

Global Journalism, National Identities

Professor James Sleeper

Interpreting Nation-Building and Public Sphere in Singapore

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In a televised speech on March 9, 2010, ebullient and charismatic president of Georgia, Mikheil Saakashvili made a promise to turn Georgia into Switzerland of the Caucasus with “elements of Singapore.”¹ He drew parallels between Singapore and Georgia and claimed that his country faces similar hardships that the island city-state did in its early years of independence in 1960s: poverty, unemployment, and neighbors that threaten the sovereignty of the state. Yet, he argued that Singapore’s success story and its emergence as one of the richest countries in the world over the past three or four decades can be emulated in Georgia. Saakashvili tied Singapore’s success story with incorruptible governance, strong state institutions, and developed infrastructure that attracted foreign tourists, investors, and capital to the island city-state. He stressed that his own policies of tax-free havens along the Black Sea coast would attract millions of dollars in investment and tourism to the impoverished nation and would lead to the rapid economic growth akin to Singapore’s.

Historically, Georgia’s rulers always looked to the West for role models in state-building. Close ties with Europe are still paramount in the country’s foreign relations. However, despite absence of historical, cultural, or political ties with East Asia, fascination with Singaporean model of economic development has been permeating the political discourse in the country.

¹ “Georgia: Saakashvili Says Switzerland Will Meet Singapore in Tbilisi,” *Eurasianet*, March 9, 2010, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/news/articles/eav031010.shtml>.

Surprisingly, Saakashvili is not alone in his determination to emulate Singapore. *The Economist* noted recently how many Third World countries in Asia and Africa have ambitiously poised to become the next Singapore because of the quickest path to prosperity its model seems to offer. Leaders and populace in Timor, Rwanda, and Equatorial Guinea crave “to become the new “hub” of the region—just like Singapore.”²

Yet Singapore and its admirers pose a challenge for the proponents of a liberal public sphere, the founding principle of a Western democracy, since the East Asian country seems to be comfortable with what its government claims to be an inevitable tradeoff between political freedom and economic prosperity. The island city-state has been under the authoritarian and paternalistic rule of the same political group and leader, People’s Action Party and Lee Kuan Yew, since its independence in 1965. PAP does not allow free and independent media, instigates political repression through institutions and judiciary that favor the rulers, keeps the civil society under tight control, and systematically constrains opposition. International organizations monitoring human rights and freedom of the press around the globe consistently criticize Singapore’s harsh crackdown on journalists, writers, or anyone disagreeing with the government’s official standpoint. Reporters without Borders, a France-based international non-governmental organization that advocates freedom of information, ranked Singapore as 135th out of 179 surveyed countries in terms of freedom of the press in 2011.³ In the most recent report on Singapore, Freedom House, a US-based NGO that conducts research on political freedom and human rights, claimed that “media freedom in Singapore continued to be constrained (...), with the vast majority of print and broadcast journalists practicing self-censorship for fear of harsh

² “Annals of Development: Dangerous Delusions,” *The Economist*, March 20, 2012, <http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2012/03/annals-development>.

³ “Press Freedom Index 2011-2012,” Reporters Without Borders, <http://en.rsf.org/press-freedom-index-2011-2012,1043.html>.

defamation charges.”⁴ The government of Singapore has repeatedly argued that it is not ashamed of its low rank in media freedom since it has achieved high ratings for its impressive economic performance, long-standing political stability and impeccable state institutions.⁵ It is indeed hard to disagree with the Singaporean government officials who emphasize the country’s economic achievement. The real Gross Domestic Product, investment, and immigration into Singapore have grown dramatically since 1980s and the government does not hesitate to take all the credit for the country’s success. In 2011, Singapore’s GDP per capita was 3rd largest in the world according to the International Monetary Fund;⁶ World Bank ranked it as number one worldwide for the ease of doing business;⁷ and Transparency International, a NGO that monitors political corruption, ranked Singapore’s public sector and government officials as 5th least corrupt in the world.⁸

Hence, Singapore challenges the traditional argument of wedding capitalism and free-market economy with political freedom and democracy. In contrast to Chile and South Korea that have emerged from dictatorships and established stable democratic governments by gradually introducing free market economies, Singapore does not seem to undergo democratic transformation anytime soon: “One of the most basic puzzles is why Singapore has become even less democratic while advancing economically. That political freedom is a precondition to economic prosperity is one of the most basic findings of the social sciences. (...) Why, then,

⁴ “Freedom of the Press 2011: Singapore,” Freedom House, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-press/2011/singapore>.

