The Port City, Globalisation and Identity

The complex processes of globalisation have, over the past few decades since the 1970s, profoundly changed the cities in both advanced and developing countries.[1] These processes of change often attributed to globalisation involve not only the economic sector but also the political, social and cultural spheres of life in the recipient countries.[2] While global integration has brought about high-technology production and professional services offering jobs for the highly skilled, there also appears to be a rising number of people working in the less qualified service activities as well as the informal economy.[3] The globalising context of urban landscape changes has been accompanied by an observed shift in urban policy from social to economic targets, with a consequent reduction in expenditure on social programmes and corresponding increase in expenditure on city marketing, productive infrastructure and elite cultural developments.[4] In studies that have been conducted of the impact of globalisation on large cities in advanced countries, such polarisation in employment and social citizenship is seen to pose the most serious challenge to the future of Western democratic societies.

Economic globalisation refers to the internationalisation of a host of economic relations. In such globalisation, multinational firms have been the leading economic agents. Together with social and political actors at different spatial scales and levels, these agents have recomposed urban networks as both cities and the linkages among them have become embedded in the global economy.[5] In discussing the impact of telecommunications technologies on the future of cities, a prevailing view is that the dispersion of work will alter the nature of cities and towns, reaffirming their importance as places where people live and as centres for the consumption of entertainment and culture.[6] Yet such views, while optimistic, also have a downside in the fragmentation of labour markets and the increasingly prevalent employment of people on short-term contracts or as freelance workers. That is, an increasingly insecure and transient and workforce. More specifically, 'neighbourhoods and cities, and their different constituent social and political groups, cannot achieve renaissance on the basis of new economic initiatives alone; the reconstruction of local social and political fabrics is equally essential, and the recovery of full urban citizenship from the fragmentation of social, economic, political and cultural identities is a complex process'.[7]

Based on the argument that the globalisation of the economy is completely renewing the way public policy deals with 'territory', there are concerns arising from the new role that cities are playing in implementing new policies of economic development and even real entrepreneurial strategies.[8] These concerns focus on different types of tension that are generated between what are seen as the political and economic logics in the production of territory and urban form and hence, the different types of social cohesion resulting from this production. This implies that with the urban development trends that are emerging as cities seek integration with the global economy, there is tension in the search for coherence combined with relationships of conflict that may develop, and the negotiation of compromises that may have to be reached. In this light, the city has been considered a social form of adjustment between the market and society. A strong suggestion is that governments everywhere are putting up their cities for sale, crudely speaking, in the world market and that the cities have become effectively, economic actors.   In both developed and developing countries, public policies have been found to be important in promoting cities and their attractiveness in competition against other cities. In this way, cultural or land-use policies that preserve historical landscapes can be used to try and influence the locational decisions of firms or skilled workers required by the economy.

The concern that has been raised about the de-linking of the economic from the political system, as Habermas has argued, is that while capitalism or the market has been liberated from the interference of the state, liberal capitalism has become more vulnerable to challenges against its authority and legitimacy.[9] Such 'legitimation crises' as Habermas calls them, have

arisen from challenges of citizens and citizens' groups that have mobilised among the population, including ethnic and social groups, religious fundamentalists, gay or lesbian groups to name a few.[10] Given the relentless push to globalise among cities and their governments, there has been considerable tension not only within the multi-ethnic population but the labour sectors that are being sidelined as the planning agencies emphasise new areas of economic growth and development. The globalisation of economy suggests that there can be two possible prospects for politics and policies in cities. One prospect may be a gradual displacement of the political sphere by pure market logic while the other may perhaps be an attempt by both state and society to rebuild a political and democratic sphere at the local level.

Singapore, the Port City and the Global Economy

Singapore, a tiny island-state in Southeast Asia has since its emergence from colonial rule, adopted an international positioning and worked tirelessly at integrating its economy with the global networks which foreign investment flows have shaped. Between the 1960s until the 1990s, the economy has achieved almost uninterrupted growth apart from a recession in the mid-1980s.

