

Nietzsche, Foucault and Lee Kuan Yew's Unreason Wrapped up in a Cloak of Reason

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Abstract

This article explores the attitudes and actions of Lee Kuan Yew to understand better his perspectives on modernity. This section is informed by the philosophy of Nietzsche. I also draw upon Foucault's work on reason and unreason and later work on power/knowledge and use these tools to penetrate Lee Kuan Yew's world and gain insights into who he was and what he did and what impacts he made. I conclude that his madder elements, which he always prompted as exercises in rational reason, such as his eugenics and anti-Indonesian and anti-Malay racism, were not so much outliers of madness as examples of his logic being pushed to the extreme under pressure and the absence of countervailing forces such as detailed criticism by experienced cabinet colleagues or systematic critique by a strong opposition. While Lee used the modernist tools of surveillance and control to discipline and normalize the Singapore individual and collective worker, his punishments of disliked opposition figures had a premodern element where his personal honour had to be avenged in public view and the opposition figures highlighted as being worthy, in his view, of stigmatization.

Keywords

Foucault, Modernity, Nietzsche, Power/Knowledge, Reason and Unreason, Lee Kuan Yew, People's Action Party, Singapore

“All superior men who were irresistibly drawn to throw off the yoke of any kind of morality and to frame new laws had, if they were not actually mad, no alternative but to make themselves or pretend to be mad” (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Day-break*, 14).

1. Introduction

General introduction

Modernity refers to a phase in Western European history beginning around 1800 when reason replaced tradition and clerical authority as the main arbiter of public decision-making. Furthermore, trust in civilization, science, and progress became the chief characteristic of society and culture. The arrival of modernity outside Western Europe did not necessarily follow the same trajectory or time-line and, in particular, religion often remained a key element of public life, as Chakrabarty (2000/2008) says about India, even amidst modernization. Lee Kuan Yew (hereafter LKY) was able to hold back the apparent meaninglessness of modernity through appeals to essentialist ideas of culture, partly invented traditions, and a future goal of higher and higher living standards as Singapore approached First World status (Barr, 2009, 2019). His successor as Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong (GCT), added the idea of the economy's external wing, which means Singapore companies setting up subsidiaries in the ASEAN (Association of South East Asian Nations) region (Barr, 2019: p. 34). LKY even drew upon working-class cultural traditions, but never upon working-class politics (at least after 1963). Ideology was shorn of politics and the class struggle, and this ideological (and practical) work had achieved its aims by the early 1970s when dissent became nonexistent, alongside ideologies of dissent and believers in dissent of whatever political hue. History and everything else became simply economics plus ideology, i.e., sanitized accounts of the government's courageous victories over a collection of what Stanley Cohen termed folk-devils (Barr, 2019; Cohen, 1972/1987).

Lee Kuan Yew (LKY) saw Cambridge at the peak of modernity but took up none of its revered theoretical systems, such as Marxism, communism, Christianity or even liberalism (note his illiberal laws). What then did he take from it? A will to power (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: p. 41; Nehamas, 1996: p. 240; Nietzsche, 1886/2003a: Section 259, p. 194; Nietzsche, 2003b, p. 138; Nietzsche, 1901/2010: Section 534, p. 208), and a belief in and commitment to progress and development that had no specific theoretical foundation—an empirical and pragmatic one—let's attain First World status and beat the neighbouring countries. And he combined his shell of modernism, in later years, with the notion of being a Confucian gentleman. He believed in reason, and he tried to exercise it, but his foibles, eccentricities, and mad ideas came out as Reason's underside and the mad ideas are what many people remember him for (although People's Action Party loyalists repress this recognition)—illiberal laws; anti-Indonesian (Barr, 2009: pp. 194-195) and anti-Malay sentiments (Barr, 2009: pp. 77-78, 168-169, 185-187, 191-194, 200, 203-204); eugenics; the Graduate Mothers' Scheme (Chee, 2012: p. 344); defamation suits (Barr, 2009: p. 35); and other mad views and practices. His suspicions and paranoia, his madness, ultimately created a prosperous and stable state, albeit an authoritarian and sterile one. It might be a literal performance of Lenin's law of dialectics—everything contains and produces its opposite. In a reverse of the transition from Lenin to Stalin in the Soviet Union, his successors as prime minister, Goh Chok Tong (1990-2004) and the junior Lee (Lee Hsien Loong) (2004-present), have calmed things down,

toned things down, injected some civility and freedom, and built upon the rational, sterile state that was also a product of unreason wrapped up in reason.

Somehow, in Singapore's case, we arrive at a good end-point, although still highly capitalistic, commodified, and illiberal - how repressive the state feels in daily life would have to be a question answered by the citizens who still live there and haven't emigrated.

The situation is a bit more apparent than real, but it seems that Singapore now no longer changes—it has reached a neoliberal impasse that synthesizes the old (LKY) and new (post-LKY) eras. Progress is no longer a goal, or even a relevant word, as First World status has been reached and Singapore is now one of the richest *per capita* countries in the world. Like Norway or Finland, where can it possibly go now? The liberal-democrats and a few socialists might want to see change, but would they really? Is change imaginable? Is it only ideological? Can anyone really imagine a different system, apart from minor tinkering, including opposition figure Chee Soon Juan of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP)? How could the current Singapore even continue if not built on the backs of disenfranchised migrant workers? There is nowhere left to go, even geographically - the Housing Development Board (HDB) flats have reached as far as the main island's northeastern extremity Pasir Ris.

Despite the above comments, which assume that the system built by the People's Action Party (PAP) will continue, the SDP has suggested some important changes, such as free medical care, minimum wage, and unemployment benefits. However, these would be major changes, not tinkering, and they are unlikely with a PAP government in power. The foreign worker issue will always remain though and they will remain collectively a marginalized group. As with the UK and Dubai, if locals cannot or do not want to do the more burdensome and low-paying work, what alternative can there be but a large foreign worker population?

This article draws on interviews conducted by the author with 26 Singapore opposition politicians and activists between 2009 and 2019, although the views are fully my own.