⁵ “Singapore Not Ashamed of Low Rank for Press Freedom,” Reuters, October 31, 2005, http://www.redorbit.com/news/international/290904/singapore_not_ashamed_of_low_rank_for_press_freedom/.

⁶ “World Economic Outlook Database,” International Monetary Fund, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2012/01/weodata/index.aspx>.

⁷ “Ease of Doing Business Index,” World Bank, http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IC.BUS.EASE.XQ?order=wbapi_data_value_2011+wbapi_data_value+wbapi_data_value-last&sort=asc.

⁸ “Corruption Perceptions Index 2011,” Transparency International, <http://www.transparency.org/country#SGP>

does the Singapore government continue to espouse the view that it must assign higher priority to achieving economic growth than to providing more political freedom?”⁹ Indeed, the case of Singapore exemplifies how neither state nor free market economy can provide democratic institutions and fair and just rule of law without civil society and liberal public sphere that engages populace beyond the elites. But the ruling party constantly refers to the popular support it enjoys in Singapore; indeed, in elections that have been procedurally fair since 1960s, PAP has always garnered more than 60% of the votes. Does, then, Singapore pose a true challenge to the liberal public sphere? Do the exigencies of economic progress require political repression? Are the people content as long as their basic needs are met? Does the country really need a liberal public sphere as long as it is prosperous and under the guidance of a figure akin to Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor?

It would be foolish to pretend to pass a final verdict on these fundamental questions, yet they are always worth examining. The process of formulating and asking questions and exchanging arguments can be even more beneficial than trying to find definite answers. The experience of different forms of a liberal public sphere, dating back to the Ancient Greek city-states, has demonstrated that there are no simple answers to questions on human nature and political association. Lee Kuan Yew and PAP cannot pretend they can solve all the problems of their country. So far, they have legitimized their power through claiming credit for the economic success and improvement of living standards for most of the population. I will refer to several articles that debate this view and argue that Singapore’s success stems from its incredibly profitable geographical location, the nature of a city-state that attracts vast human resources, and

⁹ Michael Haas, “The Singapore Puzzle,” in *The Singapore Puzzle*, ed. Michael Haas, Westport: Praeger Publishers, 1999, 6.

the larger trends in global economy. According to these criticisms, all PAP had to do was to copy the economic policies of Hong Kong.

The globalized economy is unstable and volatile, and governments can neither always control it nor blunt its sharp blade when crises strike. As long as PAP bases its legitimacy on economic prosperity, its model of governance is unsustainable and has to refer to violence (systemic and institutional) to hold its grip to power. Justifying violence by emphasizing the propensity to law and order in East Asian societies is a dire attempt to mask the authoritarian practices of elite in power: “The “Asian values” concept of Singapore, (...) is nothing more or less than an ideological justification for an approach to provide ultrastable economic, political, and social structures. (...) The government seeks legitimacy by judiciously marrying a Western democratic vocabulary with a particular set of traditional values that it claims are uniquely Asian.”¹⁰ This model does not recycle and endure crises, and the technocratic approach of the government cannot solve the crises all the time; PAP is also fallible. It claims it knows what the people of Singapore want; furthermore, it argues that it has been fulfilling those wants quite successfully, judging from the electoral victories of Lee Kuan Yew’s party. Yet wants can be imposed upon people; they can easily be manipulated and seduced. Only the deliberative process in which people engage freely, the practice of democracy as a way of life, leads to the emergence of truth. Truth emerges from the exchange of opinions, give and take of arguments by citizens critical of their authorities. Without the engagement and the commitment on the part of citizens to the democratic lifestyle, PAP cannot take credit for fulfilling the wants and demands of the population. Only a liberal model of communicative rationality that engages wider population of

¹⁰ Christopher Lingle and Kurt Wickman, “Political Economy,” in *The Singapore Puzzle*, 70

Singapore and that is not based on political terror or elite governance can provide a sustainable model of state-building and legitimating of power.