Singapore has put in a great effort to develop its role in the world economy and broaden the basis upon which to build its economic competitiveness. While independence deprived Singapore of its natural hinterland to the north in Malaysia, progress towards modernisation and modernity has been attained through the expansion and exploitation of those geographical, or locational, advantages that initially led to success as a colonial port city. Singapore in the new millennium, however, is not the Singapore of the 1990s or for that matter, the city-state that had emerged from colonial rule in 1960. Neither are the external conditions that the port city faces now compared to the 1990s when research that was conducted on a city-state had largely impressed the world with thirty years of rapid economic growth.[11] This is however, a world that has witnessed the 1997 economic crisis in Asia, and thereafter laboured through a slow recovery process until it met with the uncertainty and insecurity that followed the 11 September 2001 destruction of the World Trade Centre, and consequent US-led intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Geography, as the following discussion will emphasise, has shaped the destiny of the city-state of Singapore. Yet the economic success that it has enjoyed was no mere accident of locational advantage vis-à-vis historical trade routes plying the Southeast Asian region and later, linking East Asia and the industrialising countries of the West. Historical factors have played their part at various times in both fortifying and overshadowing geographical advantage, generating the changes in Singapore's fortunes as first a trading emporium and colonial port and then, a modern nation-state. While the framework for the following discussion will be geographical, rather than historical, it is important to remember the chequered history of Singapore as a port of call. Periods of prosperity alternated with those of stagnation when Temasek, and later Singapura, all but disappeared from the map.

The island's origins, first as a port of call and eventually a port city, have been well documented.[12]   With the Portuguese colonisation of Malacca in 1511, events led to Temasek, now known as Singapura, becoming an outpost of the Malacca Sultanate, and with its trading links weakened the island became an haven for pirates. Singapura sank into regional obscurity until 1819 when Raffles' search for a geographically strategic point in the Straits of Malacca opened up a new chapter in its history.

Historical documentation shows that the objective of Raffles' decision was not territory, but trade. His search was for a great commercial emporium, and a fulcrum for the extension of British colonial influence that would destroy the Dutch monopoly of trade in Southeast Asia.[13] Singapore, together with the ports of Penang and Malacca, soon formed a single emporium that ended Dutch dominance of the Malacca Straits.[14] In contrast to Dutch protectionist monopoly of

trade between Europe and the East Indies, British commercial dominance in the Southeast and East Asian regions prospered on the basis of free trade and free navigation and Singapore's mercantile economy thrived on the policy of *laissez-faire.*[15] Subsequently, a population boom fed in part by active immigration, combined with a meteoric rise in the volume of trade passing through Singapore, bore testimony to its status as the region's pre-eminent port city.

At the Cross-Roads of Southeast Asian Trade

Singapore's early success was due to its centrality. During the British colonial period, geography provided the port of Singapore with the impetus for growth. Its central position within the productive region comprising Siam (later Thailand), British Malaya and British Borneo, as well as islands of the Indonesian archipelago, fostered its evolution as a staple port dealing with the range of staple products including rubber, tin and ultimately petroleum, demanded by the Western industrialised countries.[16] The development of trade necessitated the setting up of financial institutions and other commercial operations, many of which were headquartered in Singapore. These were largely in the hands of Europeans. Smaller-scale operations however, were controlled by Chinese businessmen and traders. These seized on opportunities for distributing goods between Southeast Asia and China. Such development however remained focused on the transhipment of goods, with few commodities originating in the port city that also possessed limited capacity to hold goods in stock.[17]

The visible impacts of Singapore's expanding entrepôt function were largely confined to areas around the Singapore River where a hive of warehouses and processing centres flourished. Change Alley, located in the area adjacent to the Singapore River, accommodated establishments like the Chinese Produce Exchange with a membership of more than 100 firms, mostly storekeepers of European merchant houses. Not surprisingly, Singapore has been referred to as an emporium, with its specialisation as a collection and distribution centre, which thrived on economies of bulking and trans-shipment.[18]

The Geography of the Modern Port City

> *The commercial functions of Singapore today correspond closely to its historic vocation as an emporium up to the time of its independence, they remain the area of its activity which, above all others, makes its economic role in Southeast Asia truly important.*[19]

At the time of independence and emergence from British colonial rule, Singapore was a declining entrepôt port apparently past its heyday at the height of the British colonial era.[20] Somewhat suddenly ejected into modern nationhood with its separation from Malaysia, it has served as a remarkable model of successful economic modernisation. After independence, the island's role as a trading emporium at the crossroads of Southeast Asia was etched firmly in the minds of the state's first political leaders who placed great emphasis on the merits of an open economy with unfettered trading links. Despite the introduction of a domestic industrial base, after 1959, Singapore's outward orientation has remained paramount. This outwardness has consistently differentiated the city-state from its larger neighbours, which are dependent upon primary, agro-based economies. Such major geographical differences have provided different trajectories for growth between Singapore and the rest of the Southeast Asian region.

