of Civilizations?', Huntington presents the case that, with the conclusion of the Cold War, global conflict is more likely to result from clashes between civilisations centring on different religions and beliefs, rather than ideology or state-to-state economic and political confrontation. He puts forward the gloomy scenario where the Confucian and Islamic civilisations join together to form a confrontation between East and West.

quite justified, it does not necessarily follow that the assertion of Asian values is a belated and indignant response to Western imperialism. A competing explanation is that the Asian values theme represents little more than a cloak of convenience which serves to shield its leading protagonists from criticism; most notably, the authoritarian leaders of the newly-powerful Asian regimes.

In support of this latter explanation, there is evidence to suggest that the issue of Asian values has gained political prominence only after it has been articulated in government rhetoric and official statements. In asserting these values, leaders from the region find that they have a convenient tool to silence internal criticism and to fan anti-Western nationalist sentiments. In the case of Singapore, for example, not content with asserting the existence and significance of such values, the authorities felt compelled to institutionalise these values in the form of the *Shared Values* White Paper.²⁷⁹

The essence of the argument put forward by the PAP is that the only alternative is the 'Asian way', based on Chinese culture, specifically Confucianism, which puts group interests before individual rights, and which emphasises harmony, learning, social hierarchy, respect for elders and loyalty to authority. In short, Singaporean society is depicted as having a social structure and cultural traditions that are very different from Western societies.²⁸⁰

Where Westerners laud the rights of the individual and the clash of ideas, Singaporeans revere the Confucian values of community, consensus and order. Where Singaporeans are more concerned about outcomes than they are about the processes to secure the outcomes, Westerners, by contrast, are more concerned about processes than outcomes, which is all very well, so long as the

²⁷⁹ See Chapter 1.

²⁸⁰ This is especially true after they were 'made official' following the *Shared Values* White Paper. Indeed, barely a day goes by without the *Straits Times* publishing at least one article or letter that either lauds Asian values or derides Western values.

system generates a productive, just and humane society. The problem, say the 'Asian democrats', is that the Western system of democracy is failing to produce this kind of society and, using the example of the United States, they make reference to the widespread violence and crime in American cities, arguing that the US has gone too far in protecting the rights of the individual as the expense of the rights of society as a whole.²⁸¹

There are a number of problems associated with this conceptualisation of Asian and Western values. These problems concern: (i) the dichotomy of Asian and Western values in general, and (ii) more specific issues relating to the legitimacy of so-called Asian values, in terms of their internal consistency and applicability to the Asian situation, and Singapore in particular.

Turning, first of all, to the treatment of Western values, there is a tendency to misrepresent Western social democratic systems through oversimplification. The value system in Sweden, for example, is quite different from that in the United States. While there exists a strong social collectivist tradition in Sweden, for instance, in the United States the tradition is one that champions the ideology of individualism. If the West is characterised in terms of the latter, as it frequently is, and then depicted as some homogeneous whole, this is seriously misleading.

Similarly, it is difficult to see how those who assert commonly shared Asian values are able to reconcile their claims given the immense diversity of Asia; a heterogeneity that extends to its people, their social-political practices and ethnic-cultural identities. Indonesia and Malaysia, for example, are predominantly Muslim countries with no historic connection to Chinese culture or Confucianism. The Philippines, essentially a Catholic country and a former Spanish and American colony, has received strong Western influence and can hardly be considered a member of a mainly Buddhist East Asian community. Thailand, Laos and Cambodia, on the other hand, are arguably closer to India

²⁸¹ See, for example, Ching (1993) and Fong (1994).

culturally speaking, and their branch of Buddhism, coming directly from India, is more austere than Chinese Buddhism. Japan, South Korea and Taiwan, meanwhile, have attained the status of democratic and industrialised nations, Indonesia and Singapore have authoritarian regimes, and China, Vietnam and North Korea remain communist states (Lam 1996).

The very idea that Asian values draw on Chinese culture (specifically Confucianism) is also problematic. Chinese culture is so vast and so complex, it can be used to justify either authoritarianism or democracy. Kim Dae Jung, South Korean human rights activist and former presidential candidate, for example, relies on Chinese culture to rebut Singapore's brand of authoritarian capitalism. He condemns it as an 'Orwellian extreme of social engineering', and argues that democratic practices are more in keeping with Asian tradition (Kim 1994, p. 190).

Moving on to the second, more specific set of problems, there is some doubt surrounding the supposed exclusivity of Asian values. That is, Asian values are assumed to be culturally specific (they are not to be found in Western culture), and cross-pollination of values is not a consideration. In short, social norms originating in other cultures ought not appear in Asian culture. In practice, however, advocates of the Asian values theme are often inconsistent in their adherence to this rule. The record of the PAP over the past three and a half decades provides graphic evidence of this, in that its leaders have chosen freely from other cultures, generally adopting whatever has been in its best political interest. It became national policy, for example, to demolish traditional kampongs and replace them with high rise apartments, to discourage traditional large families and promote the Western nuclear family, to downgrade Chinese education and promote English education. Capitalist markets and consumerism, meanwhile are deemed to be perfectly compatible with Asian values (Koh 1995).

A second specific problem relates to the claim that Asians put community above individuality. According to the PAP, this is a very real cultural difference between Asian and Western societies, and a good reason why individuals' inalienable rights do not suit Asian societies. However, the PAP's brand of communitarianism actually obscures more than it reveals about community. It says very little, for example, about community and its relations with the state and individuals, and about the conditions congenial to its development.²⁸²

A third claim which warrants closer inspection concerns the Asian cultural tradition of respect for elders and loyalty to authority, and the related question of outcome taking precedence over process. The right of workers to form independent trade unions, for example, is deemed to be less important than 'stability' and 'efficient production'. Implicit is the assumption that once people's basic needs are met and social stability is attained, the luxury of civil and political rights will be forthcoming. In the interim, however, economic development will be successfully achieved, only if the ruling élite are authorised to restrict individuals' political and civil rights for the sake of stability. Whether the cultural traditions of Singaporean society provide this authorisation is a moot point. The arguments put forward by Kim (1994) would suggest not. Furthermore, the radical labour movement of the 1940s and 1950s (see Chapter 2) could hardly be described as a group committed to consensus and order, and respectful of social hierarchy and authority.

Debates about the existence and significance of such cultural characteristics notwithstanding, a number of observations might be made of the argument that economic development rights have a priority over political and civil rights. First, it supposes that people must, in fact, make a choice between the two, which itself is debatable, but when it is an authoritarian regime that poses the dilemma, one ought be particularly wary. As the evidence in the previous

²⁸² This is an issue explored in more detail later in the chapter.

chapter illustrated, the powerful are well placed to accumulate wealth for themselves, and whatever their stated intentions, the hard reality of the situation is that an authoritarian regime can practise political repression and exploit the poor at the same time.

A second, related observation is that national development cannot be treated as being synonymous with the economic rights of vulnerable members of society. This has, of course, been a theme running throughout this thesis, but it is worth reiterating at this point in the context of the denial of civil-political rights. Development has not produced greater economic and social equality, and in the absence of civil and political freedom the poor cannot speak out, without fear, of their discontent. In short, the ruling authorities are beyond reproach for their failure to ensure the social-economic rights of the weak in society.²⁸³ As the remainder of this chapter will demonstrate, this is all part of the politics of inequality in Singapore.

6.3 The immobilisation of the poor

One might ordinarily expect a growing underclass to be a politically sensitive issue yet, in Singapore, despite the increasing numbers seeking assistance from VWOs, and the meagre resources these organisations have at their disposal, the position of the poor is not a prominent feature of political deliberations. This is not to say that the PAP denies their existence (indeed, several Government ministers have acknowledged that greater stratification of society is inevitable); it is more a case of the PAP ‘redefining’ what it means to be poor, and doing it so successfully, that possible sources of dissent have, to date, been effectively neutralised. The PAP has done this in a number of ways; first, it regularly denounces the Western welfare state; second, it promotes its own system of welfare based on voluntarism and what it identifies as the cultural

²⁸³ It is not axiomatic, of course, that greater political freedom would necessarily improve the lot of the least well-off in society, especially if the organisational capacity of the lower classes is limited.

characteristics of Singaporean society; and third, it neutralises potential opposition to its policies by co-opting community leaders into the PAP fold.

Of these three strategies, its regular public denunciation of the Western welfare state perhaps figures most prominently. The attributes associated with the welfare state receive no attention while its problems are given expansive coverage with detailed statistical and anecdotal evidence to show that it is a system doomed to failure.²⁸⁴ According to the PAP, the welfare state fosters dependency and constitutes a drain on the public purse. In short, its practices are morally and financially bankrupt. By contrast, its preferred model encourages individuals to fend for themselves and welfare is a matter of charity, not a state-financed entitlement.

The elevation of PAP's own model, which is remarkably similar to the system that operated under the English Poor Laws,²⁸⁵ constitutes the second major

²⁸⁴ The author has uncovered only one sentence in the Singapore print media that is even vaguely even-handed in its treatment of the Western welfare state. In his special report on the issue, Warren Fernandez observed that PAP politicians were so opposed to the welfare state, that they 'glossed over its attributes' and ran the risk of 'simplifying the reasons for its present malaise' (1994, p. 6). Despite this minor concession, there is no reference to the fact there exist economically successful nations (Germany, Australia and the Republic of Korea, for example) with sizeable welfare states (Adonis 1995b). Furthermore, there is a tendency for the Western welfare state to be depicted as a uniform, monolithic structure. Little attention is given to the fact that there is considerable variation among OECD countries with respect to the extent and nature of state social expenditures, their impact on income and wealth distribution, and the institutionalisation of egalitarian values.

²⁸⁵ The Poor Laws provided the basis for relief and welfare payments in England from the 16th until the 20th century. Earlier, relief had been given by the church rather than the state, and poor laws in the 14th and 15th centuries were passed principally to suppress vagrancy and begging. Legislation in 1572 authorised each parish to levy a rate, or tax, for relief of the poor if charitable contributions proved insufficient. The Elizabethan Poor Law Act of 1601 provided that overseers of the poor be appointed in each parish, whereupon they were to give relief to those unable to work and to set up workhouses for the able-bodied unemployed. Those unwilling to work were to be punished severely as vagabonds. In the 18th century, 'outdoor' relief (emergency, temporary relief for unemployed persons outside of the workhouses) was set up, and relief payments were also given to some employed persons who did not receive a living wage. This so-called Speenhamland system was abolished by the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834, which sought to tighten up what was regarded as a system of coddling those who did not wish to work (Briggs, 1984).

plank of the Government's scheme to depoliticise the issue of the poor. In Chapter 5, evidence was presented that showed the level of state welfare assistance to be trifling by any standard, but also that the conditions experienced by the poor are not made any easier by the fact only a small proportion of this group actually receive assistance (Goh 1991, p. 65).

There are two interrelated reasons for this. First of all, qualifying for financial assistance is quite an ordeal as benefits available through public assistance and RUAS are subject to stringent means-testing. Second, a consequence of this, seeking aid is considered socially embarrassing. Fernandez (1994a, p. 6) cites a study (but gives no details) which found the majority of Singaporeans were averse to seeking aid from public or private charities for this reason.²⁸⁶ This is where the similarity between the provision of welfare assistance in modern Singapore and 16th century England is most striking. Liew (citing Romanyshyn 1971) makes reference to 'the bitter bread of charity' that characterised Poor Law society, and how victims were blamed for their impoverishment. In this way, dependants of the Poor Laws were deprived of their full membership of society, and 'ascribed stigmas of deviance and sloth'. Meanwhile, charitable institutions effectively carried out a policing function on the poor as 'society's malcontents', with dispensations being meted out in a residual manner (Liew 1992, p. 10).