Introducing Lee Kuan Yew

To many readers, the name of Lee Kuan Yew will need no introduction. For other readers, I present here a short outline of his political career and personality followed by certain key policies or beliefs that could be treated as Unreason within the overall context of his determined pursuit of rationality. These areas include his eugenic ideas, racist statements, and his civil law defamation suits against political adversaries. I now introduce to readers his namesake and one of his lesser-known nemeses or opposites, the Singapore Democratic Alliance (SDA) candidate for Pasir Ris-Punggol Group Representation Constituency (GRC) at the 2011 General Election, the late Patrick Lee Song Juan.¹ Patrick Lee

¹Under the GRC scheme (introduced in 1988), three-to-six member constituencies have to have at least one person per party from a designated ethnic minority (Yeo, 2002: p. 206). Every team member of the winning team becomes an MP while the losing team walks away with nothing.

was an interesting character, a court jester and master orator in the serious world of Singapore politics, but one who was easy to underestimate as he came from an Establishment background and maintained strong grassroots connections. He was completely unafraid of government leaders as he knew them all personally and knew all their weaknesses. With his hastily-assembled team of SDA candidates, he took on the then Deputy Prime Minister, Teo Chee Hean, and his team at the 2011 General Election and scored a respectable 35.21% of the popular vote. Sitting around the café table with me later on, he was enjoying himself when he joked about an incident when he exchanged words with Teo in a washroom and then he said to me dramatically: “Teo Chee Hean? Please tell me who is Teo Chee Hean!” He is presented here as something of an anti-Lee although that tends to obscure the commonalities. **Figure 1** depicts the late Patrick Lee with the *Straits Times* edition that announced that LKY had resigned from the PAP central executive committee (2011). **Figure 2** is me with Lee. As Patrick Lee said to me in interview on 6 October 2011:

Teo Chee Hean asked me (in the toilet) “why don’t you join us?” I said “you go after the PhD, Masters, Mistresses, and Bachelors!” I graduated from the University of Lifelong Learning.

I’m very happy with the 35%, we are all green horns, first-timers in politics. I met many residents who said: “you dare fight with Teo Chee Hean?” I said purposefully: “Who is Teo Chee Hean?” [personal interview, 6 October 2011, Singapore, notes in possession of author].

Lee Kuan Yew (1923-2015) came from a middle-class Straits Chinese family. He pursued a law degree at Cambridge University in England and became active there in anti-colonial struggles. On his return, the energetic, bright, and motivated lawyer, who began his political career as a socialist, became a key local political figure and was responsible in part for the formation of the PAP in 1954



Figure 1. Patrick Lee Song Juan celebrates LKY resigning from PAP central exec. committee, October 2011.



Figure 2. Kieran James (left) with Patrick Lee, Singapore, 6 October 2011.

(Barr, 2009: p. 21). He became Singapore's founding Prime minister in 1959, and was involved in the short-lived union with Malaysia (Barr, 2009: p. 23). By the 1960s, his prominent position became unrivalled and he became first-among-equals, especially after leftwing firebrand Lim Chin Siong (1933-1996), was expelled from the party's central executive committee (CEC) and from the PAP party itself in 1961. He was later arrested under *Operation Cold Store* in 1963 (Barr, 2019: pp. 8, 22, 23, 108-109, 117). By the early 1970s, Lee and his cabinet colleagues could rule an effective one-party state largely unopposed as dissent and rival belief systems had been cracked down upon heavily. The discourse of survivalism, Singapore being a tiny under-resourced city-state that needed strong and effective leadership to ensure continued economic growth and social cohesion (Barr, 2009: pp. 32, 78; Barr, 2019: pp. 3-4), meant that ideologies other than those espoused by the PAP were deemed to be threatening and subversive. Some opponents, such as Chia Thye Poh (b. 1941), were detained for many years without trial while defamation lawsuits, the outcomes of which were not difficult to predict in advance (like a last-minute penalty to Glasgow Rangers in the 2023-24 Scottish Premiership season), saw opponents made bankrupt and unable to contest elections. Lee was ably assisted by his talented cabinet colleagues and especially Goh Keng Swee, Toh Chin Chye, and S. Rajaratnam. However, similar to the work of Michael D. Barr (2009), this article focuses on Lee as an interesting character worthy of continued and serious study within the context of the philosophical works of Nietzsche and Foucault. Lee handed over the reins to Goh Chok Tong (GCT) in 1990, who came across as more mild-mannered and less confrontational. In one sense, he did not need to be, as the ideology was already set in stone and, if the opposition had not yet been totally defeated, it was a known quantity and easily containable. GCT continued on largely as Lee had done with a continued focus on taxing and charging the working-class and middle-class via a wide range of innovative and cunning

tools, that led to the party's nickname in that era, PAP as Pay And Pay. As the National Solidarity Party's (NSP) leader at the 2011 General Election, Goh Meng Seng, told me in a 2010 interview, GCT was akin to a sweet pill that led to a bitter aftertaste. Lee did not hide away, but took up the position of Senior Minister. He still exerted enormous power behind the scenes as seen by the campaign of negative commentary surrounding Workers' Party candidate Tang Liang Hong at the 1997 General Election. Lee's son, Lee Hsien Loong (LHL), took over from GCT in 2004 and his style was also more outwardly civil than his father's had been. By this time, the PAP had become synonymous with both the government and the country and it became very difficult to imagine, yet alone to articulate, a different path for Singapore. Lee continued on as Minister Mentor after GCT took over the Senior Minister role. LKY remained Minister Mentor until 2011 and an MP right up until his death in March 2015. The swing back to the PAP at the 2015 General Election was widely seen as a public honouring of LKY's achievements. Even Eric Tan, former Workers' Party Treasurer and candidate for East Coast GRC, told me in interview in 2010 that we can't discount the PAP's achievements of building up modern Singapore and that LKY clearly loved the country.