The state of Singapore under the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) conceived a plan to shift the economy away from its entrepôt function by way of greater integration with global flows of trade and capital investment. This led to the subsequent embarkation on a massive spatial re-organisation exercise involving the development of major industrial estates and the rapid growth of transportation infrastructure in a physical and spatial transformation of the island-state.[21]

Beyond the Crossroads Identity

The landscape at the mouth of the Singapore River has been significantly transformed in the new millennium. Dominating the waterfront during these early years of the new millennium are now the Theatres on the Bay, the Esplanade, the revamped and reassigned Fullerton Building together with an eclectic mix of food and entertainment establishments that is the new Boat Quay. The latter is a riverfront development project along the banks of the Singapore River which used to accommodate the warehouses and entrepôt functions of the port city. Such changes appear to signal another round of effort at re-inventing the image of the city-state, but just as the landscape along the Singapore river has been transformed, so too has the global geopolitical climate.[22] The advent of terrorism on a seemingly unprecedented scale has prompted the USA, as the world's sole superpower, to embark on series of political regime changes in the developing world. This has created an economic climate of further uncertainty, following the 1997 Asian crisis, but now one in which growing security concerns threaten to undermine the benefits of globalisation.

Not for the first time has Singapore arrived at such a crossroads in its development. Having seen the trauma of its early years of independence, the city-state entered its first major recession in 1985. At the time, Singapore was being seen as yet another 'dragon' economy in distress that needed fundamental changes to its old paradigm of high-speed export-oriented industrialisation.[23] This argument for a new development paradigm saw the need for a local business class as well as greater integration with the development of Southeast Asia. It was also predicted that these changes would necessarily include greater democratisation, because the people, as in Taiwan and South Korea, were alienated from the 'economic miracle' that had been built on their backs. 'Only through democratic participation in political and economic decision-making would the citizenry develop an enduring stake in the national economic enterprise'.[24]

Singapore's post-recession success with reinventing its economy, which led to a rapid growth in prosperity during the 1990s, belied the pessimism of those who sought to challenge its global orientation and entrepreneurial role. Furthermore, such economic revitalisation was achieved without a noticeable increase in the participative decision-making making process advocated above. In contrast to the general belief that national identity cannot be created in a top-down fashion by the state, it is the latter that has continued to play the dominant role in Singapore's nation building and the development of its national identity. Singapore's ruling PAP government would reject the notion that a nation is an imagined reality that transcends government, politics, and even civil society. At the same time, its leaders would be comfortable with the sentiments expressed by G. Ford in his 1917 address to the US City Planning Programme, '…all city planning should start on a foundation of economic practicableness and good business. It must be something that appeals to the businessman, and to the manufacturer as sane and reasonable'.[25]

That however, was the logic of the 1990s, and should be considered redundant following the events that have unfolded in the aftermath of the destruction of New York's World Trade Centre (WTC) on 11 September 2001 ('9-11'). The use of global networks for ends other than economic development turned the West's fervent support of globalisation on its head. The attacks have dealt a blow to the global economy and set the US on a path towards an apparently unending succession of military interventions in a process that has been described as a 'war on terror'. In Southeast Asia, economies that had been recovering from the 1997 Asian economic crisis, and its aftermath, have been confronted with new vulnerabilities. For Singapore these vulnerabilities strike at the heart of the country's much-vaunted embrace of globalisation. Its role as one of the world's most important ports of call, its international air traffic hub, tourism industry and ability to attract foreign investment capital all rely on the safety and security as well as political and social stability demanded by open-market economies.

Singapore in the Wake of '9-11'

In February and March 2003, with the world protesting against the prospect of a US-led war on Iraq, popular demonstrations filled the streets and squares of countries in all six continents. Even Chinese citizens were allowed to take their protests to public places. For Singapore, which stands to lose more than most in any potential global carnage, a few protestors at the American Embassy were stopped before they could raise their placards. Apparently, some were stopped in the nearby Tanglin Mall with their placards still in plastic bags.[26] Yet, despite this apparent public indifference or reluctance to challenge the state's authority, Singapore could be considered to be a frontline state in the events that have unfolded since '9-11'. Indeed, the WTC destruction served to enhance debates, already well underway in Singapore, about the global influence of change on Singapore society and about ethnic identity, cultural values and preferences.