Surprisingly, the leader of People's Action Party, Lee Kuan Yew, started his political career championing the cause of liberalism and harshly criticizing Britain's colonial policy in Singapore. The city was part of the British Empire since 1824, when the ambitious Sir Stamford Raffles acquired the island of Singapura for the East India Company. Since then, with the exception of short Japanese occupation during World War II, the island was governed directly from London and already had a reputation as a major trading port. Demands for self-rule emerged in late 1950s, followed by vigorous labor and student unrest, mostly instigated by the Malaysian Communist Party and People's Action Party, which had a socialist platform. Lee Kuan Yew, the secretary-general of PAP, had recently returned to Singapore with a law degree from Cambridge and was making stirring speeches for democracy, independence, freedom of the press, and social justice in Singapore's newly-elected parliament. He took the office of self-governing Singapore's prime minister in 1959 and soon merged the island with the Federation of Malaysia. Lee stood up for a free press when he felt that Singapore was overlooked in Malaysian newspapers; he made several speeches that probably hunted him later in his career: "Let us get down to fundamentals. Is this an open, or is this a closed society? Is it a society where men can preach ideas... where there is a constant contest for men's hearts and minds on the basis of what is right, what is just, of what is in the national interest, or is it a closed society (in which) men's minds are fed with a constant drone of sycophant support for a particular orthodox political philosophy?"¹¹ Following race riots between Chinese and Malay in the city, and disagreements

¹¹ Quoted in Francis T. Seow, *To Catch a Tartar: A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew's Prison*, New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies, 1994, 174.

between Lee and the federal government in Kuala Lumpur, Singapore was expelled from the federation and achieved full independence in 1965.

Since 1965, PAP has engaged in massive modernization projects, subsidizing housing development and urban renewal, and allowing longer working hours and regulated wages. Lee, perceiving Singapore under constant military threat, implemented the Total Defense Doctrine, strengthening the state's military capabilities and acquiring state of the art military technology. By 1970, he has fully abandoned socialism and welcomed large foreign businesses by abolishing capital gains taxes, capital flows restrictions, inheritance taxes, and wealth taxes. Meanwhile, a full-fledged institutional crackdown on media and opposition was underway: using all available institutional resources (police, judiciary, and parliament), as well as intimidation, Lee managed to take all the media resources and political opposition of the country under his firm control.

Dramatic reforms of the judiciary and the abolition of the jury system turned the courts from a check on the balance of power into a tool for the prolongation of PAP's political domination. Judges are appointed based on their loyalty to PAP; they are paid extremely high salaries ("the Chief Justice of Singapore receives more than the combined stipends of the Lord Chancellor of England, the Chief Justice of United States Supreme Court, and the Chief Justice of Canada."¹²) that raise suspicion about their independence, since they would be less willing to fine the government that treats them so generously. Judges known for impartiality and strength of character are seldom assigned to sensitive cases concerning government. Furthermore, Singapore abolished the right to appeal to Privy Council, the highest court of appeal for Commonwealth countries, following the critical response of the Council to the injustice suffered by the opposition politician J. B. Jeyaretnam at the hands of the government of Singapore. In