A cursory reading of the *Straits Times*, on the other hand, is unlikely to reveal such similarities. On the contrary, the PAP is presented as a firm but fair government that helps those most in need. This has been the case particularly since Goh Chok Tong took over the prime ministerial role with the promise of a 'kinder and gentler Singapore'. To this end, several schemes have been introduced which, to use the Prime Minister's words, help to complement the

²⁸⁶ Fernandez was most likely referring to Goh's work (given the rarity of such commentary) which noted that most mainstream families avoid seeking help from Family Service Agencies as the latter are identified as providing services for 'the failures and the destitute' (Goh 1991, p. 67).

competitive *yang* spirit with the compassionate *yin* spirit.²⁸⁷ The SFI and RUAS schemes (see Chapter 5) constitute prime examples of the Government's attempt to project its compassionate side. Meanwhile, great care is taken to avoid unwelcome publicity. It may be significant, for example, that a monograph focusing on low income families in Singapore was cancelled by the Government. This monograph, one of a series of seven based on 1990 Census data, was the only one not to be published. The others focusing on the aged population; religion, cultural, social and leisure activities; households and housing; a geographic analysis of the population; and multi-lingualism were all published on time. According to a Department of Statistics spokesperson, 'plans to produce a monograph on low income families were aborted owing to a time constraint faced by the monograph writer'.²⁸⁸

A third important component of the PAP's scheme to immobilise the poor has been to co-opt community leaders. This has been a successful ploy for the PAP throughout its period in office. As Chan (1976, p. 227) has documented, reducing the status, power and activities of community leaders is a politically risky exercise, whereas giving them a place in the official party structure taps their contribution and forestalls their opposition. Indeed, the Government is quite open about this. In a speech given by Goh Chok Tong in 1985, it was stated, when commenting on Singapore's dominant party system, that the PAP was always on the look out for suitable candidates to stand on the governing party ticket, but would 'co-opt those who disagree ... on certain policies, provided they share [the PAP's] core values' (cited in Bello and Rosenfeld 1990, p. 319).²⁸⁹ In Singapore, the leaders of the various ethnic groups have to be viewed in this context.

²⁸⁷ See, the Editorial, *Straits Times*, 30 December 1993, p. 24.

²⁸⁸ Personal communication with the Population & Manpower Statistics Section, Department of Statistics. The monograph was to be produced by Chia Siow Yue, currently the Director of ISEAS. The author contacted Professor Chia about this, who advised that the monograph was incomplete and that it was currently in the possession of the MCD.

²⁸⁹ The escalation of political co-option is an issue covered in some detail by Rodan (1994).

As Rahim (1994b, p. 47) has noted, a society organised and mobilised on the basis of race can easily be divided on the basis of race. In the first instance, therefore, Singapore's system of ethnic-based self-help groups (formed to assist the underachievers in their respective communities) could be thought of as a potential threat to the stability of the regime. However, on closer examination, the prospect of the two Malay groups (Mendaki or AMP [Association of Muslim Professionals]), SINDA (Singapore Indian Development Association) or CDAC (the Chinese Development Assistance Council) behaving in a sectarian fashion for political gain is negligible. The executives of these organisations, with the exception of the AMP,²⁹⁰ are dominated by patrons of the PAP-state whose first responsibility is the preservation and stability of the meritocratic system.²⁹¹

A number of Singaporeans have expressed scepticism over the efficacy of the ethnic-based self-help approach, the essence of their concern being that it might upset the nation's 'delicate multi-racial social fabric'. Rahim (1994c), for one, feels that the system is inequitable, as CDAC has much larger financial resources at its disposal, given that the Chinese are the wealthiest ethnic group. Making reference to the 'unequal engines of assistance', Rahim cites statistics for 1992 which show that on the basis of the CPF check-off system alone,²⁹²

²⁹⁰ AMP was formed to promote the interests of the Malay community as a result of a growing perception that Mendaki was becoming too beholden to the PAP. This notwithstanding, AMP is quite happy to accept Government funding.

²⁹¹ The author was provided with an abundance of literature on all the various educational programmes offered by Mendaki, for example, but was unable to procure data on the educational performance of Malay students relative to their counterparts in the other ethnic groups. This information was considered 'too politically sensitive' and could not be released even for an academic thesis.

²⁹² The current arrangement for the financing of the ethnic self-help groups is for employees to make small contributions from their wages to their respective ethnic self-help group. The so-called CPF check-off system requires Malay/Muslim workers to contribute S\$1 per month, the Chinese to contribute 50¢ (or S\$1 if they earn more than S\$2000 per month), while the Indians contribute between S\$1 and S\$6 per month according to income level. All contributions are deducted at source, and while the check-off scheme is not compulsory, the

CDAC received S\$5.7 million, compared with Mendaki's S\$870,000 and SINDA's S\$1.5 million. Add to this, the generous donations CDAC receives from its multi-millionaire patrons, from clan, guild and business organisations, and it is easy to see why plans to raise S\$50 million for its endowment fund by the year 2002 are not too ambitious (1994c, pp. 265-66).

Meanwhile, Mendaki and SINDA have Boards of Directors drawn largely from the civil service and from grassroots organisations. The CDAC's strong financial base is especially significant, argues Rahim, when 'viewed in the context of the deeper socio-economic and educational problems confronting the Malay and Indian communities relative to the Chinese community'. Not only is the CDAC able to cement the already relatively advantaged educational position of the Chinese community, it is well positioned 'to widen the community's socio-educational position relative to the other ethnic communities' (1994c, p. 267).

Rahim is not alone in her criticism of the ethnic self-help model. Of the 760,000 working Chinese, some 8.7 per cent elected to opt out of the CDAC CPF check-off scheme. Publicly identified by Goh Chok Tong as belonging to the English-educated Chinese community, some members of this group subsequently gave voice to their philosophical aversion to an ethnic-based self-help approach, arguing instead for the establishment of a multiracial self-help body (see Rahim 1994c, p. 265). As one correspondent to the *Straits Times* put it: 'If the Chinese majority, like the Malays and Indians, also face the problem of poverty ... then perhaps it is time for us to approach the problem of the destitute on a national level. In so doing, we will be able to help the needy from all communities without having to run the risk of raking up the issue of race'.²⁹³

onus is on the individual to opt-out. The ethnic self-help groups are also dependent upon pledges and donations from businesses, community groups and individuals.

²⁹³ Gwendoline Lee, *Straits Times*, 26 September 1992 (cited in Rahim 1994c, p. 275).

Another critic, Nominated MP Kanwaljit Soin, also takes up this theme making reference to society's 'vertical alignment' (its ethnic divisions) and society's 'horizontal alignment' (its class divisions). According to Soin, the vertical alignment is becoming more accentuated, and this she believes to be more detrimental. The way forward, she argues, is to have a national organisation, financed by contributions from the working population, that looks after the bottom 5-10 per cent.²⁹⁴ Soin then goes on to argue that it is poverty that binds people together. She rejects the arguments that people are more likely to give money to their own kind, and that Indians are better role models for Indians, Malays for the Malays and so on. 'A middle-class Indian', she states, 'may not be able to talk to a poor Indian in the same way that a poor Chinese or another poor Indian may be able to communicate with him or her'. In other words empathy overrides sympathy.

While it is probably not her intention, Soin is drawing attention to the fact that, first and foremost, Mendaki, AMP, SINDA and CDAC are receptacles for working class problems. Moreover, the use of ethnic communities to address problems not exclusive to any single ethnic community serves the vital function of fragmenting and disuniting the working class. Thus, while communitarianism and an Asian value system provide the publicly stated rationale for such an approach, it is no small coincidence that the ethnic-based self-help groups perform a valuable role with respect to the stability of the regime.

With the lower classes divided according to ethnic group, and their community leaders reliant upon or co-opted into the official political structure, it would appear unlikely (in the near future, at least) that the poor will mobilise to pose a threat to PAP rule. Quite simply, there is no-one to speak for these people in Singapore. In the absence of independent representation within their

²⁹⁴ See 'A broader approach to self-help' in the *Business Times*, 9 January 1993, p. 3.

community groups,²⁹⁵ their only other hope lies with those working within the various welfare agencies, but this is where a fourth factor comes into play that prevents the issue of the poor becoming politicised. Not content with lambasting the Western welfare state, promoting an ethos that treats the acceptance of welfare assistance as shameful, and co-opting individuals to neutralise their opposition, the PAP sets what it calls ‘OB markers’; that is, it decides which matters may be discussed freely, and which are ‘out-of-bounds’.²⁹⁶ Pronouncements about the plight of the poor fall into the latter category, and any welfare worker wishing to take up the cause would quite likely be challenged to stand for election, to ‘debate’ the Government in Parliament. Alternatively, an individual could run the gauntlet and continue to operate outside of the OB markers. However, with the experience of the 22 community workers accused of a ‘Marxist conspiracy’ still fresh in the mind, this is not a serious possibility.²⁹⁷

6.4 The significance of middle class alienation

To date, while the PAP has experienced some success in fending off criticism for not doing enough for the needy in society, it has come under increasing pressure from another quarter. As the CRC report noted, there is growing disenchantment among the young middle-class who find that assets such as property and cars are way beyond their reach because of resource constraints and Government-imposed restrictions. The advice given by the CRC was that this group must moderate their expectations and redefine the ‘good life’ to include artistic, cultural or other non-materialistic goals (Henson 1993b). But in a society with such a materialistic national credo, for many within the middle classes, this is easier said than done. Inequality for these people has an altogether different meaning. It is about not being in a position to realise one’s

²⁹⁵ Representation independent of the PAP, that is.

²⁹⁶ See ‘Only those elected can set OB markers’, *Straits Times*, 3 February 1995, p. 22. Goh, a keen golfer, first used the analogy in 1992 in the context of his promise of a ‘kinder, gentler’ Singapore (see Anon. 1993c, p. 26).

aspirations with respect to the ‘five Cs’ — car, condo, credit card, career and cash.²⁹⁸

The desire to accumulate material goods is one of the defining features of an affluent capitalist society. However, the scramble for status symbols is not a recent phenomenon, and it is not exclusive to Singapore.²⁹⁹ In Singapore, however, this phenomenon (referred to locally as *kiasuism*) is highly pronounced.³⁰⁰ This has as much to do with the PAP’s philosophy and policies as it does the capitalist system *per se*, because so unrelenting has the Government been in its promotion of a meritocracy, success in this society has become narrowly defined. As Henson (1993b, p. 2) put it:

My contemporaries and I belong to what I call the PAP generation. We are willing to work hard so that the future [will] be better than today. And so long as our efforts are rewarded in our system of meritocracy, we will strive to do our best. Of course, for some, the rewards need not come in the form of a Volvo or a condo ... But it is a fact, perhaps a sad fact, that the rewards most young Singaporeans look forward to, come in the form of material comforts or status symbols.

In short, the call for Singaporeans to rein in their expectations contradicts the PAP’s meritocratic ideal because, quite simply, as Nominated MP Toh Keng Kiat has put it, ask people to lower their expectations, and they will ask what it is they are working for.³⁰¹ This inconsistency notwithstanding, the Government

²⁹⁷ See Chapter 5 for details.

²⁹⁸ See ‘Grads aim high, but are realistic about expectations of the good life’, *Straits Times*, 3 October 1993, p. 20.

²⁹⁹ Recall that Arnold (1903) noted inequality had the effect of ‘vulgarising’ the middle class.

³⁰⁰ A recent addition to the Australian Macquarie Dictionary, *kiasu* is a Hokkien Chinese dialect term meaning ‘being afraid to lose’. The *kiasuism* of many Singaporeans is a frequently debated issue is the Singapore media, particularly how it exhibits itself by many people placing too much value on the same narrow set of goods for which they all compete. See Chan (1994) for an examination of this phenomenon.