In the wake of the '9-11' terrorist attacks, economic conditions worsened with unemployment rising to 4.8 per cent in December 2002 compared to 3.8 per cent in 2001.[27] Economic slowdown affected the entry of school leavers into a declining job market, although the number of retrenched workers dropped slightly to 18,900 in 2002, compared to 2001 (25,800), but still higher than 2000 (11,600).[28] Half the workers retrenched were from the manufacturing sector, with electronics contributing some 22 per cent. Another 44 per cent of those retrenched were in the services sector, including some 14 per cent in financial services (Table 1.1 insert).[29] The reality behind many of the unemployment figures and retrenchments was of workers being released, despite recent corporate returns of record profits, in anticipation of slower economic growth and stiffer regional competition particularly from China.

Table 1.1 Singapore: Rates of Change of Economic Sectors (Year on year, yoy, change in value added)

Sector		1999	2000	2001	2002
Manufacturing Value Added at 1995 market prices	$millions yoy%*	35,357 13.0	40,712 15.1	36,091 -11.5	39,027 8.3
Construction Value Added at 1995 market prices	$millions yoy%	11,217 -9.0	11,009 -1.8	10,657 -3.2	9,503 -10.8
Wholesale and Retail Trade Value Added at 1995 market prices	$millions yoy%	17,903 6.5	20,558 14.8	19,877 -3.3	20,412 2.7
Hotels and Restaurants Value Added at 1995 market prices	$millions yoy%	3,450 3.6	3,734 8.2	3,651 -2.2	3,545 -2.9
Transport and Communications Value Added at	$millions	18,869	20,307	20,833	21,880

whole. The public housing authority, the Housing and Development Board (HDB) has a say in the ethnicity of the people involved in the buying and selling of public housing apartment units through the ethnic integration policy.

Promoting Harmony

In response to the heightened political climate the Singapore government initiated what appeared to be yet another round of effort at managing inter-ethnic relations. Inter-Racial Confidence Circles (IRCCs) were constituted throughout Singapore, following a dialogue between the Prime Minister and community leaders on 28 January 2002.   The IRCCs were designed to promote better cultural and religious understanding among the different ethnic groups. The IRCCs were complemented in their efforts by Harmony Circles (HCs), which were formed 'at the local levels, in neighbourhood precincts, work places, schools and local organisations, to reach out to more people'.[32] Programmes that have been organised by IRCCs include visits to places of worship and schools, focus group discussions, exhibitions, talks, publications as well as Racial Harmony Day celebrations.

Significantly, however, the IRCCs will not address issues that have been 'resolved' by the state, notably the *tudung* debate that attracted international attention in the aftermath of '9-11'. In a similar vein to that of the *madrasah* issue, the wish for four Muslim families to send their young primary-school daughters to school wearing the *tudung*, or headscarf, has been contested by the state. Civil society activism in support of the practice was mounted most strongly by a cyber-group comprising Malay-Muslims communicating via a website registered as fateha.com. In October 2001, Fateha announced that it was petitioning the government to allow Muslim students to cover their *aurat* in school backed by a supportive petition containing 3,300 signatures.[33] In Singapore, such a practice has been disallowed by schools. This is in line with the government's view that it was not part of school uniform and would infringe upon 'common space'.

In spite of current global and regional events involving the war on terrorism, it should not be forgotten the government's concern regarding the transmission of regional ethnic and religious strife to Singapore predates the WTC destruction. Indeed, the year 2001 when the WTC destruction took place, began with the Prime Minister, Mr Goh Chok Tong warning religious leaders to exert every possible effort to maintain inter-religious harmony and cooperation in the wake of ethnic strife in the Maluku Islands and Christmas 2000 explosions in Java.[34] The intensification of such concerns since the WTC destruction has again put the issue of Singapore identity to the fore, and changed circumstances suggest the need for innovative actions. Perhaps the way forward is to commit to a vision that places citizen participation at the forefront of any identity-forming agenda. For a stronger social and political identity to emerge, the citizenry has to be given confidence in itself. Such confidence will provide the social capital previously engineered by the state, and contribute to the city-state's further growth and transformation.

Maintaining growth

Singapore's system of government has been described as 'authoritarian capitalism', a system where limited government intervention in market activities is combined with extensive intrusion into the social and political realms.[35] Yet the Singapore government's stake in business and investment in the economy has grown substantially over the last few decades. The Government Investment Corporation (GIC) managed some S$140billion of official reserves in overseas investment in 2000, a four hundredfold increase over the S$345million assets in thirty-six companies when it was first established in 1981.

