Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore
Chua Beng Huat
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In his latest book, Chua Beng Huat offers the reader a thoughtful and provocative interpretation of the principles and the operation of the Singapore government over a 50-year period, though with a decisive emphasis on recent and contemporary developments. It is part sociology (Chua's home discipline) and part history, but its strongest claims are in the arena of politics. The author's objective is to tease out the underlying principles/ideology that have driven the Singapore government's operation over half a century and so enable the reader to view the legacy beyond the simplistic dichotomy of "liberal vs. authoritarian" rule. He is also setting out to better understand the longevity of the Singapore regime, focusing on the regime-sustaining elements of features such as the public housing program and the operation of state-owned enterprises. Chua additionally analyzes the sinews of the Singapore government's political, social, and economic methods and outcomes through a prism that is relatively agnostic on concepts such as democracy and rights. He does not dismiss them completely, but keeps them in abeyance while he considers the complex political economy behind the Singapore success story.

Chua's basic argument is that when scholars assess the Singapore government's record, we should not do so by the standards of political liberalism (democracy, rights, etc.) since the People's Action Party (PAP) government has never claimed to be liberal. With this in mind, he sets out a convincing case to show how the PAP has always consciously and deliberately rejected doctrinaire liberalism. The author sets out a rather less convincing case to say it should be judged as a party of social democracy—or at least a party whose origins and inspiration have social democratic roots. He does so by applying a surprisingly simplistic understanding of social democracy involving little more than a strong role for the state in the economy and in society, and a government propensity to protect the vulnerable and build social harmony.

Put like this (and to be fair, these are my words, not Chua's), his vision of "social democracy" seems to have its roots in the communitarianism of which he has written so much in the past and which forms part of this book's title. In fact the PAP record seems rather remote from any conventional understanding of the term "social democracy," which has an inherently egalitarian foundation that is itself grounded in a notion of personal rights and respect for the individual. These elements are completely missing in Singapore's ruling elite.

In arguing his case for highlighting the PAP's social democratic credentials, Chua makes much of the PAP Old Guard's early attraction to British Labourite politics in the post-war years. But this was dead for the future PAP leaders long before the PAP was founded in 1954, let alone by the time it came to government in 1959. In 1996, I tentatively suggested to former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee in a research interview that he [Goh] and Lee Kuan Yew might once

have been "conventional British Labour Party type socialists." In response, he actually broke out in spontaneous laughter before dismissing my suggestion in more measured terms (Barr 2000, 116).

The Singapore government does have a record of distributing social goods throughout society, but its motivation is a mixture of pragmatic politics and elite beneficence (something akin to idealized versions of Confucianism), rather than any notion of egalitarianism or individual rights. By its own standard, its base line of self-judgement is rather the efficacy of its administration and the acceptance of its rule by society, than any notion of social democracy or its close cousin, social justice.

Chua nevertheless makes a valid point when he argues that, when assessing its record, the Singapore government's routine infringements on civic and human rights, its heavy-handed imposition of social controls, and its rough treatment of democracy are not deal breakers. He describes the PAP's historical record as one of constant achievement and innovation, which has won the support of most Singaporeans. Admittedly it comes at the cost of living in a nanny state that is more authoritarian than democratic. The author however clearly regards this is an acceptable impost, especially since the nanny/authoritarian state has been gradually loosening its micromanagement of society over the last few decades. He concedes that his approach risks creating the impression that he is endorsing the government (Rodan *et al.* 2019, 205). On that matter, I suppose we must take Chua at his word when he says he is not, though it is difficult to escape the feeling that his concluding chapter reads like an advertorial for the PAP, praising much and putting a benign gloss on the rest.

Considerable praise for the government's historical record is certainly warranted. It would be foolish for anyone to dismiss independent Singapore's unique and often pioneering achievements in the areas of housing, healthcare, economic development, state capitalism, and the management of ethnicity. All these items are on Chua's list of positives, along with its creation of a form of authoritarian governance that is nearly as stable as an outright dictatorship, but which foments a number of critical feedback loops that keep the politicians relatively responsive to their constituency. Indeed Singapore retains just enough features of democracy, open debate, and accountability to make it reasonable to speak of members of its ruling class as "politicians." This is something that we would not do when talking about full-fledged authoritarian states like China, Vietnam, or North Korea.