¹² Francis T. Seow, "The Judiciary," in *The Singapore Puzzle*, 118

1993, Chief Justice introduced a hearing fee scheme beyond the first day of hearing, making courts less accessible for the relatively poor in the country. The draconian laws and the use of torture, death penalty, and caning have drawn sharp criticism from human rights organizations many times. Finally, in so called defamation cases against opposition politicians and foreign and local media, politicized judiciary has been consistently awarding government officials incredible amounts in damages: “Supremely confident of the reliability of his judiciary, the prime minister uses the courts as a legal weapon to intimidate, bankrupt, or cripple the political opposition, while ventilating his political agenda. Distinguishing himself in a caseful of legal suits commenced against dissidents and detractors for alleged defamation in Singapore courts, he has won them all.”¹³ In the past couple of years, British author Alan Shadrake was sentenced on defamation charges for criticizing the country’s use of capital punishment; and the New York Times group was forced to apologize to Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew after being threatened with a substantial fine for printing an article about political dynasty of the Singaporean prime minister. These recent cases further substantiate the claim that Singapore’s judiciary is simply a political instrument in the hands of the ruling party.

The government’s grip on media is even tighter and more obvious: “Nearly all print and broadcast media outlets, internet service providers, and cable television services are either owned or controlled by the state or by companies with close ties to the PAP. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) World Service is the only completely independent radio station available in the country. Satellite television is forbidden. A substantial variety of foreign newspapers and magazines are distributed uncensored, but the government is authorized to limit the circulation of

¹³ *Ibid*, 115.

print editions.”¹⁴ In contrast to his early days as an adamant supporter of the free press in late 1950s and early 1960s, Lee has adopted an extremely conservative view of the role media on the political scene. He sees the ideal journalist as the diligent scribe of government announcements, a clerk in charge of commenting on government statistics. The prime minister has used various foreign threats (Communist, Islamist) as bogeyman in intimidating his people and in providing excuses for ending any media independence in Singapore. Christopher Lingle’s “Singapore’s Authoritarian Capitalism: Asian Values, Free Market Illusions, and Political Dependency,” as well as Terence Lee’s more up-to-date “The Media, Cultural Control, and Government in Singapore” overview in detail the history of media harassment in Singapore, and different institutional structures that shape the self-censorship among journalists and the larger society afraid of defamation charges.

Terence Lee, in particular, analyzes pervasive media and cultural control as an example of Michel Foucault’s ‘governmentality’ “which is designed to shape the hearts and minds(ets) of Singaporeans to conform to desired social, cultural and political moulds.”¹⁵ Having adopted the pragmatic policy of ensuring the economic growth, political stability, and PAP’s domination on the political scene, Singaporean government has engaged in methods of cultural control and intervention “to ensure that the thoughts and mindsets of Singaporeans were in sync with the establishment’s.”¹⁶ This would explain the hybrid regime of the city-state; on the one hand, its high-tech ambitions, and, on the other hand, its emphasis on inefficiencies of Western liberal democratic rule and assertion of a better ‘Asian’ model of governance. PAP is reluctant to entirely reject the principles of democracy, since it still derives its legitimacy from large electoral

¹⁴ “Freedom of the Press 2011: Singapore.”

¹⁵ Terence Lee, *The Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore*, New York: Routledge, 2010, 15.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 8.

support, however concocted and farcical it might be: “More recently, the concept of ‘soft authoritarianism,’ a mode of governing which seeks to systematically obstruct alternative social and political voices whilst allowing some scope of the functioning of “procedural democratic norms,” such as the holding of regular elections, has been used to explain Singapore’s ‘hybrid political structure.’”¹⁷ Lee’s perceptive application of Foucauldian ‘governmentality,’ that is the institutional framing of citizens’ conduct, to Singapore exhibits absolute absence of liberal public sphere in the political discourse. The ruling elite has invested a lot in media control “to get members of populations to behave and conduct themselves in ways which fit determinations of what has been prescribed as desirable by a higher authority, typically the government itself or a supreme being.”¹⁸

Singapore’s rulers have quite a few supporters in the West. Many are skeptical of the universal applicability of liberal public discourse and argue that democratic principles, including individual human rights and free market capitalism, are necessarily modified to fit a different, Asian context that has been defined by non-liberal political traditions such as Confucianism and Legalism. Furthermore, they are critical of universalists who would like to see Western-style political practices implemented wherever possible: “there are morally legitimate alternatives to Western-style liberal democracy in the East Asian region. (...) They may also be defensible to contemporary Western-style liberal democrats, in which case they may be worth learning from. But there may also be areas of conflict, in which case the Western-style liberal democrat should tolerate, if not respect, areas of justifiable difference.”¹⁹ Daniel Bell’s *Beyond Liberal Democracy* is an example of reformulating fundamental principles of a liberal democracy to fit

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 14.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 23.