³⁰¹ Reported in ‘Hard for S’poreans to lower expectations of “the good life”’, *Straits Times*, 3 October 1993, p. 20. See, also Chan S.M. (1993).

has taken up the cause with great alacrity, and preaching about the virtues of moderating one's expectations has become a regular theme in the public pronouncements of the Prime Minister and other senior figures within the Government.³⁰² However, although managing Singaporeans' frustrated expectations has been identified as one of the Government's major challenges for the near future, according to Nominated MP Walter Woon, it is a challenge made more difficult by the fact politicians and senior civil servants are telling people to scale down their expectations when they themselves are earning high salaries.³⁰³

Meanwhile, those within the middle classes who are motivated less by material considerations are caught in a cleft stick. Even if they are accepting of a society which judges a person's worth in material terms, where the non-economic dimensions of life are lower order considerations, this group faces the added problem of society perceiving any expression that attempts to recapture self-esteem, to be a socially-disruptive force.³⁰⁴ In short, while the Government makes pronouncements about the need to become a 'gracious, cultivated and compassionate society',³⁰⁵ it does not provide the independent political space that would foster the development of this kind of society.³⁰⁶ Inequality for these people means not being in a position where they are afforded the opportunity to participate in society for the benefit of their self-respect.

³⁰² See, for example, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech to undergraduates at Nanyang Technological University, reported in the *Straits Times* on 11 February 1995.

³⁰³ See, 'Govt's task: Managing expectations', in the *Straits Times*, 20 January 1994, p. 25. See, also, 'The good life is here, says PM', in the *Sunday Times* (Singapore), 19 February 1995, for a classic example of the Government's inconsistent stance on the issue.

³⁰⁴ This is a point made in 'Why it is so hard to lower expectations', a letter written by Chia Hern Keng, published on the 'Forum' page of the *Straits Times*, 7 October 1993, p. 28.

³⁰⁵ See, for example, the Prime Minister's National Day message, reported in the *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 12 August 1995, p. 1.

³⁰⁶ See Rodan (1994) for a detailed discussion.

One might imagine that, politically, this may turn out to be a more of a problem for the PAP than the question of the poor, on the grounds that calls for greater personal autonomy from the well-off attack the very heart of the economically successful authoritarian regime. Indeed, starting in the early 1980s, Singaporeans started to show signs that they were becoming far less accepting of the dominant one party system. The percentage of the popular vote captured by the PAP declined from 75.7 per cent in 1980, to 64.8 per cent in 1984, to 63.2 per cent in 1988, to 61 per cent in 1991,³⁰⁷ the PAP's worst electoral performance since the Barisan Socialis left the political scene in 1968.³⁰⁸ Then, in August 1993, the election of ex-PAP stalwart Ong Teng Cheong to the Presidency was marred somewhat by the fact he managed to capture only 58.7 per cent of the vote. The general feeling, both within and outside of the Party, was that this decline in popular support was, in large part, due to middle-class discontent with the PAP and its over-paternalistic style of government.

An indicator to support this view is that few young people are being attracted to the PAP fold, and that those who have joined the Party are resigning or failing to renew their membership. One explanation for this is that the youth see no reason to get involved in politics because they are affluent. In other words, 'with no challenge or crisis to galvanise them behind a rallying cry and careers occupying their time, they see little need to join a political party' (Henson 1993a, p. 14). A competing explanation is that 'the PAP is up against a deep cynicism among many young Singaporeans over everything it says or does' (Tan 1993b, p. 12). In short, the young, internationally mobile middle class, has been exposed to a wide range of ideas, and this group has become quite resentful of the state's intrusion into their private lives. As Rahim (1994a, p. 20) notes:

³⁰⁷ Reported in Tan S. (1993b, p. 12).

³⁰⁸ Barisan Socialis, the largest opposition party at the time, boycotted the general election in 1968.

Singaporeans have been lectured about the vices of gum chewing and its much deserved prohibition, regularly advised of the merits of preserving traditional Asian values and discarding decadent and immoral Western values, reminded of the primacy of economic development over political development, of nation over self, encouraged to be slim and trim, have more children but only if they can afford it, told how many members of an ethnic community are allowed to live in a district, what language to speak at home, the imperative of maintaining a formidable military capability and the dangers of welfare dependency.

The problem with such a paternalistic style of governance, according to Rahim, is that the PAP has become so preoccupied with defining the public interest that it has become 'out of touch with the aspirations of an increasingly well-educated, affluent and politically sophisticated public' (1994a, p. 26).

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the PAP leadership, sensitive to the erosion of its support, instigated a number of measures in an attempt to appease the discontented middle classes. These measures included the establishment in 1985 of the Feedback Unit, a body accorded with the responsibility of receiving suggestions from the public and explaining government policies at the grassroots level; the adoption of Government Parliamentary Committees in 1987; the introduction of town councils; the setting up of the Institute of Policy Studies which, among other things, aims to involve professionals in debates over public policies; and a relaxation of some of the censorship laws in the run up to the 1991 election (Rodan 1996, p. 33). These moves coincided, somewhat conveniently, with a carefully stage managed leadership transition, whereby the so-called 'old guard' led by Lee Kuan Yew would be handing over to a new breed of younger leaders, giving the impression that the PAP was, indeed, changing with the times. To this end, Prime Minister Goh declared in 1991 that he was in favour of a more consultative style of leadership.

It came as rather a shock, therefore, when the PAP continued to lose ground in the 1991 election. The surprise was not so much that the opposition parties

managed to capture 4 seats (up from 1 seat), so much as the location of the constituencies these seats represented. As it turned out, the level of disenchantment among the middle classes was not sufficient to unseat PAP members in the wealthier constituencies. The biggest swings against the Government were in those constituencies containing predominantly working class voters (Rodan 1993c, pp. 60-61, Singh 1992). As a consequence, the Government has changed tack somewhat, and it no longer panders to the English-educated middle class. Indeed, encouraged by the fact that the perceived discontent among the middle class does not represent a major electoral threat, the PAP has gone on the offensive with its anti-liberal Asian values theme.

6.5 Deconstructing liberal values

At a recent conference held at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies,³⁰⁹ Chua Beng Huat commented that in Singapore the birds in the trees have more to say than the poor, a rather mischievous reference to the fact that while the poor have no voice, the flora and fauna enjoy elevated status on the grounds that the activities of the Nature Society of Singapore (NSS) fall within the Government's OB markers. Indeed, other groups besides the NSS are also tolerated including, for example, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE) and, more recently, the Roundtable.³¹⁰ This might lead one to conclude, therefore, that Goh Chok Tong's 'gracious, cultivated and compassionate society' is just around the next corner.

As Rodan (1994) has noted the moderate political objectives of middle class groups like the NSS and AWARE mean that the interests of the PAP are not seriously threatened. As a result, it is more accepting of these organisations

³⁰⁹ Conference on Rapid Economic Growth and Democratisation in East and Southeast Asia, 16-17 December 1994.

than it would be a group campaigning against poverty, for example. The question remains, however, as to how far the PAP is prepared to go to accommodate Singapore's growing middle classes, with their middle class values and aspirations.³¹¹ The short answer is not very far. The PAP makes full use of what might be described as its 'unrealistic expectations-small vulnerable island' strategy,³¹² but it complements this strategy by promoting the idea of a special kind of 'Asian democracy'.

Not content with promoting the Asian value system at home, senior figures within the PAP have taken up the cudgel overseas. Brimming with the confidence one would expect given Singapore's enviable macroeconomic achievements, the PAP leadership have pulled off something of a master stroke in this department. With the possible exception of Malaysia, no other Asian country actively promotes the idea of an Asian-style democracy.³¹³ Singapore's political leaders can do so and get away with it because in the grand scheme of things, a tiny city-state does not wield much power. If Singapore were a force to be reckoned with, then its leaders would quite likely be accused of cultural imperialism.

³¹⁰ Roundtable is a non-partisan citizen group that aims to foster public discussion on national issues. Its first position paper was published in the *Straits Times* in September 1995 (see Raymond Lim 1995).

³¹¹ As Argyle (1994) has pointed out, there are many substantial class differences in values. An extensive analysis is beyond the scope of this study, but it is clear that there has been a growth of 'post-materialism' in Singapore in the same way there has in other nations at a similar level of development. This phenomenon involves a concern for non-material values like freedom of speech, social cohesion and the environment (Argyle 1994, p. 239).

³¹² The Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's speech to undergraduates at Nanyang Technological University provides a good example of this (see *Straits Times* on 11 February 1995).

³¹³ As Diana Wong pointed out to this researcher, there are only three countries in the world which talk about 'Asian democracy': Singapore, Malaysia and Australia (pers. comm., 17 February 1995). The inclusion of Australia in this list is an ironic reference to the Australian Government's desire to be considered part of Asia (see Scott and Williams (1995), and Williams (1995b) for details).

As it is, the likes of Lee Kuan Yew, introducing himself as a humble ‘Third World leader’, can lecture Western audiences on the virtues of the Singaporean political system without attracting much controversy. Indeed, while in the past a number of commentators have had cause to criticise Singapore for its human rights record,³¹⁴ Senior Minister Lee, in his capacity as travelling statesman, has taken to cautioning the West for its human rights record. This development has not created too many shock waves,³¹⁵ but there is certainly evidence to suggest that the ‘Asian democracy’ theme has started to gain acceptance in the West, especially from those who admire Singapore’s economic record.

The publicity that surrounded Lee Kuan Yew’s visit to Australia and New Zealand in April 1994 is testimony to this. As a consequence of Senior Minister Lee’s tour, a lot of media attention focused on the Singaporean way of doing things and what was being peddled as a superior brand of capitalism.³¹⁶ Not surprisingly, Lee Kuan Yew’s trip to Australasia received very favourable coverage in Singapore,³¹⁷ as did Brigadier-General George Yeo’s speech to the Salzburg Seminar two months later. In this address, the Information and Arts Minister told the international audience of academics and business leaders that Western democracy, which took centuries to develop, now faced serious problems and that East Asia could contribute to its reinterpretation.³¹⁸

Indeed, the PAP’s public relations machine has been quite unrelenting in this department. Social values Singapore-style was the central theme of the Prime

³¹⁴ See, for example, Amnesty International (1988), Haas (1989), Paul (1992) and Williams (1992).

³¹⁵ Aside from the exchanges between the PAP and US journalist William Safire (see the *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, June-September 1995 for details).

³¹⁶ See, for example, the *Australian Financial Review*, 19 April 1994, p. 1, p. 16 and pp. 30-31. For a less sanguine view, see Cotton (1994).

³¹⁷ See, for example, Chua H.C. (1994).

³¹⁸ See ‘The rise and rise of Asia’ and ‘Asian democracies offer lessons for West: BG Yeo’ in the *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 18 June 1994, p. 12 and p. 24 respectively.

Minister's 1994 National Day rally speech,³¹⁹ it was also the subject of his Lunar New Year message,³²⁰ and it received international coverage in the statement made by Abdullah Tarmugi (then acting Minister for Community Development) at the recent World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen.³²¹ Thus, with the backing of the *Straits Times*, which obliges with the frequent publication of articles decrying the permissiveness of Western society and its associated ills,³²² the disenchanted among the young middle class are constantly presented with a barrage of information, which aims to persuade them of the merits of anti-liberal life in Singapore.