Some of LKY's more controversial ideas and policies came about in the mid-1980s where electoral victories for the PAP were guaranteed and there was a certain hubris, if not arrogance, at the top levels that often comes with such complete control. LKY's contemporaries had mostly retired or were sitting on the backbenches. The most vocal and critical of the LKY of that era was probably Toh Chin Chye who clearly felt that he had nothing to lose as his place in the history books was already assured. In this era, LKY began to play about with eugenics and appeared to communicate a literal belief in discredited scientific ideas about a hierarchy of races. He maintained that Chinese were at the top, followed by Indians, and that Malays and Indonesians were last (Barr, 2009: p. 187). Hence he believed that Singapore's future success depended upon the maintenance of a Chinese majority (Barr, 2009: p. 186) and that only the most educated and smart people should become PAP MPs. He was shocked by a 3.5% decline in tourist arrivals in 1983 (Kong & Yeoh, 2003: p. 136) and introduced, to much derision and laughter, a matchmaking unit, the Social Development Unit (SDU), to match graduates with graduates. Much more sinisterly, he introduced policies that would reward financially uneducated mothers if they underwent sterilization and reward graduate mothers if they had more children (Chee, 2012: p. 344). He believed that the allegedly more intelligent people must reproduce faster than the allegedly less intelligent if Singapore was to reinvent itself as a Knowledge Economy in a rapidly-changing world. His racist comments about Indonesians and Malays were strategic and tactical, designed to warn people that if lazy attitudes were adopted then Singapore might sink into the same economic stagnation that had befallen its neighbours in the region. Someone like Patrick Lee was one person who was irritated by the PAP's movements into eugenics territory and the racism (Barr, 2009: p. 192) was also unpalatable to many

people. He opposed strongly, as he told me in a 2010 interview, LKY's "stop at two" policy as he argued that large families created warmth and were an integral part of Chinese culture. Another supporter of the PAP who changed to become an opposition supporter was my interviewee, S.K. Leong, a resident of Potong Pasir, who gave his support to local lawyer and opposition figure Chiam See Tong. The unassuming and quietly-spoken Chiam consolidated his electoral hold over Potong Pasir SMC and his Singapore People's Party (SPP) kept the seat until they were removed at the 2011 General Election. That election campaign saw Chiam's wife take over after her husband's death and this was not well received by some voters. To what extent LKY seriously believed in his eugenics ideas and racism will never be known with certainty. Barr (2009: p. 121) records that Toh Chin Chye and Ong Pang Boon, out of Lee's cabinet colleagues, did not support his eugenics views while S. Rajaratnam and E.W. Barker after their retirements also stated that they disagreed with these opinions. Without doubt the shift to eugenics-based discourse was a tactic of policy of that era (as Foucault said - laws themselves being used as tactics) and also reflected LKY's constant anxiety about Singapore's economic future. No matter how strong and stable Singapore became, the survivalist narrative (Barr, 2019: pp. 3-4) was still an inescapable part of the dominant discourse and it was socially unacceptable to challenge it.

The constant defamation suits against political opponents was an unusual aspect of PAP rule and many would see the constant use of this law as running contrary to the spirit of the law as it existed in Britain. It was hard for some to understand because it pursued opponents, but did not criminalize them, although sometimes opposition figures ran foul of the criminal law as well usually due to unapproved political protests. Foucault's (1975/1977) concept of power/knowledge is a useful vehicle to analyze the defamation suits as Foucault did not distinguish between power and authority or criminal and civil law. Clearly, laws were used as tactics, as were defamation suits themselves since they put a political opponent out of action, deprived the person of funds that could be used for political purposes, and gave society a message that the person must be disapproved of and stigmatized. In a socially-conservative Chinese-majority society, the SDP's brave and consistent efforts to turn opposition figures into heroes have not been completely successful outside of influencing young liberal-democrats.

In the 1990s, an Asian Values discourse (Barr, 2009: pp. 34, 38, 248) was championed by veteran leaders Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia and LKY among others. It was an ideological defence of South East Asian practices in the face of criticism by Westerners and Western governments. The term and the discourse seem to have outlived their usefulness.

Today Singapore and LKY's legacy is as secure as ever, despite the opposition vote rising to about 40%. The world has become more like Singapore, after the death of communism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe and the worldwide rise of neoliberalism. Singapore, too, has become more like the rest of the world as current rhetoric does not match the colour and directness of the

LKY era. While LKY's words now would be deemed politically incorrect, if not offensive, the naked capitalism espoused by the PAP state, combined with authoritarian restrictions on speech and association have not exactly become endangered species. Singapore has always been relatively liberal in the areas of adult entertainment and the sex industry, and its liberalism here too is consistent with Western postmodern attitudes. While there is death penalty for drug traffickers, alcohol use has arguably never received the same social stigmatization that it has in those Western countries with a Christian foundation. Sport and religion, areas not seen as within the purview of the "political", have largely been left alone, although see my later comments about religious buildings. So, we have illiberalism within a sea of liberalism or liberalism within a sea of illiberalism, depending on how one wants to view it. The PAP state is no longer even necessarily seen as an outlier on the world stage. Its support for the USA and Israel has also made outsiders view it as just another figure in the USA-UK-Australia camp.

2. Background

Summary and comments on the role of Lee Kuan Yew in the modernization of Singapore

Singapore is a multi-ethnic city-state in Southeast Asia located at the foot of the Malay Peninsula. Its main ethnic groups have remained stable in percentage terms since independence - Chinese (74%), the Indigenous Malays (13.5%) and Indians (9%) (James & Walsh, 2023: pp. 152-153). On winning the 1959 election, Lee became Prime Minister. Although Malaysia had gained independence in 1957, Singapore remained a colony until joining the new Federation of Malaysia in 1963 along with Sabah and Sarawak. Lee Kuan Yew was the first prime minister of Singapore after independence and separation from Malaysia in 1965 and he continued on in that role until 1990. He was a Cambridge-educated lawyer who originally teamed up with left-wing trade unionists such as Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan to win the support of the Chinese-educated working-class who were the largest group of residents in the 1950s and 1960s (James, 2022). At that time the Chinese-educated population was caught up in the excitement of the 1949 Chinese Revolution (Barr, 2019: p. 109), and this included communists and a broad cross-section of the rest. However, in *Operation Cold Store* in 1963, Lim and other activists on the left-wing were detained without trial. By this time, Lee's conservative-technocratic faction had already gained control of the People's Action Party (PAP). However, it was a long battle to defeat the socialist wing which had control of large swathes of the grassroots organizations.