¹⁹ Daniel A. Bell, *Beyond Liberal Democracy: Political Thinking for an East Asian Context*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, 8.

the East Asian context. Yet, the book fails at defending the concrete actions of political leaders in the region that they justified as emblematic of ‘Asian values.’ East Asian thinkers’ political writings are definitely worth perusing, yet they cannot justify selfish actions of modern East Asian rulers. Machiavelli is still widely read in Italy, yet it would have been absurd for Berlusconi to rely on the 14th century writer to justify his deeds.

Drawing on empirical evidence and modern theories of state-building, Clark D. Neher offers a more solid defense of modern Singaporean state. He argues that Western criticism of the island city-state is understandable, yet Singaporeans themselves have different standards of what a good government should be like: “The political system, controlled as it is by PAP, is more authoritarian than Americans would find acceptable, and its emphasis on law and order, rules, and conformity have given the island-state an antiseptic quality much at odds with the more open American culture. For Singaporeans, however, the nation and its leaders have established a society that is tolerable, even agreeable, because the citizens’ needs are being met.”²⁰

In line with the official Singaporean narrative, Neher emphasizes the seemingly impossible economic achievement of a country without any natural resources. The geographical location between India and China necessarily make Singapore an important port and a commercial hub with shipbuilding industry. However, Neher still accredits lion’s share of success to Lee Kuan Yew and PAP, who, according to him, have mobilized effectively Singapore’s human capital and directed it in ways that led to economic prosperity. They carefully observed the trends in global economy, first initiating Export-Oriented Industrialization to attract foreign investment, before switching to financial and business services to diversify sectors of economy and reduce Singapore’s vulnerability to an international recession. Neher

²⁰ Clark D. Neher, “The Case for Singapore,” in *The Singapore Puzzle*, 40.

emphasizes government statutory boards and public enterprises' involvement in infrastructure development that has stirred up entrepreneurial activity: "The strong "visible hand" of the public sector has not crowded out, but rather exists alongside the expansion of the private sector."²¹ He views the government-linked companies (GLCs) as another leverage the state has to stabilize the market. Finally, he summarizes the business-friendly environment that attracts foreign capital to Singapore: "Despite higher workers wages, the developed world has found that the advantages of low levels of corruption, a high standard of living, and a superior infrastructure make Singapore a popular choice for investors."²² This claim echoes the arguments often made by economists regarding the interconnectedness of global markets. The production activities of multinational corporations become 'footloose:' as soon as they sense that business prospects are deteriorating, they do not hesitate to reconfigure their production according to assessment of financial risk across the globe. Hence, the multinationals are the most mobile element of the global economy, whereas the state is the most immobile. Multinationals' investments benefit tremendously the recipient countries; however, location-specific factors determine how committed multinationals are to a certain locality: "In the current state of the world economy, however, man-made location-specific factors like policy, institutions, infrastructures and so on are far more important in locational decisions made by mobile players. Within a given territory, the state is the principal agent responsible for providing these man-made contemporary assets."²³

Considering the importance of location-specific factors, Neher seems to justify Lee Kuan Yew's harsh and authoritarian measures that emphasize order, stability, and disdain for strong opposition that is tainted as promoting disharmony. He is fully aware of the omnipresence of the

²¹ *Ibid*, 44.

²² *Ibid*.