The publicly stated rationale for the PAP not countenancing a transition to a liberal democracy is that Singapore is a society culturally ill-suited to such a political system, and to go down such a path would be tantamount to social and economic suicide.³²³ The problem with such a culturally deterministic line of argument is that it fails to explain why certain societies succeed at certain times. As Zakaria (1994, p. 125) points out, 'if Confucianism explains the economic boom in East Asia today, does it not also explain that region's stagnation for four centuries?'. He also draws attention to the fact that Harry Lee,³²⁴ the architect of modern Singapore, has not always been so preoccupied with culture, and argues that part of Lee's interest in cultural differences is

³¹⁹ This speech, entitled 'Moral values: The foundation of a vibrant state', is reprinted in *Current History*, December 1994, pp. 417-422.

³²⁰ See 'External influences must be managed: PM', *Straits Times*, 30 January 1995, p. 1.

³²¹ See 'Singapore: Statement by Minister for Community Development and Country Report for the World Summit for Social Development', Copenhagen, Denmark, March 1995 (available from the Feedback Unit, MCD).

³²² See Richard Lim (1995) for a prime example. Also Han (1994) and Jacques (1994). The latter was retitled for the benefit of Singaporean readers. In the *Sunday Times* (London), the article was headed 'Western culture defies the rising Eastern sun'. Reprinted in the *Sunday Times* (Singapore), the article was entitled 'The rise of Asia: An historic drama of epic proportions'.

³²³ PAP supporters have been quick to point out that Taiwan has experienced 'all sorts of problems' since the lifting of martial law in 1987. See, for example, Han (1994) and Fong (1994).

³²⁴ Harry Lee is Lee Kuan Yew's English name. He was called Harry until his thirties, and still is by family and friends (Zakaria 1994, p. 125).

that they provide a coherent defence against what he sees as Western democratic imperialism (Zakaria 1994, p. 126).

The realities of power cannot be ignored, and in this respect the PAP is no different from the US Republicans, the British Conservatives or any other Western political party. The latter make rhetorical statements about freedom and democracy in the same way that the PAP does about harmony and consensus. A point that receives scant attention from the cultural determinists is that, whether the ‘power brokers’ talk of freedom and democracy or harmony and consensus, the primary motivation is invariably the preservation of class interests. A nation’s culture and unique socio-historic circumstances may explain how a ruling party governs, but they are factors which do not explain why a particular group governs like it does. In the final analysis, it is economics or, more precisely, economic power that shapes public policy.

In summary, the PAP resists liberalisation, not because of its Asian values, but because it fears that challenges to its authority would erode its power base and, therefore, the material well-being of the governing élite, the so-called technocratic class.³²⁵

6.6 ‘Technocratic’ communitarianism

As the discussion in this chapter has made clear, this thesis attaches little importance to Asian values as an explanatory variable. The executive of the PAP-state, under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew is, in the first instance, anti-liberal and has always been so. The evidence to support this claim is quite considerable, and while some commentators will point to the fact that the PAP was once committed to democratic socialism, as George (1973, p. 111) points

³²⁵ As Woo-Cumings (1994, p. 416) has noted, authoritarian politics is ‘not something genetically encoded in Confucian civilisation’, but a tried-and-tested formula in East Asia for creating the entrepreneurial class, and for shifting resources to this class.

out, while any speech by Lee Kuan Yew between 1955 and 1959 ‘could go straight into the liberal democrat’s bedside bookshelf’, after 1959 democratic rights were a theme only when in opposition in the Federal parliament in Kuala Lumpur. In Singapore, such sentiments have not been expressed publicly, and they have certainly not been expressed by the government-controlled media, the co-opted trade union movement, the stifled opposition and the political detainees. In short, under the pretext of economic progress, the PAP has put into effect a policy of rigorous internal repression.

There will be many who will consider this claim rather contentious. Singapore does, after all, have a parliament, there are regular elections, there are opposition parties, and large sums of money have been spent on public housing and education, for example.³²⁶ The reality, however, is that while a parliament exists, it contains only one opposition member, while elections have not been abolished, they ceased to be of significance after 1963, and while the PAP’s policy on public housing receives international accolades, it is important not to overlook its ideological and political significance in ensuring that, literally and metaphorically, the potentially sensitive issue of poverty remains behind closed doors. The PAP’s position on education must also not be taken at face value. As this final section of the chapter will demonstrate later, the history of education policy in Singapore is further testimony to the PAP’s illiberalism.

Put simply, the PAP is illiberal because to be liberal would be self-destructive. In the 1960s and 1970s these sentiments were effectively concealed behind social democratic rhetoric, but as the power of the Party has grown, and its lack of social democratic credentials has become more obvious, it has become clear to PAP leaders that the Party’s political consolidation would be served by the construction of a national ideology that is anti-liberal. This the PAP has

³²⁶ That people are persuaded by this view is a measure of the success of the PAP’s hegemony-consensus (see later in this chapter).

been working on for the best part of a decade, but particularly since the adoption of the *Shared Values* White Paper in 1991.

At the heart of *Shared Values* is the concept of communitarianism which champions collective interests above those of the individual. As Chua (1994a, p. 27) has documented, the Government has declared this to be the 'cultural essence of Asian societies' and the 'encompassing value' embraced by the three major ethnic groups in the population. Chua further notes that its 'dis(re)covery' coincided with the Government's rejection of what it perceived to be the gradual encroachment of 'liberal individualism into the ethos of Singaporeans' as a result of the increasingly integrated world economy, and the 'cultural invasion of the West'. However, with the tact characteristic of a Singapore-based critic of the PAP, Chua is not dismissive of the Government's commitment to communitarianism. Instead, he takes the Government seriously, and assesses the extent to which the necessary conditions for a communitarian democracy are prevalent in Singapore.

Making the observation that, in practice, communitarianism often spawns authoritarianism (the logistical problems of soliciting opinions from all affected parties ultimately leaving the elected political leaders to define the national interest), Chua (1994a, pp. 28-29) then argues that it is imperative that a dominant party government with a communitarian ideology develop political institutions which make authoritarianism less likely. To this end, Chua singles out three such institutions: first, the right to election as the means of selecting political leadership; second, the right to interest group formation and representation, and for these groups to be consulted in arriving at a consensus; third, the right to a free and independent press.

On the issue of free elections, this is a functioning institution in Singapore. However, in contrast to the institution as it exists in Western societies, in the context of a dominant party communitarian democracy, it is a mechanism that

tests the legitimacy of the dominant party's claim to represent collective interests. In other words, elections have less to do with the progress (or otherwise) of the opposition parties and more to do with the PAP's right to be identified as a 'people's movement' (Chua 1994a, p. 29).

On the topic of interest group formation and representation, Chua observes, with great discretion, that as the 'inscription of communitarianism is a recent phenomenon in Singapore, the right to be consulted is not yet firmly institutionalised' (1994a, p. 29). Indeed, as it has been noted above, consultation with community groups is piecemeal, and the pressure groups that are tolerated are very mindful of the Government's OB markers. But unless civil society is allowed to flourish, it follows that prominent groups will not be consulted with regard to actions that are prejudicial to them (Chua 1994a, p. 30).

On the question of press freedom, Chua makes the point that a 'pro-government press is not synonymous with pro-consensus and national interests' because there is always the possibility that the political leadership will be more concerned about retaining power than furthering collective interests. Furthermore, dissenting opinions do not disappear just because they fail to appear in the press. Instead, they bide their time waiting for the opportunity to exercise their effect. This is a problem for the ruling group because in the absence of contrary opinion, it is less able to make an accurate assessment of the sentiments of the electorate, and this could prove costly at election time. In short, a pro-government press constitutes a monologue. This is inappropriate for a communitarian democracy which requires a 'conversation' to produce a strong consensus on national interests (Chua 1994a, p. 30).

Even on the basis of Chua's restrained analysis,³²⁷ it would appear as though the PAP has some way to go yet before it can make any legitimate claims about presiding over a communitarian democracy. Other, less inhibited commentators have been more scathing in their analysis of the PAP's professed objectives. Most notable among these is Tremewan (1994), who describes the *Shared Values* initiative as an attempt to mount 'a systematic ideological statement of the social relations conducive to its alliance with foreign capital' (1994, p. 148). According to Tremewan, what the PAP has done is to refine a set of ideological principles that are aimed more towards the legitimation of its own policies than the 'cultural essence of Asian societies'. Taking each of the values in turn, Tremewan explains how they accord with the PAP's past and present political strategies to satisfy international capital.³²⁸

Tremewan interprets the first shared value of 'nation before community and society above self' as a principle that effectively justifies low wages, restricts individual human rights, and disregards the grievances of minority groups. He contends that the second value of 'family as the basic unit of society' 'reinforces patriarchal relations' and also notes that by including grandparents in this 'basic unit', the burden of welfare costs (pensions and child care) is transferred from the state to the family. The third value of 'community support and respect for the individual' may also be viewed as a mechanism for shifting the responsibility of the poor and disadvantaged away from the state. The fourth value of 'consensus not conflict', according to Tremewan, 'effectively legitimates the labelling of political dissent ... as anti-national', whereupon only 'the PAP-state has the political reach to organise national

³²⁷ Chua's essay was originally published in the *Business Times*, 25-26 December 1993. Had he been less accommodating of the PAP's stated rationale for the *Shared Values* White Paper, it is quite likely that his work would not have received editorial approval.

³²⁸ Tremewan's analysis is a little dated in that it overstates the degree to which the PAP-state is dependent upon foreign capital given recent trends. Furthermore, he does not clearly establish why foreign capital in particular would be interested in such an alliance. The requirement of a cheap, docile labour force is the same for local capital as it is for foreign capital. The PAP's primary motivation is not to appease foreign capital but to consolidate its political position.

consensus'. The fifth, and final value of 'racial and religious harmony', meanwhile, is aimed at suppressing the 'grievances and political demands of the varying racial and religious groups' (Tremewan 1994, pp. 146-47).

It is clear, therefore, that the PAP's brand of communitarianism is really about collapsing community into the state, which itself is part of the regime. Thus, any criticisms of the regime become 'crimes' against the nation, the community, and the people. Such a conceptual manoeuvre is very effective in that it serves to dismiss democratic rights that might conflict with the PAP's interests, condemning these rights as anti-communal, destructive of social harmony, and even sedition against the nation state.

In effect, there is a denial of the existence of conflicting interests between the PAP-state and communities. What begins as an endorsement of the value of community and social harmony ends in an assertion of the supreme status of the PAP and its leaders. Furthermore, such a regime is capable of dissolving any non-governmental organisations it dislikes in the name of national or community interest, and it can cite traditional Confucian values of social harmony to defend restrictions on the right to free association and expression. In other words, it has increasing control over unorganised individual workers and dissenters.

Tremewan's rather dated characterisation of the Singapore political economy aside,³²⁹ his analysis of social control in Singapore is a valuable contribution to the literature on Singapore politics. He highlights, for example, the importance of the CPF as a political instrument in that, by controlling access to forced savings, and what constitutes the only financial asset of some workers, the PAP-state has enormous regulatory power (1994, p. 55). He also comments on the political impact of public housing which served to break up class and ethnic concentrations, and thereby reduce the potential for social conflict (1994, p. 73). But it is Tremewan's analysis of the education system in Singapore that is

³²⁹ With its over-emphasis on dependency theory.

of special interest here. The two chapters that he devotes to this subject represent one of the few serious attempts to radically critique, in a comprehensive fashion, what many would consider the linchpin of the meritocratic system.³³⁰ In short, Tremewan presents evidence which supports the contention that the promotion of a national ideology is a technocratic response to shore up electoral support and how, in this sense, it amounts to little more than a thinly veiled attempt by the PAP to legitimate its political actions.

In tracing the historical development of the Singaporean education system from the immediate post-colonial period to 1978 — the year that the Government commissioned the Goh Report (Republic of Singapore 1979) — Tremewan argues that this was a period when the education system was used to defeat the PAP's political opponents and sort Singaporeans into their class positions for industrialisation. It was also a period when, though not immediately obvious, 'a deeply discriminatory, meritocratic education system' came into being (Tremewan 1994, pp. 75 and 85).