Lee and his talented cabinet colleagues had a strategy of economic growth through export-oriented industry and the encouragement of foreign, mostly Western, MNCs to adopt Singapore as a regional base. The export of services, including tourism, was also important (Huff, 1985). Low tax and a pro-business legal system, with minimal labour protection and no safety net, allowed the

country and region to develop economically at a pace with Hong Kong (China), South Korea, and Taiwan region, China. Social cohesion was pursued both as an end in itself but also so that the economy could progress due to high education levels, hard work, and minimal civil or labour unrest. Important to this was an emergent ideology of nationalism and citizenship that was encouraged by the state (Kong & Yeoh, 1997; Tan, 2007). By the late 1980s, Lee had accumulated more personal power as his original colleagues had retired or were relegated to the backbenches. Younger MPs were unwilling to challenge his authority or his ideas, and he remained respected and feared among voters. As time passed, there was a strategic shift from export-led manufacturing to high technology industries including the creative industries, logistics, healthcare services, fund management, and biotechnology. Singapore continues to be heavily reliant on foreign labour in manufacturing and construction and there is a large population of foreign domestic workers. The PAP has won every election in postindependence history (Yeo, 2002: pp. 209, 212) and the first-past-the-post and GRC voting systems make it hard for opposition parties to win seats even when they secure 40% of nationwide votes overall.

The key issues of Lee Kuan Yew policy

The main tenets of PAP policy have been export-led economic growth, substantial investment in education and technology, and social stability. Meritocracy (Yeo, 2002: p. 212) and multiracialism (Heng, 1997; Yeo, 2002: p. 212), along with freedom of religion, have been seen as important planks of government systems and values. Race has been regulated and controlled in order to assist minority groups to gain representation in parliament, through the GRC scheme (introduced in 1988) where three-to-six member constituencies have to have at least one person per party from a designated ethnic minority (Yeo, 2002: p. 206). There are four official languages although English has been championed since independence as the language of global business and academia. Now students must learn their assigned “mother tongue” at school, which means Malay for Malays and Indonesians, Mandarin for Chinese and Tamil for Indians. Since 1979, the Speak Mandarin Campaign was designed to improve Mandarin-speaking competency so as to improve the ability to trade and negotiate with China businesses and government. This was a pragmatic move and only occurred in the Deng Xiao Ping era when China had moved to socialism with Chinese characteristics. By this time, Singapore’s Chinese-educated left-wing of the 1950s had been largely replaced by the English-educated and increased wealth moved more people into the middle-class (Yeo, 2002: p. 214). Any left-wing radical politics or dissent in Singapore had been extinguished by the mid-1970s and hence the promotion of Mandarin was seen as safe by the PAP state. Chua (1995) maintains that the PAP had changed the public sphere of life in Singapore to one that was largely in need of administration rather than one that was alive with political contestations. This situation was attained during the 1968-80 period when there were no opposition MPs in the Parliament. Rules in government

housing estates limited the percentage of each ethnic group in each block or area, and many say that this was to scatter politically-motivated ethnic enclaves all about the island (Yeo, 2002: p. 206).

The influence of population control

The highest birth rate ever recorded was in 1957 at 42.7 births per thousand individuals. In the late 1960s, a “stop at two” policy was introduced so as to control population growth. Increased education and wealth by the 1970s, as well as the “stop at two” policy, led to a decline in the birth rate and the population expanded slowly. The decade between 1970 and 1980 saw a moderate population increase of only 339,000 people. In 1990, non-citizens only amounted to about 10% of the total population of 3.7 million. As at 2022, the population had expanded to approximately 5.98 million and it is estimated to grow to 6.5 to 6.9 million by 2030. Increased middleclass lifestyles and wealth led to a shortage of locals wanting to work in manufacturing and construction and higher and higher demand for foreign domestic workers and hospitality industry staff including “exotic” dancers from the poorer countries of the region (James & Walsh, 2023; James, Khrisnamurti, & Walsh, 2023). In-migration from China, and India kept the percentage of each main ethnic group approximately the same over time. The immigration of educated Chinese into Singapore was always seen as a government priority that sometimes created suspicion among members of minority races. Lee Kuan Yew once said that an ethnic Chinese-majority was needed for sustained economic growth (Barr, 2009: p. 186; *The Straits Times*, 21 August 1989). Immigration rates skyrocketed in the new millennium, but foreign workers cannot bring in family members and there is no easy or straightforward path to citizenship for those not working in “professional” jobs. The number of net immigrants was 824,147 from 2000-2010 and 405,432 from 2010-2020. It had been only 24,000 from 1970-1980, suggesting high emigration relative to immigration in that decade. Nowadays, the number of citizens and foreign workers have both risen significantly creating local unrest and a move by many opposition supporters to the centre-right in terms of immigration policy after 2010 (James, 2022). In fact, forty percent of residents were foreigners by that year (Barr, 2019: p. 169).

The factors that influence Lee Kuan Yew policy and thought

In regards to Lee Kuan Yew, there is no generally accepted body of thought similar to Mao Zedong Thought. He is a complex individual and perhaps pragmatism and empiricism serve as his main belief systems. He was interested in pursuing economic growth (Tan, 2007: p. 306) and social stability, and every other value or policy, including multiracialism (Heng, 1997; Yeo, 2002: p. 212) and meritocracy (Yeo, 2002: p. 212) must be seen in this light. He was also interested in defence of the country and people, protecting them both physically and in terms of resisting decadent Western cultural influences (Barr, 2009: pp. 33, 169-170). As to whether economic growth or social stability were a more important end for him is an open question, but cynics would argue that eco-

nomic growth has always been the primary impetus (Barr, 2009: pp. 77, 168; Devan Nair in Seow, 1994: p. 12). The survivalist narrative has been a key plank since independence, the notion that, due to natural resource lack, the people must work hard and be innovative so as to prevent the economy crashing to the level of its regional neighbours. Rodan (1996: pp. 86-89) and Yeo (2002: p. 215) suggest that the interconnection of various ideological tenets and the elitism inherent in the meritocracy principle means that it is hard to envisage major changes in the Singapore system. Even the opposition do not really contest elitism. In regards to meritocracy and multiracialism, it is very hard if not impossible to state a case directly against such lofty concepts without appearing wrong-headed or fascist.