²³ Jang-Sup Shin, "Globalization and Challenges to the Developmental State: a Comparison between South Korea and Singapore," in *Global Challenges and Local Responses: The East Asian Experience*, ed. Jang-Sup Shin, New York: Routledge, 2007, 35.

government in Singaporean society, yet argues that government control does not annoy the Singaporeans, as long as their needs are met. Therefore, he believes that PAP's paternalistic and authoritarian rule is more persuasive than coercive. The populace would complain if rulers are too cruel or show favoritism; but so far complaints have been few.

Neher's argument is an impressive challenge to a liberal public sphere: "A primary aspect of good government is the capacity to bring about change before crises emerge. The success of Singapore's technocratic meritocracy in coping with changing demands has been remarkable. That capacity is the essence of the case for Singapore."²⁴ In Neher's description, PAP's intervention in the Singaporeans' everyday lives and its regulation of civil society seem to be peripheral for Singaporeans as long as their private interests are respected and the government guarantees economic success for the broader society. Why do we need to take care of ourselves, as long as the Grand Inquisitor takes care of us so well?

Christopher Lingle and Kurt Wickman offer a sharp and perceptive critique of Neher's arguments. They claim that the role of government in Singapore's economic boom is exaggerated and that its success is more due to the specificities of a city-state: "the role of the government in promoting Singapore's economic "miracle" has been more passive than active; (...) more of Singapore's economic success occurred because of the economic imperatives of a city-state in today's world economy than because of the meddling of the government."²⁵ The urban development of Singapore naturally attracted many workers in the region in their most productive ages. The high mobility of labor, absence of strong union constraints to job-matching, and accumulation of "middle-class" citizens who value hard work, learning, and savings habits

²⁴ "The Case for Singapore," 52.

²⁵ "Political Economy," 57.

can be identified among the factors that led to the growth of a city-state. Furthermore, Singapore largely drew on the experience of Hong-Kong's "Ricardian free port" policy, allowing unrestricted international trade, unencumbered capital flows, and minimal tax rates, as well as eliminating subsidies and regulations that distort business decisions. The internationalization of Singapore's economy coincided with increased international capital flows and loan-crises management that deregulated capital markets, and provided an attractive ground for investors: "The open trading structure of the Asian city-states, with open connections to their respective "hinterland economies," put them in a favorable position to compete in the worldwide competition to attract capital and investment."²⁶

Lingle and Wickman's critique places Singapore in a historical context that explains a larger picture of its development and shows trends independent of PAP's control that contributed to the city-state's success. The two are also extremely critical of the Singaporean social contract and liken it to contracts in feudal Europe: "the feudal lord (government) provides safe shelter and infrastructure for the economy in return for loyalty, subordination, and tax payments from the serfs (citizens). Such modern political concepts as "consent," "reciprocity," and "mutuality" between the government and the governed are as absent from the "Asian values" model as they were under feudal arrangements."²⁷ Furthermore, Lingle and Wickman note the "dualism" in Singapore's economy: foreign companies and government-run corporations face little government intervention, whereas the domestic sector is highly regulated. Hence, Singapore's high score on economic freedom ratings is only partially true. Finally, the two note the challenges Singapore will inadvertently have to face: its growing middle-class that will inevitably demand more political rights and enlarged participation in decision-making (and PAP

²⁶ *Ibid*, 64.

²⁷ *Ibid*, 68.

would be forced to accept larger political participation out of the most pragmatic reasons: “Although PAP would have citizens believe that a small group of enlightened politicians, advised by skilled technocrats, are sufficient to run the country, any system that engages more of the electorate in decision-making will have more information to guide the system.”²⁸); and it more competition from emerging economic powers in the region. Lingle and Wickman undermine Neher’s belief in perpetual status-quo of economic prosperity and envisage a failure in the economy because of a property or stock market “bubble,” as has been the case in many other countries for centuries. They claim that unless political actors undertake a systemic change, PAP’s impeccable record of economic success will be tainted: “Either PAP leaders will allow more political space to unleash the creative, entrepreneurial spirit or an economic crisis will herald their fall from grace.”²⁹ It seems Lingle and Wickman believe that only communicative rationality and deliberative political process that engages people beyond the elites can sustain Singapore as a stable, competitive nation in the future.