The PAP-state has enjoyed a high degree of success in convincing people of its role as impartial guarantor of meritocratic advancement, whereby it ensures equal opportunity for all classes and races, and it is incumbent upon the individual to make the best of this opportunity. If an individual then fails to take advantage of the equal opportunity, this is deemed to be a reflection of a person's innate characteristics. In other words, the failures are either lazy or unintelligent, and merit nothing better than bare subsistence because they contribute little to society (Blum 1978, p. 162). Unfortunately, while there is no legal restriction on members of the lower classes and ethnic minorities entering Singapore's élite educational institutions, proficiency in the English

³³⁰ Scholarly work does exist on the Singapore education and training system (see, Low *et al.* 1991, Tham 1989, and Soon 1987, for example), but its analysis is structurally weak. The distinguishing feature of Tremewan's

language certainly helps. It is here, that the PAP's 'impartiality' may be called into question.

When the PAP was pushing for Singapore's independence as part of Malaysia, it naturally emphasised Malay as a future common language. On coming to power, the PAP pursued a policy of two common languages, Malay and English, but with an emphasis on the former in an attempt to establish its credentials as a state within the Federation of Malaysia. However, following its expulsion from the Federation, an English-educated work force became the overriding objective, and there was a reversion to the British colonial policy of recognising four languages as mediums of instruction (English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil) but with *de facto* provision for English, as people 'chose' this 'option' (Tremewan 1994, p. 80).

While the PAP claimed to preside over a truly intercommunal educational system giving equal weight to the four language streams, English gained ascendancy as the *lingua franca* and this was justified by the Government on the grounds that it was an international language, the language of modernity, and a neutral language to be used by all racial groups. The PAP's EOI strategy ensured this would be the case, with one very important side-effect. In the words of Tremewan:

English, the language of foreign capital, would be the indisputable and sole language of merit. Facility in English (or lack of it) would be the ostensibly neutral criterion for placing Singaporeans in their social places. But since English was the language of the Chinese and Indian upper class, an educational system which favoured English would continue to reinforce the connections between class, language and race. English would cement the upper class across ethnic divides while excluding the working class of all races. In this way the 'neutral' criterion would ensure the reproduction of the capitalist class and the consolidation of an industrial proletariat.

(Tremewan 1994, p. 86)

work is that, unlike that which has gone before, it examines the social relations that are maintained and reproduced as a result of the education system.

Mathematics, science and technical subjects were promoted by the PAP as being those most appropriate for the industrialisation process, while the liberal arts were accorded a lower status. To help convey this message, by 1969 all students were streamed into academic, technical or vocational schools after their primary education according to their proficiency in English, and by 1975, all schools, regardless of language medium, were required to teach mathematics and science in English at all levels, while other subjects could be taught in the second language. As a result, no-one was left in any doubt as to what they had to do to get on in Singaporean society. The existence of four language streams lent credence to the belief that students had real choice, and that success was therefore a question of parental judgement, individual intelligence and application. A seldom acknowledged fact, however, is that save for the English-speaking upper class, success in the formal education system necessarily meant the sacrifice of one's cultural and linguistic traditions (Tremewan 1994, pp. 87-88 and 94-96).

In a meritocracy where an individual's innate qualities determine their place in society, and where the lower classes and minority races are failing in large numbers, the logical inference is that Singaporean children from these groups have fewer convolutions in their brains than their upper class counterparts. Indeed, Lee Kuan Yew makes no attempt to disguise his contempt for the working class. His egregious use of the word 'digits' to refer to fellow-citizens provides ample evidence of this,³²¹ although there are other more worrying examples, most notably the policies introduced under Lee's leadership predicated on eugenics theory.³²² Tremewan (1994 pp. 103-4) draws parallels

³²¹ See the foreword by Devan Nair (p. xiii) in Seow (1994).

³²² The abortion and voluntary sterilisation laws and the failed Graduate Mother's scheme (see Quah and Quah 1989, pp. 113-14) fall within this category. The Small Family Improvement scheme is also a thinly veiled attempt to discourage the working class from having children, and is a reworking of the voluntary sterilisation scheme when S\$10,000 was paid into a mother's CPF account if she got herself sterilised after the first or second child.

between the prognostications of Lee and those of Adolf Hitler, and cites a number of examples which show Lee to be unashamedly racist (1994, pp. 102, 131, 133-34 and 142-43).

If the first two decades of the Singaporean education system were decidedly 'uncommunitarian', little was to change in the next phase of its development. The Goh Report concluded that academic stream students were not achieving a sufficiently high standard, and those graduating from the non-academic stream were insufficiently skilled, either linguistically or technically, for hi-tech industrialisation. The response was to introduce a system that was even more élitist than its antecedent. December 1983 saw the introduction of the 'National Stream' of education which drew to a close the Government's professed commitment to four language streams. Now all workers had to learn some English. This move was particularly disastrous for the largely working class Malay community which already performed poorly in the education system. Now, instead of some Malays failing through their own vernacular-medium education, considerably more would drop out of an English-medium system, saving the Government the cost of Malay-medium schools.³³³

A further educational reform was the introduction in 1982 of compulsory religious education, the main objective being to instill in the young Chinese, at least, the Confucian ethics which stressed the moral rectitude of loyalty to the patriarchal state. This was introduced at the same time as an extended Government campaign on the use of Mandarin. Both these events served to exacerbate tensions between the PAP and the Malay community on the issue of

scheme when S\$10,000 was paid into a mother's CPF account if she got herself sterilised after the first or second child.

³³³ As a Singaporean social worker remarked to the author, a major problem facing Malay children attending school for the first time is that they are assumed to have the 'linguistic ability of a 6-year old in London' (J.B. Williams, field notes, 6 March 1995). As a result some never go, and those who do go to school have trouble fitting in, and drop out. Recent statistics show that the drop-out rate is rising among Malay and Indian pupils (see 'High primary, secondary drop-out rates "disturbing"', *Straits Times*, 6 September 1993).

ethnicity and language. Now, each student's official classification according to ethnicity, language and religion determined at least two of the subjects taken, and indirectly, their chances of educational success. In short, Malays were condemned to the periphery of the meritocratic system given that Islamic studies and the Malay language are not conducive to upward mobility in Singaporean society (Tremewan 1994, pp. 118-19 and 125-26).

The work of Rahim (1994c) constitutes the most authoritative work to date on the position of Malays in Singaporean society. Her thesis focuses on how the Malay community has been effectively marginalised because of the institutionalised racism, fostered and facilitated by the PAP leadership. In essence, Rahim hypothesises that Malay inferiority, a notion promoted by the colonial authorities and conceptualised in cultural deficit terms, has been granted greater legitimacy and prominence by the PAP, as it provides a powerful and convenient justification for adopting a minimalist stance towards the low socio-economic status of the Malays (Rahim 1994c, pp. 55-56).³³⁴

The institutional and structural obstacles that cause this group to be represented in disproportionately large numbers in the lower echelons of society are given scant attention by the media. There is seldom any reference, for example, to the prerequisites for success within the meritocratic system; *viz.* sufficient quantities of cultural capital (that is, linguistic ability), financial capital, and a home environment conducive to sustaining an interest in education. Instead, it is the views of the PAP eugenicists that receive favourable coverage, and how

³³⁴ This is despite the assurance given to the Malay community by the PAP leadership shortly after separation from Malaysia, that it would abide by its constitutional responsibility to raise the economic and educational level of the Malays (Article 152). Indeed, in 1967 Lee Kuan Yew went on record as saying that the Government was prepared, with the support of the non-Malays, to allocate a larger than average share of resources to the Malay community. The only tangible form of assistance given was free education, a policy that was discontinued in 1990, when Malays were made to pay for tertiary education (Rahim 1994c, p. 56).

it is simply a matter of Malays 'working harder', 'helping themselves', or 'changing their outlook' (Rahim 1994c, p. 55).³³⁵

Like the Malays, Indian school children are under-achieving in large numbers, corresponding with the Indian community's generally low socio-economic status. This state of affairs led to the formation of the Action Committee on Indian Education (ACIE), and the publication in 1991 of *At the Crossroads*, the final report of the ACIE, which showed Indians to be under-performing at each step of the educational ladder. Particularly worrying was the fact that one in every four Indian students was dropping out of the education system without obtaining a Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) certificate (two and a half times the attrition rate of Chinese students) (ACIE 1991, p. 2).³³⁶

Another innovation, since 1988, that has done little to assist the working class and ethnic minorities has been the carving up of the secondary education system into 'independent', 'autonomous' and 'government' schools.³³⁷ This 'privatisation of meritocracy' effectively frees the PAP from direct political accountability for education by giving individual schools the responsibility of

³³⁵ This notwithstanding, Malays have been told that they could never perform better than the Chinese in Maths: 'If you pretend that the problem does not exist, and that in fact [the Malays] can score as well as the Chinese in Maths, then you have created yourself an enormous myth which you will be stuck with' (Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in the *Straits Times*, 26 June 1992, cited in Rahim 1994c, p. 60).

³³⁶ Among other things, the ACIE identified 'relatively sharp class distinctions in the community' as a root cause of Indian educational under-achievement (1991, p. 3). The Committee also identified certain institutional impediments that needed to be addressed, namely that although educational policies were 'ostensibly race-neutral', certain policies had 'inadvertently' disadvantaged minority children 'even though this was not the intention of the policy makers' [*sic*] (1991, p. 13). Specific complaints were that the vast majority of Indian children had no exposure to their mother tongue at the kindergarten level unlike their Chinese counterparts, and that Indian children had limited access to the top primary schools where the foundation for long-term educational achievement was laid (1991, p. 21).

³³⁷ There are also Special Assistance Plan (SAP) schools in which students study both Chinese and English at first language level. These institutions, aimed at 'preserving traditional Chinese values', have come under attack recently for being 'racially divisive' (see Nominated MP Soin's comments reported in the *Straits Times*, 17 March 1995, p. 27).

the selection or rejection of aspirants to the top educational stream. Given the intense competition for education and the Government's inability (not to mention lack of desire) to meet the raised expectations of all the population, ridding itself of the final decision as to who gets in and who does not, enables the Government to oversee the development of an even more élitist system without creating the impression of direct involvement (Tremewan 1994, pp. 135-36, Adonis 1995a).

Each type of school receives a per capita grant from the Ministry of Education, but the eight independent schools can command fees of up to S\$200 per month per student (excluding the cost of books, uniforms and transport). Meanwhile, the twelve autonomous schools (introduced in 1994) charge fees of up to S\$32 per month (compared to government school charges of S\$12-14 per month). However, autonomous schools are given more money by the Government (between S\$700,000 and S\$1.2 million) so that, according to Goh Chok Tong, they may 'breathe down the necks of the independent schools'.³³⁸ The publicly stated objective of these initiatives is to promote excellence, the independent and autonomous schools using their extra funds to put on more creative educational programmes. Thus, creativity is strictly the domain of the wealthy. As Lee Yock Suan, the Minister for education has commented '...if parents want more they should be prepared to pay for it' (Adonis 1995a).

According to Adonis (1995a), 'Government scholarships are available which reduce discrimination against the less well-off'. This is an obvious reference to the quasi-governmental scholarship schemes provided by the Citizens' Consultative Committees (CCCs) and other grassroots organisations,³³⁹ rather than the Government scholarships *per se* which are very much the preserve of

³³⁸ This quote, and the accompanying statistics, are drawn from 'Six more autonomous schools next year', *Sunday Times* (Singapore), 5 March 1995, p. 28.