3. Methodology

I became interested in the world of Singapore politics when I first worked there full-time in the years 1993-94. I was interested in the ethnic dimensions, as reflected in the controversial Group Representation Constituency (GRC) system, and admired the bravery and persistence of the opposition candidates who faced insurmountable odds, especially in those days, against the powerful PAP machine. The opposition had legendary figures, such as the Slipper Man and the Bicycle Thief, and I suspected that they couldn't possibly be as bad or ridiculous as they were painted by the incumbent party. The same candidates would persist year-after-year with little success and it seemed that once someone stopped being a government supporter they never reneged on that decision. I was in Singapore, by chance, during a holiday in December 1996 when the election campaign for the 1997 General Election was being played out in the mainstream media. The battle for Cheng San GRC was attracting widespread interest and the Workers' Party (WP) team, led by veteran campaigner J.B. Jeyaretnam and Tang Liang Hong, posed a real threat to the incumbents. Government ministers pursued a relentless campaign of vilification against Tang, accusing him of the "unforgiveable sin" of "Chinese chauvinism".

I started the research project officially in 2009 when I contacted the SDP via email requesting for interviews. My interest had been rekindled by reading the SDP website. I was interested in how opposition people viewed the system and the future, and also issues of power, meaning, and identity. I was interested in studying the opposition community *qua* community which had not been done before at that stage. I made my first research trip there in September 2009 and visited the old party headquarters in Jalan Gelenggang just off Upper Thomson Road. I interviewed the Assistant Secretary-General John L. Tan and two SDP Youth activists, Seelan Palay and Jarrod Luo, as well as the SDP Women's Wing's Jaslyn Go. Around this time the SDP Youth was at its peak and a significant amount of hype had been generated around them. There was a hope that their committed internet activism could make significant inroads at the polls. They were a "broad church" and had a variety of different belief sets and ap-

proaches, the party did not require them to join as members because the leaders were concerned that possible social stigmatization would be a factor that might stop young people from getting involved. I returned to Singapore in February-March 2010 and attended the SDP's 30th Anniversary Dinner. I was able to meet a number of politicians and activists there and during the next week interviewed six people at five different interview sessions.

Overall, I interviewed 26 different people, at 31 interviews, between September 2009 and May 2019, 23 (88.46%) of whom were men and 3 (11.54%) of whom were women. My main period of activity on the project was March 2009 to December 2013 when 27 interviews took place. Only one person elected to remain anonymous, the 14-year-old opposition supporter Renarda Yoch (name changed), whom I interviewed alongside his 17-year-old friend Sebastian Yap Puay Tong. The median (average) interview length was 120 minutes (112.5) minutes. The shortest interview was 70 minutes long while the longest took 180 minutes. The youngest interviewee was 14-years-old while the oldest was 66-years-old (Patrick Lee). Because the youngest interviewee was 14-years-old, I interviewed him at a crowded public place on a weekday afternoon (McDonald's restaurant in Bedok Town Centre), with his 17-year-old friend present and with his parents' permission.

My aim at the beginning was to focus on researching the opposition parties and activists only because not much was known about them. This was due to the PAP state's domination and control of mainstream media. Books on Singapore had always tended to write about the government with references to opposition figures being restricted to a page or two, usually when they appeared in relation to some event deemed significant such as J.B. Jeyaretnam's victory in Anson SMC in 1981 which made him the first opposition MP in Parliament since 1967. Therefore, my work has to be read within the context of the existing literature.

In terms of selecting interviewees, I used a mix of convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling involves interviewing people that are easily accessible to the researcher. I made contacts at the SDP's 30th Anniversary Dinner for example and then interviewed people I met there during the following week. I met people at the SDP headquarters as well. Because Patrick Lee was retired, I could interview him three times over a three-year period. These interviews tended to be 3 hours long as we would meet for lunch in the coffee shop at Telok Blangah Plaza and stay there for the whole afternoon. In terms of snowball sampling, the friendship between Patrick Lee and Goh Meng Seng allowed me to interview those two individuals one after the other. I cannot recall which person introduced me to the other. I wanted to get a mix of ages and genders and opposition party politician versus activist. I defined a politician as someone who had stood as an official candidate in one or more election and an activist as a nonpolitician. Although only 3 women were interviewed, this reflected approximately the gender mix of opposition politicians around the 2009-13 period. However, as men tend to mix more with other men socially, and women with women, my snowball sampling method also tended to lead to more interviews with men. In terms of

ages, the age range, as mentioned, spread from 14-years-old to 66-years-old and hence was very diverse. All interviews were held in Singapore except for my interview with Dr James Gomez held in Melbourne.

In qualitative research, it is impossible, and maybe not even desirable, to obtain a perfectly balanced sample or to eliminate all bias. Each opposition party and politician had and has strengths and weaknesses, and the assessment of each party and person will also be a subjective undertaking. My goal at the start had been to remain fair and neutral between the various opposition parties, although I may not always have achieved the neutrality goal in practice because, as time passed, I was naturally influenced by views I heard, actions I witnessed, and party policies I read. However, I do hope that I passed the test of remaining fair.

Participant-observation included regular visits to the SDP headquarters, attendance at the SDP's 30th and 31st Anniversary Dinners, and attendance at the SDP's election count night function held at Quality Hotel, Balestier Road, on the evening of 7-8 May 2011. At that function, there was significant excitement at the WP winning Aljunied GRC, but disappointment at both the SDP's showing and the SDA's narrow loss in Potong Pasir SMC which saw the seat return to the PAP after 22 years. I heard firsthand the opinion of leaders or key members of the SDP, NSP, WP, and SDA, and I think this is one of the definite strengths of the project.

4. Nietzsche and Modernity

Although Friedrich Nietzsche's relation with modernity was complex, ultimately his aim was to provide "a critique of modernity" (Magnus & Higgins, 1996: p. 45; Nietzsche, 1908/2004: p. 82). He saw in modernity the destruction or loss of traditional aristocratic values as well as the more positive of the religious values. The fate of modernity was *nihilism* or nothingness. Strong (1996: p. 123) describes the situation as follows: "Nihilism is the state in which a being has the need to call itself continually into question, to raise continually the question of the grounds of its existence, without anything being able to count as such grounds". All that was left was master moralities (although under constant attack and criticism), slave moralities (Nietzsche, 1886/2003a: Section 195, p. 118, Section 260, pp. 194-198), and the will to power (Nietzsche, 1886/2003a: Section 259, p. 194; Nietzsche, 2003b, p. 138; Nietzsche, 1901/2010: Section 534, p. 208). In regards to his concept of the will to power as the predominant force of life and society, the modern slavely person would rather "will the void than be void of will" (Nietzsche, 1908/2004: p. 84; Nietzsche, 1887/2013: p. 145). Strong (1996: p. 123) explains this slightly differently: "That is, he will continue to exist with an identity that is premised on no-thing, rather than not exist at all". This seems to well describe the case of modern Western liberal-democracies, where there is gridlock because majority socially-acceptable opinion is fixed in advance on every issue and appeals to religion are precluded. In LKY-era Singapore there was a complex doublethink to be explained later.