Lingle, Wickman, and Neher debated the prospects of the Singaporean state more than a decade ago. Yet, their analysis is still extremely pertinent to the discussion. The general elections in 2011 have been described as a watershed by many political actors since it marked a record-low support for PAP (from 67% to 60%), as well as the first occasion when an opposition party managed to win a constituency. Many see this as a sign of an enlarging political engagement. However, Neher’s optimism about the successful performance of a technocratic government has yet to shatter: despite slowing growth rate of GDP, Singapore managed to steer clear of Global Financial Crisis in 2008. After all, one solid conclusion that could be made based on Singapore’s experience is that democracy does not come along by itself: neither the market nor the state can

²⁸ *Ibid*, 71.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 73.

provide it. Democratic practice needs to be nurtured by citizens who are conscious of the benefits and perils of a liberal public sphere; it requires determination and commitment to a certain lifestyle that is more demanding than the one under the ore of the Grand Inquisitor.

After hearing about President Saakashvili's plans to follow Singapore's model of development, a friend of mine recommended to me an article by William Gibson, American science fiction novelist who travelled to Singapore in 1990s and wrote a short piece for *Wired* magazine called "Disneyland with a death penalty," a byword for Singaporean authoritarianism that the city has not been able to discard since then. Gibson wrote about the absence of underground culture, lack of any creativity and authenticity, conformist and consumerist lifestyle, and technocratic and draconian government. His portrayal of Singapore leaves the readers wondering how committed the citizens of such state would be to their country. Besides the deliberative process, other crucial elements of the liberal public sphere involve binding commitment of the citizens to the results of the deliberative process and the constitutive fiction that delimits the people who engage in critical discussions. Clearly, the foreign labor in Singapore is less concerned about the prospects of a liberal public sphere in a country to which they do not owe any allegiance. Investors from the West and cheap labor from neighboring countries are only concerned by the economic affairs of the island city-state; they would never engage in deliberations or public discussions about its democratization. As mentioned above, democratic change does not come from outside and the people of Singapore have been often apathetic about this issue. It is closely intertwined with the constitutive fiction that shapes a population into a distinctive group with common interests and aspirations. Lee Kuan Yew and PAP have been actively involved in feeding a fiction to the Singaporean people that emphasizes multiculturalism, affinity for order and "Asian values." However, the feeling of fakeness and

inauthenticity still prevails. “The social and psychological creativity in a reconceived sense of kinship,”³⁰ in a civic-republican model of nationalism, is dramatically absent from the reality of Singapore, as noted by Gibson and others.

Therefore, the case of Singapore as a role model is disquieting not only because of the dubious and authoritarian political practices it entails, but also because of the absence of allegiance, care, and patriotism that are crucial for cultivating deliberative process among citizens. These citizens must have a commitment to the group of people they belong to. Benedict Anderson’s “Imagined Communities” overviews the history and evolution of constitutive fictions that have shaped the qualities and democratic culture of many nations. Many of these constitutive fictions were deeply influenced by the press and circulation of newspapers to a limited geographical audience. The newspapers nurtured a feeling of belonging to a certain group among its readers. The readers of these newspapers thus became part of a public sphere. In the case of Georgia, the long tradition of statehood and nationhood that were revived and reinvented several times in different historical circumstances have incited and maintained a strong commitment and engagement in the political discourse on the part of its constituents. The leaders of Georgia would face a challenge from their populace if they decided to claim they know best what is good for their country. I am very skeptical of the Georgian civil society. It has many proponents, including George Soros, who has argued remarkably well for its necessity. Yet, it is still remarkably weak and people are incapable of engaging in a deliberative process since media is not facilitating it properly. There are no institutional pressures for media censorship, even though the government does control main television channels. Clearly, the rhetoric demanding

³⁰ Robert H. Wiebe, *Who We Are: A History of Popular Nationalism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 6.