³³⁹ These awards carry the characteristically stringent eligibility criteria (see Pang (1995) for details).

the upper class.³⁴⁰ He might also be referring to Edusave, the endowment fund set up in 1993 that aims to provide children in Singapore with an account which they can draw on to pay for school fees or 'official' extra-curricular activities.³⁴¹ In the first year of its operation, Edusave paid each pupil S\$50, in 1994 it paid S\$100, and in 1995 the sum of S\$110.³⁴² In the context of the monthly fees charged by schools, it is clear that this system does nothing to alter the élitist selection procedure. Class and ethnicity are still the main determinants of merit, and if one wanted any further evidence of this, one need only refer to the fee structure for kindergartens and private tuition.

Kindergartens typically cost around S\$100 per month, and it is not unusual for kindergarten and primary school children to receive additional private tuition at a cost of between S\$200-300 per month. The main purpose is to prepare young children for the rigours of the formal education system and the sorting process that commences in the fourth year of primary school. It follows, therefore, that the type of children accessing the fee subsidies in secondary school are typically those lower middle class children who have managed to stay within the system without huge amounts of private tuition. Meanwhile, the

³⁴⁰ The Government's generous funding of élitist scholarship programmes for the academically able has been described metaphorically by the PAP leadership as the 'yeast' which helps to 'raise the overall performance of society', and a 'good investment' which promises to reap a 'higher than average return' (see Rahim 1994c, p. 43). These scholarships are not means tested (in contrast to those granted by the CCCs) and given they are only awarded to students with outstanding academic records, successful applicants are drawn almost exclusively from the top independent schools. Generally speaking, a person receiving one of these scholarships can expect around S\$5000 per year, plus return air fares (students are expected to study at a 'reputable' overseas university), tuition fees, health insurance, book and clothing allowances (see 'Scholars' choice', a special feature on scholarships, *Straits Times*, 7 March 1995, pp. 1-14).

³⁴¹ Edusave is not available to the fourth child in the family, as this runs counter to the Government's population policy. (See the response from Minister of State (Education) Aline Wong to a question from Nominated MP Soin in Parliament, reported in 'Primary schools to get Edusave grants next year', *Straits Times*, 17 March 1995, p. 26.) This is despite the fact that, when Prime Minister Goh announced the scheme in 1990, he stated 'all children, rich to poor' would benefit (Tremewan 1994, p. 137, citing a quote from Goh published in the *Straits Times Weekly Edition*, 22 December 1990).

³⁴² See 'Primary schools to get Edusave grants next year', *Straits Times*, 17 March 1995, p. 26.

children from poorer families fall by the wayside (Tremewan 1994, p. 136, Adonis 1995a).

The privatising of the meritocracy services the tripartite system that the PAP has established over the last two decades, known as the '20-40-20' policy; *viz.* 'A-levels in a junior college leading to university for the top 20 per cent, polytechnic leading to a vocational diploma for the next 40 per cent, and technical institutes conferring practical skills on the next 20 per cent. Little is said about the bottom 20 per cent' (Adonis, 1995a), because they are of little concern to the PAP executive which publicly declares its opposition to programmes aimed at assisting the disadvantaged to get into the academic stream. Tremewan (1994, p. 130) quotes Lee Kuan Yew on why the Government does not waste money on an equal standard of education for the working class:

Do these statistics lie? Every year it can be repeated. The West knows this. But the Western liberal says let's not talk about it, then we won't spend money on those who need that extra help. Well, maybe they can lavish their resources away. We can't. We've got to know what are the profiles. What returns for what investment. (*Straits Times*, 15 December 1986, p. 19.)

This instrumentalist conception of society sits uneasily with the PAP's professed commitment to equal opportunity. If the PAP were truly concerned about the provision of equal opportunity, then it would provide additional educational resources for the working class and ethnic minorities in the English-medium. Its failure to do so commits these groups to a lifetime of underachievement. This is the divisive nature of communitarianism, Singapore-style. Rather than promote an education system that champions the collective interests above those of the individual, the meritocratically-driven PAP version is stridently individualistic. Indeed, the contradictions go further

because the formal credentials of merit are heavily tied to Western educational standards and institutions.³⁴³

A genuinely communitarian education system would aim to provide education that is equal in quality and different in kind, it would highlight not the inequality of personal qualities but the social and economic environment, it would be concerned not with eugenics but with the spiritual and moral fibre that binds humankind. Most importantly, it would emphasise and strengthen, not class differences, but community harmony.

If the PAP is ever to preside over a communitarian democracy, they might do well to heed the advice of R.H. Tawney, who writing in 1937 wrote:

What a community requires, as the word itself suggests, is a common culture, because, without it, it is not a community at all. ... But a common culture cannot be created merely by desiring it. It must rest upon practical foundations of social organisation. It is incompatible with the existence of sharp contrasts between the economic standards and educational opportunities of different classes, for such contrasts have as their result, not a common culture, but servility or resentment on the one hand, and patronage or arrogance, on the other. It involves, in short, a large measure of economic equality — not necessarily in the sense of an identical level of pecuniary incomes, but of equality of environment, of access to education and the means of civilisation, of security and independence, and of the social consideration which equality in these matters usually brings with it.

(Tawney 1964, p. 43.)

As it is, on the basis of the evidence presented above, it is argued here that communitarianism is a flag of convenience for the PAP. It is not genuine communitarianism, but a 'technocratic' communitarianism, imposed from above where the only 'collective interests' at stake are those of the technocratic class. This fraction of the capitalist class, the most structurally autonomous of

³⁴³ The Government's top scholarships go to students enrolling at the leading American and British Universities. Lee Kuan Yew makes no secret of the fact that, as far as he is concerned, these are the only places worth going to.

all groups in Singapore, would be constrained by a genuine commitment to communitarianism. The PAP's brand of communitarianism, on the other hand, is a vehicle for continued class domination. The all important question is whether this inequality really matters in Singapore. In short, is it a threat to the PAP's hegemony-consensus?

6.7 The validation and legitimation of PAP hegemony

As Clammer has observed, the subject of ideology is seldom mentioned by politicians or the social science community in Singapore, not least, because of the complex questions it raises about the political legitimacy of the regime, the economy, and the issue of culture in Singapore. This state of affairs has arisen largely as a result of the PAP's attempt to 'deideologise' the political and social arena, in the name of 'pragmatism' (1985, pp. 166-67). Indeed, the concept of pragmatism is understood by lay individuals and political scientists to be devoid of ideology. However, as Chua (1995, p. 5) has noted, in Singapore, it is a concept that is thoroughly ideological.

The production of the 'ideology of pragmatism' began in earnest at the time of Singapore's early nationhood when the 'survival of the nation' was the all important goal. As it was noted in Chapter 2, from this time all aspects of social life became subordinate to the pursuit of economic growth as, without it, the chances of social and political stability were considered much reduced and national survival less likely. The economic imperative has since provided the justification for state intervention at every level of life, from the most private to the most public (Chua 1995, pp. 57-78). Nowhere has this rationale been more clearly stated than in Lee Kuan Yew's 1987 National Day rally speech, when he stated that:

I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yet, if I did not, had I not done that, we wouldn't be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse, that we wouldn't be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had

not intervened on very personal matters — who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think. That's another problem.

(*Straits Times*, 20 April 1987, cited in Tremewan 1994, p. 2.)

Ironically, what the people think has become a problem. It was probably a bigger problem than Lee gave it credit for in 1987. The decline in the PAP's electoral performance the following year, and again in 1991, would appear to corroborate this. In short, during the 1980s, the ideology of pragmatism/survivalism began to wear a little thin on the electorate. Economic success and the accompanying material gains served to validate the PAP's authoritarian style of government for the first two decades of its rule, such that the social controls were perceived to be quite legitimate. But in the 1980s, with Singaporean society becoming increasingly economically stratified, attitudes towards the PAP were clearly changing. In other words, the PAP's ideological hegemony was being undermined because of a diminution in value consensus.

With Lee Kuan Yew 'stepping down' to Senior Minister and other first generation PAP leaders retiring, the so-called 'New Guard' has attempted to develop a new consensus with the electorate. Pragmatism continues to be a defining feature of the PAP's ideological system, and the state of 'perpetual crisis' has not completely disappeared, but a new hegemony is being ushered in predicated upon Asian values and communitarianism.

In the Singaporean context, communitarianism, like pragmatism, is an ideology of class domination. At first, the ideology of pragmatism successfully produced hegemony-consensus because although it favoured one class, it was synonymous with the survival of the nation, and all classes. It then became less successful in politico-sociological terms when having ensured the survival of the nation, it failed to address the growing class contradictions in Singaporean society. Notwithstanding the 'evolution' of this system, to become the ideology of communitarianism, class bias continues to be its dominant feature. The all

important question is whether the new hegemony will halt the electoral slide which began in the 1980s.

6.8 The 'high respect-low regard' equation

During 1994, the *Straits Times* published two 'controversial' articles written by Catherine Lim (see Lim 1994a and 1994b) which raised the ire of the authorities.³⁴⁴ In the first of these articles, Lim drew attention to what she termed the 'Great Affective Divide' between the Government and the people of Singapore, whereupon the latter had a deal of respect for the former as a consequence of the economic strides the nation had made under its guidance, but the Government was held in low regard by the people because of its uncompromising, authoritarian style. While Lim's analysis does not extend much beyond the emotive level, the 'high respect-low regard' dichotomy is worth pursuing, not least because this is the equation that lies at the heart of the hegemony-consensus. In short, so long as 'high respect' outweighs 'low regard', the hegemony-consensus will endure.

Implicitly, Lim treats 'high respect' as a constant as she assumes, like others of a liberal persuasion, that economic gains made by the nation are synonymous with improved living standards for all Singaporeans.³⁴⁵ As this thesis has shown, however, the reality is quite different. But whereas governments in other capitalist nations have, at a similar stage in the development process, seen fit to introduce a welfare state to ameliorate this most basic of class

³⁴⁴ Lim, a highly regarded Singaporean author, and some time columnist for the Singapore *Sunday Times*, is not a political commentator. Indeed, she is better known for her chatty insights into the less consequential aspects of life in Singapore.

³⁴⁵ Lim does acknowledge that if economic prosperity were to wane, the 'high respect' could easily 'relocate' to another country, but intentionally or otherwise, she seems to imply this is an option for all Singaporeans. In a recent survey of HDB residents, those for whom it may be an option indicated that loyalty to Singapore is not high on their agenda. Approximately one third of those interviewed living in 5-room, Executive or HUDC dwellings (around 31,750 of the 103,845 respondents) stated that they would prefer to live in a country other than Singapore (Republic of Singapore 1995b, p. 67).

contradictions, the PAP has rejected this option, not because of any fiscal crisis, but for purely ideological reasons. It follows, therefore, that the vast majority of those in the lower strata have anything but high respect for the PAP. Add to this group those within the lower middle classes at the periphery of the meritocracy who are 'materially frustrated' and there is a growing number of people for whom the economic success of the nation is of little consequence.

On the 'low regard' side of the equation, relative deprivation logically implies increasingly low regard. In addition, there are also people whose economic position has improved markedly under the PAP, but nevertheless hold the PAP in low regard. These are the people to whom Catherine Lim was referring in her 'Great Affective Divide' article, the educated middle classes deprived, not of material wealth, but 'intellectual and spiritual freedom'.³⁴⁶ Taken together, this group, and those identified above, represent potentially powerful and dynamic elements in the equation determining the legitimacy of the PAP-state.

The 1997 election was a long time coming. There were forecasts that it would take place for a full eighteen months before it actually did take place, and there is strong reason to believe that the election was put off for as long as possible because the PAP was concerned about its electoral popularity. A number of issues were proving difficult for the Government. Not least of these was the question of rising living costs which caused there to be a reconvening of the Cost Review Committee in July 1996. This time, however, the Government also had to contend with an independent report prepared jointly by two opposition parties.³⁴⁷ This, together with a generally hostile reaction to the

³⁴⁶ The poor, of course, are deprived of both.