The situation of modernity was and is that it must produce its own values from within itself as it cannot take values from other ages. Addressing the neo-Kantians of his time, Nietzsche said in *The Antichrist* that everyone must create his or her own categorical imperative (Nietzsche, 1889/1990: Section 11, p. 134; Solomon, 1996: p. 183). Nietzsche, more generally, took refuge in the figure of the creative artist, and held that the creation of life should be an individual aesthetic project. Nietzsche (1886/2003a: Section 260, p. 197) says in *Beyond Good and Evil* that, “according to master morality it is precisely the ‘good’ who inspire fear and want to inspire it, while the ‘bad’ man is judged contemptible”. Under these criteria, LKY is certainly Nietzschean in style and intent and a practitioner of master moralities, he wanted to inspire fear and he regarded his “bad” opponents as contemptible. Those who were strong he enjoyed attacking and rendering powerless and debase through vilification and lawsuits. Singapore’s electoral history shows that the majority of voters have accepted this master morality perspective at least for rulers.

In Richard Rorty’s perspective on Nietzsche, all that is left in modernity is for people to create themselves as a personal project (Nehamas, 1996: p. 236). The liberals might want to reduce cruelty in the world but these political beliefs have no connection to the idea of life as a personal project (Nehamas, 1996: p. 236). This has been true for a long time in Singapore because of the lack of political freedom and the large number of illiberal laws which must be memorized and followed, only for people to have to follow the new laws once the old ones are removed. The only freedoms were to work hard all day and drink beer all night (if you could afford it). Now there is another aspect where there is only the personal because First World status has been reached. And, in the times of the twentieth century, the LKY era, even the personal power to create one’s own life was minimal as evidenced by the repression of leftwing activists such as Lim Chin Siong and Fong Swee Suan. However, the opposite can also be argued as no student of Singapore’s political history can fail to remember what they stood for.

LKY claimed to believe in liberalism, but not necessarily of the Western, decadent, permissive type, and demanded that people see him as such. If Nietzsche called the modernity problem “nihilism” or “nothingness” (Nehamas, 1996: pp. 237-238; Pippin, 1996: p. 254), how exactly does that work out in both the LKY and post-LKY eras? And what were the positive things, if any, that he absorbed at Cambridge?

The contradictions at the heart of LKY’s project, between economic growth and social stability (James & Walsh, 2023: p. 152), between progress and tradition, between English language proficiency and multilingualism, between multi-racialism and “ruling a Chinese society”, had no answers at all, except for pragmatism (usually) and authoritarianism (definitely). He reached nihilism and meaninglessness quicker than the Western countries. Partly, I think, this was due to his great cynicism, hidden by sincerity, but hidden in plain sight. Paradoxically, his sincerity was not obviously fake or not provably so. This is another contradiction at the heart of his project. In one way, LKY’s vision for Singapore

succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. In another sense, it failed abysmally, but only because he wanted it to fail - he dared not give people freedom or the ability to relax and enjoy life and be creative. I think the Church grew in Singapore because it was both an escape and respite from his harsh rule, while the regime's order, stability, and promotion of family and traditional values made the Romans 13 injunction that the authorities that exist have been established by God plausible in a very realistic sense. But the background context of the regime and the society produced, in certain circles, a harsh and austere Christianity, which is not to say that the Church did not provide a positive role in many lives. People, in some cases, began to think of God as a nicer version of the all-powerful and all-knowing LKY, when the desire to see God in the natural world became too strong, either at the conscious or subconscious level. However, Protestant, often Pentecostal, Christianity gave people freedom to think and dream and act within Christian boundaries that, in most cases, did not offend the sensibilities of the regime as the focus was on building ties and personal growth. Only the issue of evangelism was something that the regime found problematic due to its official doctrines of multiculturalism and religious freedom. Once you encroached on areas of life and belief that the PAP saw as its exclusive area of provenance, you were deemed to have entered the fray of politics and you were fair game for persecution from the state. It was then no longer possible to hide behind religion as the PAP always saw politics as trumping religion; religion was relegated to the purely private and ceremonial realms of life. In the PAP's pursuit of 22 young Roman Catholic priests and social workers in 1987's *Operation Spectrum* (Barr, 2019: pp. 8, 24, 136), at the tail-end of the LKY prime-ministership, they were targeted because the PAP perceived liberation theology to be an inexcusable and dangerous mixture of leftwing politics and religion. It was repression such as this that saw many breathe a sigh of relief at the end of the LKY prime-ministership, although he kept considerable power as Senior Minister in the GCT years. Repression was evident then, too, but lessened in the new millennium. An example of repression in the 1990s was the campaign of persecution against Tang Liang Hong, a Workers' Party candidate for the Cheng San GRC at the 1997 General Election, for "playing the race card", a card that opposition politicians Goh Meng Seng and the late Patrick Lee Song Juan have said only the PAP is allowed to play. The PAP always fixes the rules of the game. This was considered to be assumed knowledge and the population was expected to accept this reality while also pretending that they lived in a nonrepressive society.

Other concepts of Nietzsche were the *Übermensch* (Superman) and eternal recurrence, which Nietzsche (1908/2004: p. 69) said in his autobiography *Ecce Homo* was the key idea in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (Nietzsche, 1883-85/2003b). Would the free spirits have the ability to overcome the existing constraints of herd mentality? Nietzsche lamented that "we moderns", himself probably included, ended up in timid conformity because of the lack of values inherent to modernity. Although he lamented "goallessness" he admired individuals who had goals. His *Übermensch* character, however, was never fully at home in