“Singapurization” of Georgia does not provide an incentive for a more deliberative, engaging public sphere.

Gibson’s verdict is fascinating, but also inconclusive, since he, like me, finds something profoundly troubling about Singapore: “And what will it be like when these folks, as they so manifestly intend to do, bring themselves online as the Intelligent Island, a single giant data-node whose computational architecture is more than a match for their Swiss-watch infrastructure? While there’s no doubt that this is the current national project, one can’t help but wonder how they plan to handle all that stuff without actually getting any on them? How will a society founded on parental (well, paternal, mainly) guidance cope with the wilds of X-rated cyberspace? Or would they simply find ways not to have to? What if, while information elsewhere might be said to want to be free, the average Singaporean might be said to want, mainly, not to rock the boat? And to do very nicely, thank you, by not doing so?”³¹ Gibson reformulates the Grand Inquisitor question in the modern context. Dostoevsky probably would have done the same thing: in the postmodern world where God is dead, he would have had Ivan Karamazov talking to Alyosha about the island city-state and Lee Kuan Yew instead of Spanish Inquisition.

Naturally, Singaporeans feel uneasy when they are told they live in a Disneyland with the death penalty. From my personal experience, they shun from discussing in detail their government’s practices; they are distressed by Westerners’ preoccupation with their country and wonder why we just do not leave them alone. Probably, western legacy of political and individual freedom is so dear and paramount to us that we cannot come to terms with a thought

³¹ William Gibson, “Disneyland with the Death Penalty,” *Wired*, September/October 1993, <http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/1.04/gibson.html>

that one can possibly be well-off without it. And probably we are right: in his recent article in *Wired*, one of the leading opposition politicians in Singapore, Kenneth Jeyaretnam, gave an unfeigned account of what it means for him to live in a Disneyland with the death penalty, where dictators from Third World countries go shopping and the government intimidates bloggers. Jeyaretnam's father, J. B. Jeyaretnam, was the first opposition politician to get a seat in the parliament; however, he was soon charged with defamation suits that bankrupted him and forced him out of parliament. As a bankrupt, J. B. Jeyaretnam started selling his books near the subway stations: "It made for a bizarre spectacle on our uneventful streets, this old gentleman barrister with his sandwich board proclaiming "Hatchet man of Singapore" and his little rolling suitcase full of books. In his own unique way he was evading the censorship and control that pervades every aspect of our society. It is this endurance that he is most remembered for."³² After his father's death, Kenneth Jeyaretnam took up the political cause and ran in 2011 general elections, albeit unsuccessfully. His critical article in *Wired* draws attention to the feeling of stagnation that has captured Singapore: "With the benefit of hindsight those plans look hopelessly naïve, and their targets prosaic and pedestrian. Mostly it was just hype and self promotion. In fact we have gone backwards to our early stage of development and an industrial strategy based on labor-intensive manufacturing and tourism. Even in mainstream activities Singapore now feels very different from the high-tech, high-wage utopia envisaged by the planners."³³

The opening lines of Jeyaretnam's article have reminded me of Georgia again. The author mentions the E-gates with personalized welcome message in the passport hall in Singapore's airport, a piece of high-tech that used to be a symbol of Singapore's technological savvy. I have

³² Kenneth Jeyaretnam, "Disneyland with the Death Penalty, Revisited," *Wired Opinion*, April 19, 2012, <http://www.wired.com/opinion/2012/04/opinion-jeyaretnam-disneyland-death-penalty/all/1>

³³ *Ibid.*

encountered the same E-gates in the airport of Tbilisi, Georgia, during my last visit home. Now I know that Singapore is no longer an abstract role model for my country's government. This thought leaves me distressed, since I find my compatriots' and my own nature to be irreconcilable with what Singapore stands for. But I am still hopeful of a liberal public sphere, of unyielding people who do not relinquish to the Grand Inquisitor and stand up for their most profound beliefs.