³⁴⁷ The Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Singapura (PKMS) refused an invitation to sit on the CRC, preferring to produce their own report. Not surprisingly, it was far more critical than the CRC version released in November 1996, claiming that the cost of basic necessities such as housing, health care, transportation and education had all risen to disturbing levels over the previous five years, outstripping increases in income levels. The report went on to criticise the Government for becoming too

large ministerial pay increases, and some adverse publicity for Lee Kuan Yew and Lee Hsien Loong following some allegedly shadowy real estate dealings,³⁴⁸ meant that going to the polls was probably the last thing on the Government's mind. Even without these trials and tribulations, the election was shaping up to be a big test of the PAP's new hegemony.

On 16 December 1996 Parliament was dissolved with candidates wishing to stand for election having to submit their nominations by 23 December. No date was given for the General Election but, by law, polling day had to be within three months of the dissolution of Parliament. As it turned out, the Government opted for the minimum time permissible, and the election took place just nine days after Nomination Day on 2 January 1997. The PAP was actually returned to power before the election on account of the fact the opposition parties contested only 36 of the 83 seats. The key issue for the PAP, therefore, was the number of seats the opposition might win and, more importantly the percentage of the vote they might command.

The PAP's showing was impressive. The Party not only won back two seats it lost to the opposition in 1991, but also raised its share of the vote from 61 per cent to 65 per cent. According to Prime Minister Goh, the result proved that Singaporeans rejected Western-style liberal democracy and freedoms. However, closer examination of the events leading up to polling day suggest otherwise. Analysis of these events would suggest that while the high respect-low regard equation certainly worked in the Government's favour, it is debatable whether there was a reduction in the low regard element.

involved in the corporate world and less mindful of its responsibilities in the area of public welfare. The rising cost of living, the report concludes, ensures that the population remains dependent on the ruling party for its economic existence, thus strengthening the PAP's 'comprehensive control of society' (SDP-PKMS 1996, pp. 24-25). The SDP-PKMS report was roundly criticised by the PAP for containing inaccurate data.

³⁴⁸ In May 1996, it was revealed that Lee and his son had benefited from unsolicited discounts on property purchases. The Lees subsequently paid the amount of the discounts to charity.

Furthermore, any increase in the high respect side of the equation likely came about because of fear rather than admiration.

The PAP began the election campaign in a familiar style, concentrating on the alleged character failings of opposition politicians. Then, several days into the campaign, when it appeared that the opposition might win the Cheng San group representation constituency,³⁴⁹ the PAP went so far as to denounce an ethnic Chinese Workers' Party candidate, Tang Liang Hong, as a dangerous racial chauvinist, despite the fact that he had not raised racial issues during the campaign.³⁵⁰ Clearly worried about Tang's appeal to poor Chinese voters, Goh Chok Tong himself went even further, declaring that a vote against the PAP in this ward would be a vote against him personally. Tang stated that the PAP leaders had lied about his views and threatened to sue for defamation. The PAP leaders reciprocated the threat and, fearing the worst, Tang fled to Malaysia shortly after the election.

Another crucial aspect of the election was the PAP's strategy of linking support for the Party to the upgrading programme for HDB housing estates where a full 80 per cent of Singaporeans reside. As it has been noted earlier in this thesis, the question of housing has been an important political device for the PAP in the past, and it continues to be so. Until now, Singapore politics has had little to do with 'pork-barrelling'. That the PAP felt that it had to resort to this tactic to win votes amounts to a tacit admission of its concern that the Party's tried and tested strategies are no longer impressing the voters. In short, the PAP put the electorate on warning during the campaign that opposition-held constituencies would wait longest for upgrading. Prime Minister Goh

³⁴⁹ A ward in which candidates stand in groups of five

³⁵⁰ Tang is alleged to have made derogatory comments about the influence of English-educated Christians in Singapore. Significantly, PAP leaders cited comments he is supposed to have made as a participant in discussions within the Government's Feedback Unit. Quite clearly, with the confidentiality of these feedback sessions compromised, officials will likely have greater difficulty in the future encouraging participants to express themselves freely.

even went so far as to say that some might become 'slums'. Driving the point home, Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that apartment values in a seat held by the opposition since 1991 were now worth around S\$40,000 less than similar apartments in seats held by the PAP (Hartcher 1997).³⁵¹ Meanwhile, opposition politicians complained bitterly that the PAP was bribing taxpayers with their own money. Chia Shi Teck, standing as an independent, estimated that the upgrading of flats would be worth in the region of S\$50,000-100,000 to each householder affected. Chia also pointed out that as the value of all flats would rise proportionately, such asset enhancement would be illusory unless a householder wanted 'to sell up and live in the corridor or emigrate'. This, notwithstanding, the PAP's strategy proved to be effective (Anon. 1997, p. 25).³⁵²

Following the election, opposition parties filed various complaints concerning election irregularities. Most of these complaints centred around Government ministers visiting polling stations during voting, but others made allegations about the counting of invalid votes and the discovery of a sealed ballot box, with ballot papers already inside, before polling began. Opposition parties are also reported to have considered challenging the election result on the grounds the PAP's threats over the upgrading of HDB flats amounted to intimidation. In support of the challenge, a law that bans 'general intimidation or bribery' in election campaigns was cited (Anon. 1997, pp. 25-26). However, these spirited attempts at opposing the might of the PAP aside, there is little doubt that the Party is as powerful now as it has ever been.

³⁵¹ *The Economist* described a vote for the opposition as being analogous to a turkey voting for Christmas (Anon. 1997, p. 25).

³⁵² Chia Shi Teck, a prominent local businessman, won 14 per cent of the vote in a four cornered contest in a single seat constituency. Close inspection of the results showed that his supporters were either HDB executive flat owners or residents of private estates. A further point one might make about Chia is that his candidacy undermines one of the key arguments of the PAP that high salaries paid to government ministers are necessary to persuade successful business people to enter politics. Mr. Chia even offered to use his own money to help finance town council projects if he won.

6.9 Asian values or property values?

One of the most important analytical points to be made in this thesis is that while the appellation of the PAP's ideology may have changed, its substance has not. Whether it be pragmatism or communitarianism, both amount to the ideology of class domination. Some of the Singapore-based academics interviewed during the course of the field work for this thesis were of the opinion that the PAP held onto power for power's sake; that is, the kudos of high public office was the motivating factor.³⁵³ But this overlooks the fact that once power is obtained it is generally exercised. The question then remains as to what the PAP does with this power.

The standard argument advanced by the PAP is that power is exercised in such a way as to maximise the benefits accruing to the nation (the national interest argument). If this is so, then as the evidence in this thesis shows, the national interest over the last two decades must be equated with worsening inequality. This is a contradiction in terms, of course, unless the 'digits' to whom Lee Kuan Yew refers are not considered part of the equation. In other words, power is exercised to maximise the benefits that accrue to the technocratic class that populate the PAP-state.³⁵⁴ This is the motivation for clinging on to power, if it were not, then Government policies would be aimed at securing outcomes that were more participative and concerned with greater equality. In short, the PAP would have to become more democratic.³⁵⁵

³⁵³ A claim that is undermined somewhat by the fact that the Government is experiencing problems persuading 'top people' to join its ranks.

³⁵⁴ Coincidentally, the PAP's policies also favour foreign capital and the domestic bourgeoisie. The latter, once a threat to the English-educated intellectuals that dominated the PAP when it came into office, is no longer perceived in this way given the Party's firm hold on power.

³⁵⁵ From the mid-1960s to the beginning of the 1980s it is fair to say that authoritarian rule coincided with Singapore's most egalitarian phase. This is not to imply, however, that the PAP leaders had societal equality uppermost in their minds during this period. As it has been argued earlier with respect to the setting up of the HDB and the CPF, for example, government policies have to be interpreted, first and foremost, according to their political significance. These institutions and others ensured that the PAP gained the support of the working

Democracy Singapore-style is a counterpart to the ideology of class domination. Indeed, as Ralph Miliband comments:

... a good deal of class struggle from above is concerned with the attempt to limit and constrain the scope, substance, and efficacy of democratic forms. In a system of domination and exploitation, such as capitalism, those who run it are naturally and inevitably wary of those forms and of the rights which go with them, and are always inclined to seek their limitation --- and, where necessary, their abrogation.

(Miliband 1989, p. 215)

A key question, however, is how long the PAP can ward off the pressure to change. Even Huntington (1993, p. 38) refers to Singapore as an 'anomaly', expressing surprise that the richest country in Asia, next to Japan, is resisting democratisation when many others in the region (Taiwan, Republic of Korea, Hong Kong and Thailand) are ushering in change. To add fuel to the fire, there have been signs lately, of a split in the 'Asian values' coalition. Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, going as far as to admit in a recent speech that Asian values were often used as a 'cloak for authoritarianism' (McGregor 1995).

External political pressures notwithstanding, the PAP is unlikely to stray from its present course so long as the economy continues to register impressive performances in terms of the key macroeconomic indicators. Indeed, as the new millennium approaches, the promotion of the economic imperative remains as important a goal for the PAP as it was following the separation from Malaysia, as this guarantees the future of Singapore (and by definition the technocratic class). Only when the well-being of the economy is seriously threatened is change likely to occur.

classes while they simultaneously forestalled the potential for social conflict. Now power has been secured and firmly cemented, it is most instructive that the PAP is quite relaxed about the commodification of erstwhile public goods and the inequality this generates. The use of CPF funds for the purchase of insurance, housing and education is an example of this.

In the meantime, the PAP appears to have hit on a formula that promises to entrench its parliamentary dominance for some considerable time into the future. Prime Minister Goh might claim that the PAP's improved electoral performance is tantamount to a rejection of Western liberal democracy, and by implication Singaporeans laud Asian values, but it is most unlikely that Confucius would have approved of a government that openly threatened its citizens with the loss of public infrastructure development if they voted for the opposition. In short, those Singaporeans who voted for the PAP were more likely concerned about property values than Asian values.

Whether this will amount to a further modification of the PAP's hegemony-consensus remains to be seen. Certainly, one might hypothesise that the promotion of Asian values will become less important if the PAP's new approach to electioneering is anything to go by. But, ultimately, how the PAP's ideological rule is packaged is of secondary importance. With its political power as firmly entrenched as ever, inequality does not matter in Singapore, at least not for the time being. The middle classes will no doubt continue to complain about the lack of political freedoms in Singapore, but when push comes to shove, they appear to show a greater preparedness to vote for covered walk ways and landscaped gardens than to vote for their democratic rights. For the poor working classes, meanwhile, their opposition to the ruling group will continue to be the most prevalent,³⁵⁶ but in the absence of strong representation, the conditions for their exploitation will persist.

³⁵⁶ The Workers' Party still managed to poll 45 per cent of the vote in the Cheng San ward despite the ferocity of the PAP attacks on Tang Liang Hong.

Conclusion

All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.

George Orwell (1945, p. 114).

I

Overview

This thesis set out to expose the deficiencies of the orthodox analyses with respect to capitalist development in the East Asian NICs. In particular, it has been concerned with dispelling the myth that a special kind of capitalism has evolved in this region, whereupon East Asian capitalism has produced remarkably equal outcomes. This falsehood is promoted by the orthodoxy that pervades institutions like the World Bank and, given its high profile within the international community, it is quite likely to be a view that is perpetuated in the absence of a more rigorous analysis that goes beyond the neo-classical framework.

To produce such an analysis for all of the so-called HPAEs, or even the four NICs, is beyond the scope of a single study such as this. Thus, Singapore was selected as the case study, a logical choice given the amount of respect this country commands around the world for its macroeconomic performance, and the fact its leaders, along with those of Malaysia, have promulgated the view that the 'Asian values' of its society preclude what they identify as Western-type solutions to the problem of inequality.