The book opens with three chapters that set the historical and theoretical context, placing independent Singapore's formative years squarely in the context of the island's colonial and precolonial history, and an international climate determined by the Cold War and the post-WWII *pax Americana*. Chua also pays considerable attention to the theoretical underpinnings of liberalism and shows the extent to which Singapore's leaders have disavowed them. In these chapters, the author is forthright in his account of the heavy hand of the authoritarian state, taking his account

of acts of repression well into the 1980s.

This opening set is followed by three chapters in which major markers of PAP rule and achievement are placed under the microscope: housing; state capitalism and state distribution (presented as one phenomenon); and "governing race." The two common elements of the overarching argument (disavowing liberalism and embracing "social democracy") are prominently and effectively presented throughout these chapters. For instance, the Singapore government's abolition of property rights and its active interventions in both the economy and in society are rightly presented as evidence of its repudiation of liberalism. Chua also points to those elements of government's programs that create or proactively spread a common good as evidence of "social democratic" impulses—notably in public housing and the imposition of "racial harmony as a public good" (p. 136).

The political advantages accrued by the government from delivering services to a grateful electorate is freely acknowledged with analysis that is always thoughtful and should be valued highly by any serious student of Singapore politics. There is nevertheless a surprising reluctance to consider the sources of patronage and power—or even acknowledge the existence of patronage—that give the most senior members of the elite a high level of leverage over the professional class and subordinate members of the elite. The discussion of state capitalism and the operation of Government-Linked Companies, for instance, reports without analysis or commentary, the assurances by the key government figures running Singapore's sovereign wealth funds (including the Prime Minister's wife) that GLCs are run free of political interference (p. 117). One does not need to be pursuing a dichotomy of "authoritarian vs. liberalism" to think that there is something seriously amiss in this analysis.

Likewise, assumed and accepted differences in social class permeate so much of the book—consider the public housing program and discussion of post-2011 politics, for instance. Yet where is the critical analysis of the impact of social class as a factor in political management? The creation and lavish government funding of the "scholar class" through the education and scholarship system is surely both a core foundation of the Singapore elite's longevity, and also a point of political and social tension that is never far below the surface, yet it is completely absent in this account. I recognize that the government prefers to avoid class-based critiques of supposedly meritocratic outcomes, but this is nevertheless a truly surprising omission by one of Singapore's most senior sociologists. There is additionally the glaring absence of any mention of Chinese privilege, much of which has been effected through those same education and scholarship systems mentioned above. Admittedly this is a taboo subject, even in Singapore's universities, where a workshop on "Chinese privilege" recently needed to be converted into a discussion of "invisible privilege" before it was allowed to go ahead. Yet taboo or not, it is hard to see how a serious critique of the dynamics of Singapore's regime can ignore this feature. Reading Chua's volume, no one would ever know about the racial or class dimensions underpinning the operation of political power—nor the role

either plays in perpetuating the regime.

These three substantive chapters are followed by the penultimate chapter, titled "Cultural Liberalization without Liberalism." Here, the author recounts the loosening up of social space since the beginning of the 1990s. This chapter proves to be crucial in the book's final argument: that the Singapore system is likely to be "enduring" because it is proving itself to be sufficiently flexible in adapting to generational change in expectations. In identifying the grounds for optimism about the future, Chua points to social and political "liberalization," along with increases in government gestures toward social welfare.

The author is to be congratulated for successfully pushing the analysis of Singapore's political history beyond the usual dichotomy of "authoritarianism vs. democracy/liberalism." I fear, however, that his alternative prism of analysis is also far from complete. Reading this book, I sometimes felt as if I were reading about another country to the one that I know. The problem is not so much the details of the analysis presented, which are mostly sound and insightful, but that the critical elements that are missing.

The persistence of critical gaps in the analysis give this volume a decisive feel that is rather different to that which one might expect from a conventional piece of scholarship. Chua has interpreted Singapore politics rather than analyzed it—much as a musician or a singer might be said to interpret a piece of music rather than analyze it. Taken as an interpretation, this book is a fine performance, opening the door to a new way of thinking about and studying the Singapore government's half-century of achievement. In this spirit, it should be welcomed as a worthy contribution to the ongoing discussion about Singapore and its unique brand of politics.

Michael D. Barr
College of Business, Government and Law, Flinders University

References

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