splendid isolation or among others. Nietzsche goes on to say that the free spirit wants enemies that he can respect or even love. It may even be possible or a positive thing to ignore one's enemies or even to forgive. These ideas cast doubts upon simplistic either/or characterizations of Nietzsche, he admired in certain instances the spirit of Christianity even. For LKY, he saw himself as above the ordinary herd and he perceived that only the intellectual elite of Singapore, and among those only the ones who could accept the precepts and practices of the PAP, should be allowed to govern the city-state. He was afraid that the rule of Singapore might fall into the hands of an untalented and opportunistic opposition, which is why he tried his utmost to recruit the best candidates to the PAP inner sanctum and he constantly tested and discarded even cabinet ministers in the interests of continual renewal. His self-confidence, determination, and bravado were indeed remarkable, he never took a backward step and rarely admitted mistakes. Mistakes would only be "admitted" after the fact by the quiet removal of a minister or MP as when Wong Kan Seng was pushed out of his positions of Minister for Home Affairs and DPM following the "escaped terrorist" fiasco. This event saw alleged Jemaah Islamiyah leader Mas Selamat bin Kastari escape from Whitley Road Detention Centre, and Wong was the one who was required to take the blame as the responsible minister. Another example was the quiet removal of the unpopular Mah Bow Tan as Housing Minister (officially the Minister for National Development) after the 2011 General Election. LKY was bored by the herd and saw them as people to be controlled and manipulated in the interests of nation-building and social cohesion. He had opinions on every opposition person, appeared to respect some and disrespect others, but these opinions may in part have been feigned, as he was determined to manipulate public opinion in regards the various opposition figures. We will never know how many of his public comments represented sincerely-held beliefs and even he may have been taken over at times by his own hyperbole so that he began to believe his own words. Nietzsche argued that the *Übermensch* would be able to accept eternal recurrence, or the constant repetition of his past life. A different meaning of eternal recurrence is the repetitive nature of Singapore life where the main priority of life is held to be work and any creative or artistic endeavours are routinely scrutinized for alleged antigovernment agendas. The working-class and middle-class, in this sense, are doomed to eternal recurrence unless they emigrate to countries where conformity is less rigidly enforced and the education system less a race to obtain degrees. However, Singapore democrats idolize Western countries and assume, somewhat naively, that social controls are lacking there rather than realizing that the Western ruling classes skillfully manage to enforce control even through or alongside of the discourses and practices of liberal-democracy.

LKY was determined to take on modernity and win on his own terms, and it probably cannot be denied that he achieved this goal, on his own terms, for better or for worse. He relied upon the twin goals of economic growth and social stability (James & Walsh, 2023: p. 152), with the secret underpinning being that

the latter was not an end in itself but was designed to serve the former. He had no truck for any ideologies that did not serve his purposes and they were brutally suppressed. He measured success in terms of empirical measurements and his main ideology, if it can be called that, was pragmatism. So, sometimes he believed in development and sometimes in heritage preservation, extremes were usually “fixed” in practice by being quietly dropped several years after-the-fact or otherwise they were quietly dropped by being replaced by new initiatives. Slogans and programmes were recycled and created anew, as redundant ones were dropped, endlessly and frequently, and one goal behind all of this may have been the need to always keep one step ahead of the opposition and herd. In Foucault’s (1994/2003: pp. 29-30) terms, LKY had l’*éthos* of stunning, purposeful, and determined self-creation, that spread out from his own mind and body to include everyone and everything in the city-state - he had a plan for it all. And, as with Foucault’s (1994/2003: pp. 29-30) understanding of l’*éthos* in Ancient Greece, he presented himself in such a way that he was respected and it was widely believed that he had the status, talent, and elitism to reign over the elitist city-state that he had produced in his own image, an elitist city-state characterized by speed, efficiency, high education levels, power, technique, and just a little bit of unashamed brashness.

5. Foucault and Madness

Michel Foucault (1965/1988) explained in *Histoire de la folie/Madness and civilization* how the treatment of madness changed from the late Middle Ages (pre-1550) to the Renaissance (1550-1650) to the classical era (1650-1800) to the modern era (post-1800). In the late Middle Ages, madness was revered as a source of creativity and innovation. Lepers were the social outcasts, but they were housed in leper hospitals located near the city gates. Their close presence reminded everyone about the duties of Christian charity. There was neither a definite rejection nor a sharp divide, backed by the dictates of science, between madness and reason.

In the Renaissance (1550-1650), the mad took the place of the lepers in the public imagination. They were sent on Ships of Fools upriver to be excommunicated to the countryside where they were allowed to roam. The purpose was to create order within the cities.

In the Classical Age of the Great Confinement, the mad were put into the new *Hôpital général de Paris*, established in 1656 (Foucault, 1965/1988: pp. 46-47; Sheridan, 1980: p. 24), and workhouses were also set up in Germany and England. The mad were interned, along with the lazy, indigent, prostitutes, and libertines, because they were seen as unproductive and useless for capitalism. As the mad were idle, they were seen as a threat to the stability of bourgeois society and the Classical Age’s morality of work (Gutting, 1994: p. 53). The mad became the subject of medical supervision and study. The mad were seen, paradoxically to us moderns, as both the result of not conforming to God’s laws and outbursts

of animal spirits (Gutting, 1994: pp. 59-60; Sheridan, 1980: p. 30). Although there was an element where madness was seen as mental illness, this only became the dominant theme in the nineteenth century (Gutting, 1994: p. 51). Foucault is clear that the main characteristic of treatment of the mad in the Classical Age in Western Europe was mass confinement (Gutting, 1994: p. 57). In Christian terms, exhibition of the mad was designed to show both how far they had fallen and that God's mercy extended even that far (Gutting, 1994: p. 59). Previously, Christianity was seen as a scandal to reason, and hence a glorified form of madness. Such an understanding stopped in the Classical Age when Christian wisdom was reclassified as being on the side of reason (Gutting, 1994: p. 59).