The thesis began by arguing the case for a methodological approach that goes beyond the standard neo-classical economic analysis. The rationale for this was simple. Mainstream economics is characterised by torpidity. So little progress has been made by this century-old science that its practitioners are understood

by few people other than themselves, and are generally identified by the public at large as a group of scientists who seldom, if ever, get anything right. A number of reasons were advanced to explain this state of affairs, among them, the failure of mainstream economics to recognise class relations as a major determinant of economic outcomes. The political economy approach favoured in this work represents an attempt by the author to overcome this major shortcoming.³⁵⁷

The point of departure was to review the development experience of newly developed economies and the extent to which capitalism has produced relatively equal outcomes for the populations of the so-called ‘tiger economies’ of East Asia, and Singapore in particular. A critique of the World Bank’s *East Asian Miracle* report showed this bastion of mainstream economics to be sadly lacking in this department, its assessment running counter to that of the majority of scholars working in the field, both within and outside of orthodox circles. Hereafter, the large part of the thesis has been devoted, first, to the accumulation of evidence to show that rapid growth in Singapore has not occurred with equality, and second, to a political analysis of Singapore’s inequality in its various manifestations.

In summary, this thesis has challenged an interpretation of economic development and inequality in Singapore. In mounting this challenge, a major theme of broader significance has been the critique of neo-classical economics. A superior approach to these issues has been presented, which achieves three things the orthodox approach cannot. First, the economic history of Singapore has been analysed to explain crucial aspects of development; second, there is analysis of various dimensions of inequality which are not considered properly by the orthodoxy; and third, there has been analysis of the ways in which the

³⁵⁷ It is also an attempt to add momentum to the movement for a paradigm shift, whereupon economists might more usefully contribute to the policy debate.

inequalities identified are supported by ideological formulations of the PAP-state.

II

The emperor's new clothes

Chapter 1 of this thesis highlighted the crisis of vision in modern economic thought. Unlike the classical economists whose holistic approach considered the totality of the social system, contemporary mainstream economists consider only segments of it. Moreover, while the classicalists always retained a visible connection between theory and reality, this is not the case with modern practitioners. Indeed, given the direction of modern economic theorising, one could be forgiven for thinking that economic analysis is some kind of socially disembodied study.

As modern economists have striven for a higher degree of theoretical sophistication, mathematical modes of analysis have become the jewel in the crown of the science of economics. The problem, however, is that as time has passed, the jewel has become the crown, and the foundation on which the properties of the discipline rest has been lost.³⁵⁸ Indeed, economics has become so detached from the central forces determining social formation that it displays an almost callous indifference to the problems that plague society as it advises against policy that might interfere with the dynamics of the market mechanism. Much of this indifference can be traced to the starting point from which modern analysis proceeds; namely, that an economy is defined as 'an aggregation of individuals who interact with each other through mathematically specified forms of economic behaviour', and that the aim of the individual is simply to maximise his or her welfare by spreading limited income over a range of goods at given prices (Hamilton 1994, p. 184). This

³⁵⁸ This trend has been particularly evident over the last quarter of a century.

utilitarian approach to economic decision-making, at the exclusion of social or ethical considerations, is one of the reasons why the dismal science is fast becoming the irrelevant science.

The disenchanted among the ranks of the profession grow in number each year, as it becomes increasingly more apparent that economics is no closer to solving society's economic ills than it was a century ago. This notwithstanding, the leaders of the profession remain quite steadfast in their belief that, in status, economics is the emperor of the social sciences. The problem, is that the emperor wears no clothes. Indeed, rather like Hans Christian Andersen's fictional character, mainstream economics displays extraordinary arrogance and naivety. The emperor in the fairy tale marvelled at the finery of his non-existent attire. Modern economists marvel over the theoretical models of non-existent societies.

Unless it is openly recognised that the social setting of economic behaviour is crucial, that society is more than the sum of its individual parts, practising economics will become rather like telling fairy tales. The poverty of depth and reach currently experienced by the science is such that it seriously misrepresents reality. As Chapter 3 of this thesis has demonstrated, this is clearly so in the case of the World Bank's *East Asian Miracle* report. The claim that rapid growth has occurred with relative equality may not have been made had the Bank researchers made better use of empirical data, but the point remains that even with more accurate data, the narrow field of vision of these economists precludes deep analysis.

III

Class and inequality in Singapore

If the degeneration of economics is to be arrested and there is to be some attempt at its resurrection, then what orthodox economists currently classify as non-economic problems must become part of the new paradigm.³⁵⁹ In particular, full consideration must be given to social structure and the historical development of that social structure. These are important dimensions of the political economy approach favoured in this thesis.

In Chapter 2 serious consideration was given to the economic history of Singapore in order to fully appreciate the character of Singapore's economic development. Of particular interest were the factors behind the evolution of the prevailing social structure and why Singaporean society has taken the shape it has. A crucial point to emerge from this chapter was that, given the historical development of the PAP, the probability of greater egalitarianism in Singapore is low as this runs counter to the Party's élitist and authoritarian ideology. Indeed, once its power had been firmly cemented, the PAP's main concern was the weakening of the working class through the institutionalised subordination of labour and the suppression of political opposition in its pursuit of EOI.

This strategy ensured that Singapore became a lot wealthier in the aggregate sense, but only at the cost of increasing economic and social stratification. However, as Chapter 3 documented, the *East Asian Miracle* report does not acknowledge this. Instead, the image of Singaporean society that it projects is one of great efficiency and equality. This, as it has been noted above, is primarily a consequence of the report's rather limited theoretical framework. By contrast, this thesis has not been so constrained.

³⁵⁹ Non-economic factors may be identified as those which cannot be analysed within the marginalist paradigm.

In Chapter 4, the conceptual framework central to the political economy approach outlined at the end of Chapter 1 was considered in some detail. A survey of the evolution of the principal theories on class concluded that the neo-Marxist analysis of class presented the most appropriate theoretical framework for the analysis of inequality in Singapore. According to this approach, structural factors are fundamental, but human agency has an important determining influence upon the interests and capacity for action of contending social classes. In Singapore, the PAP-state has dominated the pattern of social relations, and continues to do so. The neo-Marxist conception of these social relations is that they are necessarily exploitative, and evidenced in the marketplace. The ownership of saleable assets, for example, is identified as one of the characteristic forms of exploitation within a capitalist system on the grounds that, if one group has an excessive share of these assets, this rules out the possibility of equal bargaining in commodity, credit and labour markets, hence creating the conditions for exploitation. The uneven distribution of skills and credentials constitutes another basis for exploitation, while a third is status exploitation which results from unequal access to official positions (through party membership, for example). All three forms of exploitation are very much in evidence in Singapore, providing strong reason to believe that, contrary to the view propounded by the World Bank, Singapore society is not becoming more egalitarian. Significantly, as the discussion in Chapters 5 and 6 has demonstrated the ruling authorities in Singapore are quite relaxed about this. There are frequent reminders to upgrade one's skills or be left behind, but nothing is done that will undermine the structure of class relations.

Evidence has been presented which shows the gap between the powerful and the powerless to have increased quite dramatically over the last decade or so, but particularly during the 1990s. Furthermore, the indications are that this trend will continue. The number of millionaires is increasing at the same time

as the number of people seeking assistance from VWOs is increasing. Meanwhile, those connected with the PAP-state have benefited from the civil service pay rises, with high incomes they will likely be propertied and have benefited from the wealth effects of the rise in property prices, and with higher discretionary incomes they will be better placed to invest in education to develop their skills, and to cope with cost-of-living increases. By contrast, a person not connected with the PAP-state can expect a pay rise no more than that recommended by the NWC, they are less likely to be propertied and to have benefited from the wealth effects of the rise in property prices, and with lower discretionary incomes it will be more difficult to invest in education to develop their skills, and to cope with cost-of-living increases.

Progress towards greater equality entails transformation of the economic and political relations through which inequalities are constituted, but in Singapore, there is little or no evidence to show that consideration is being given to equality of opportunity and access to resources. The Government has attempted to project a 'caring, sharing' image, and has instigated a number of schemes which give the impression that something is being done to assist the least well-off in society. However, close inspection of the likes of the SFI scheme, RUAS and Edusave, for example, has shown that these programmes are by no means generous, nor are they meant to be. The end result is that very little is done which might upset the existing class structure. The leading technocrats within the PAP-state can join the growing number of millionaires, while the working class must struggle along with low wages, rising living costs and an unyielding welfare system.

Significantly, while the PAP is aware of the increasing economic and social stratification of society, unlike other societies which have found themselves in a similar situation, it strongly resists the introduction of a Western-style welfare state. This system, which it depicts as a monolithic, financially and morally ruinous structure, is regularly berated by the PAP and condemned as

being entirely inappropriate given the cultural norms of Singaporean society. Accordingly, the PAP promotes a system which it does consider to be consistent with the values of Singaporean society. The essential feature of the preferred system is that it embraces the ethic of self-reliance as opposed to welfare as a right of citizenship. In effect, the PAP puts forward the case that there is a cultural solution to inequality. In short-hand, it is possible for a nation to develop successfully along capitalist lines without it becoming 'Westernised'.

IV

Capitalist development without Westernisation?

The promotion of 'Asian values' is a strategy that clearly has some popular resonance. Indeed, there will no doubt be people within the PAP-state who will consider appeals to Singaporeans' 'Asianism' as being perfectly legitimate. However, as this thesis has demonstrated, the Asian values theme is essentially an artificial imposition which performs a valuable ideological role for the PAP. The main benefit to be derived is that it serves to legitimate the PAP's conservative regime, while presenting liberal alternatives as inherently inferior. A second related benefit is that the issue of the poor is not allowed to coalesce as a political issue.

A key point in support of the argument that the Asian values theme is no more than an ideological formulation of the PAP-state, is the evidence presented in this thesis which shows the issue of Asian values to have gained political prominence only after it had been articulated in government rhetoric and official statements. In short, the PAP is primarily interested in preserving its hegemony-consensus, and while the ideology of an Asian communitarianism is now favoured over the ideology of pragmatism, both amount to the ideology of class domination.

The PAP claims that it is interested in maximising the benefits accruing to the nation. As the evidence in this thesis shows, however, the 'promotion of national interest' over the last two decades necessarily equates with worsening inequality. This notwithstanding, the PAP appears unlikely to stray from its present course so long as there is no deterioration in Singapore's macroeconomic performance. This has always been the case, and the promotion of the economic imperative is as important a goal for the PAP now as it has been at any time over the last three decades. Put simply, it is this that safeguards the future of Singapore and by definition, therefore, the future of the technocratic class associated with the PAP-state. Only when the health of the macroeconomy is seriously threatened is this situation likely to alter.

The PAP's improved electoral performance in 1997 provides a clear indication that its political power is as firmly entrenched as ever. It would also appear to indicate that inequality does not matter in Singapore. The disenchantment among the middle classes that has been described in this thesis does not convert into votes against the PAP, and while complaints about the lack of political space in Singapore will no doubt continue, material gain would appear to count for more than democratic rights. In the meantime, without the support of the middle classes, and without strong representation themselves, the future for the poor working classes appears bleak as the conditions for their exploitation persist.

Meanwhile, the PAP public relations machine presents a somewhat different picture. The recent election success is touted by the PAP as a rejection by the Singapore electorate of Western-style liberal democracy, and by implication, a preference for a special kind of capitalism built around an Asian value system. However, given the events leading up to the election, this is most unlikely. A more credible explanation is that Singaporeans who voted for the PAP did so because they were more concerned with property values than Asian values.