In the modern era, commencing around the beginning of the nineteenth century, Reason was defined rigidly and unreason or madness was the excluded other. Foucault identifies the start of the modern age with Pinel's freeing of the inmates at *Bicêtre* in 1794 (Sheridan, 1980: p. 31). The medical profession defined what madness was, as the opposite of Reason. Reason became a dogmatic type of King (Sheridan, 1980: p. 13), operating without an external arbiter, so that it became its own god. Madness was seen as anything other than Reason, but madness or unreason is inextricably bound up with Reason, as Reason's underside or possibly Reason taken to its logical extreme or the gaps within Reason. Madness or unreason remains unacceptable and socially feared or despised as contrary to medicine, progress, and the scientific method. But it can escape through the gaps in Reason and manifest or flow out into the real world. It can be very hard to define madness's products as inherently or totally mad or totally destructive or useless. There can be insights, meaning, and power there, as well as usefulness. Everything in this critique or commentary should be viewed in this light. If something is seen as mad by some people, that should not be seen as a universally perfect or correct or self-evident category or definition. I avoid denigrating madness or mad behaviour, and avoid putting up a false fence between Reason and Unreason. So, the piece is not obviously a straightforward criticism or praise of the founding father of Modern Singapore. In a long period of leadership, we would expect most leaders to demonstrate aspects of both Reason and Unreason, although in all likelihood they will see themselves as being completely rational all of the time. Others will be expected to agree with this presumption of rationality. Although LKY ruled using techniques of surveillance and control, of the type Foucault (1975/1977) describes in *Discipline and Punish*, his merciless pursuit of and ruining of opponents that he disliked was so obviously personal that he functioned as a premodern king figure. Hence, punishment was seen as a restoration, in the eyes of society, for a situation where the king's honour had been attacked. While everybody knew this, it was socially unacceptable to state it publicly and everyone was expected to say that Singapore was just another liberal democracy. Hence, a kind of unspoken set of laws or a discursive formation (Foucault, 1969/1972: pp. 38, 107, 116) existed where people knew that it was an authoritarian state, where the leader operated similarly to a premodern monarch in pursuit of opponents, and everybody knew that

everybody else knew, but it was never permissible to publicly state these things. And yet you were viewed as naïve and foolish if you didn't know the reality that was never permissible to speak about. So how was someone's naivety revealed if to speak was impossible? By gaps, by facial expressions, by careless words, by excessive sincerity. The fast-rising civil servant communicated his or her status through *l'éthos* (Foucault, 1994/2003: pp. 29-30) that was not devoid of irony, but was still singleminded in its commitments to both PAP discourse and PAP tasks. To be middle-class and to be either Chinese or Indian, and married with children, was an advantage if one aspired to be an MP. One could pursue religion but in a way that never approached "the political" or questioned the right of the state to regulate and control religious buildings or activities (Kong, 1993a, 1993b). One had to accept the PAP state and the society as both self-evident where the government was chosen to manage society and religion was relegated to a "nonpolitical" sector of life where the preachers could only discuss purely spiritual questions and questions of love and charity.

6. Conclusion

Perhaps LKY, with his determined long-term strategy, his focus on actively achieving both economic growth and social stability, while suppressing dissenters, was Nietzschean itself, the strong man railing against the power of the weak, who continually "threatens" to become lazy or vote for the opposition even when they stay meek. If we add madder elements, his eugenics and racism, these should not be, and generally were not, supported at the time. But they were part-and-parcel of the forward momentum of the power/knowledge that still is associated with his reign (Sheridan, 1980: p. 133). Sheridan refers to the young man, Pierre Rivière, who murdered his mother, sister, and brother, in order to free his father from abuse. In his memoir, he "set out to prove the rationality of his actions" (133) whereas the psychiatrists used it to prove he was insane. Discourses are adopted, transfigured and reinterpreted according to power dynamics and goals. With LKY, too, his own discourse that he saw as rational was reinterpreted by opposition figures to prove that it had madder elements. But they were an outgrowth of his rationality, and not separate from it. Eugenics came out of a desire to breed a smarter race, while the anti-Indonesian racism was designed to push people to work harder and smarter. LKY controlled the population in a modern way, using modern techniques, while his campaigns against his detractors resembled the premodern monarch striving to restore his own honour in the eyes of the public. I am not trying to locate any true hidden essence, whether good or bad, but want to describe and explain his forward momentum, for want of a better term, his arrow, his knife, the energy and direction that characterized his power/knowledge and that inspired fear and respect.

His later claim to Chineseness, whether fraudulent or not, still stands as a later element, providing flavour and colour, strength and accent, to the forward momentum of his reign during that latter time period, beginning around 1979 with the Speak Mandarin Campaign. I am not simplistically praising or denouncing

him, he was what he was, forward momentum, ball of energy and steel, a leader characterized by enunciation rather than debate, pronouncements and not consensus, ideas rather than consent. And if he made mistakes, his self-confidence was never even dented, to the amazement of those who did not know him at all. No-one could claim that he failed to be interesting or watchable even when not trying. If we refer to Foucault's *Discipline and punish*, LKY treated the individual and collective worker in a modernist way by improving education and urging manufacturers to become more efficient and technical, and workers to work yet harder still, so as to achieve sustained economic growth. The worker's body became a target of tactics so it would not be lazy, rebellious or a pursuer of excessive leisure or trade unionism. Instead, it had to remain a hard worker, six days a week, forever business-minded.

What are the limitations in applying Nietzsche and Foucault to political figures? One is that Foucault's ideas rely on the premodern-modern distinction in Western philosophy and, as Chakrabarty (2000/2008) has pointed out, non-Western societies did not necessarily follow the same trajectory of change in the same way. However, LKY aspired to be modern in the sense of belief in progress, science, technology, a British-based legal system, and education. Although Singapore remained a religious society, there was an almost-Western relegation of religion to the private realm. This allowed for administration and management along modern and secular lines, which makes Foucault's ideas of power/knowledge very relevant. The monitoring and control of behaviour of citizens and foreign workers in Singapore and the censorship and self-censorship (Gomez, 2000) of citizens over the years also suggest that power/knowledge is a useful conceptual model. The use of Foucault's early work on reason and madness is my own application and is speculative. If Foucault's work and Sheridan's (1980) commentary are studied carefully, we will see that Foucault did not support the sharp division in the nineteenth century between reason and unreason. Neither did he despise madness or believe that it was right that the psychiatrists and lawyers defined what madness was and who was mad at a particular juncture. My presentation of LKY in terms of these ideas is not unsympathetic. In hindsight, we can perhaps see that LKY was a victim, too, of the Western, modernist idea that reason must trump everything and that only rationality, progress, and development matter. (He believed, claimed to believe, or pretended to believe that eugenics was a scientific fact.) Barr (2009: p. 243) says that "at heart, Lee's progressivism could never be more than a secular faith". Whether he picked up such understandings during his years in Cambridge is hard to say, but in a foreign country we often subconsciously struggle for understanding and interpret things in specific unique ways, overemphasizing some things and underemphasizing others, while mentally explaining and structuring ideas and practices in a way that misses the point of why things are as they are.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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