However, in terms of Singapore's future development, economists are of the view that the multinational and transnational corporation (MNC/TNC) and government-linked company

(GLC) economic development model that has served the city-state so well may be in need of an overhaul. While the MNCs brought fast track industrialisation to the city-state, the GLCs were set up by the state to correct the lack of local entrepreneurship in the 1960s and 1970s in SIngapore.   According to researchers, this focus on MNC and GLC strategy has seen a bifurcation among the business elite, with more of the English-language educated business leaders in the GLCs and MNCs, and the Chinese-language educated in small and medium-sized local companies or enterprises (SMEs).[36]   In the view of many observers this approach to governance, while suitable for the old brick and mortar economy where the state provided physical and other infrastructure as well as social and political stability through a national savings and asset enhancement policy, is now outdated.[37] According to economist, Low,[38] the time has come for Singapore Incorporated to re-think its strategy.

> *While the economy remains state-driven, international competitiveness has been maintained by continuous and relentless economic restructuring and upgrading in response to the combined forces of globalisation, information and communications technology, deregulation and the knowledge-based economy. Increasingly, the same forces are redefining the political economy and PAP political hegemony. Taken to its logical conclusion, privatising GLCs or reducing the state-owned sector in favour of a private sector driven or POE approach would also imply greater democratisation.*

Arguments like the above for a greater role for the local market sector are based on the belief that institutional change and transformation would allow the active co-producing state to build social capital and push state agencies towards greater accountability, responsiveness and organisational innovations.[39]   Such an argument partly repudiates the role that the developmental state has played in promoting long-term entrepreneurial perspectives among an industrial elite compromising key business groups, while simultaneously resisting growth-compromising demands from special interest groups.[40] The groups which have not been given much attention so far include not only the small and medium-sized business enterprises looking for a greater stake in the local economy but also civil society groups. These have resisted the homogenising agenda of the developmental state and ultimately in Singapore's case, the agenda of the entrepreneurial city.

Whither Geography?

Geography appears to have been significant in determining the path to high growth for which Singapore has opted. Since its emergence from colonial rule, Singapore has systematically worked at enhancing the advantages offered by its geographical location, significantly in terms of infrastructural development and forward economic planning. Such planning has not only shaped the international role of the city-state but consolidated its positioning in networks of exchanges for trade and financing. Furthermore, its role as an international financial centre owes greatly to geographical location, its particular time zone contributing to its eventual placement in the completion of 24-hour global coverage.[41]   In this way, Singapore has succeeded better than any other Southeast Asian country in plugging into the global marketplace, but the question remains whether further growth and development will be limited by size and resource constraints.

The developmental course followed by the city-state has been shaped in large part by geography. Future constraints may limit the effort to globalise further although for Singapore in the past these have always been minor considerations relative to global conditions and larger technological changes. When technology transformed the global shipping industry, there was a worldwide re-ordering of shipping ports with many such formerly vital centres going into decline. Singapore, its skyline filled with the silhouettes of modern port equipment, has emerged as the major shipping centre in Southeast Asia while New York City, once a major magnet for shipping, but without the room to accommodate modern equipment, has been steadily losing its role as a

major container port. Hence, the transformation of the port, may well be only the beginning of a never-ending task for Singapore, as it works not only to leverage on its geographical advantages but also changing global conditions.

Further alignment with the Southeast Asian region, and ultimately with the rest of Asia, in particular China and India, makes geographical sense. National identity for Singapore, has been built upon the theme of economic survival and success in a changing global environment.[42] Following this argument, Singapore can be seen on the one hand, as a well-developed modern city, the regional headquarters of foreign and usually Western multinational businesses as well as the gateway to East Asia. On the other hand, it must also sell itself as an 'Asian' city, traditional and yet cosmopolitan, inviting tourists to a sojourn in the midst of modern comforts, between trips to culturally more intact, if less efficient parts of Southeast Asia.

At this time, decision-making in the city-state remains highly centralised, and participatory democracy is still a project being defined in the midst of ongoing economic restructuring. Colonialism and then the dominant role of the developmental state, have denied citizens the process of engaging in civil society through which they would have contributed to the development of both modernity and a strong national identity. The de-linking of the economic from the political realm has not gone unchallenged, however. Near-government organisations like the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) have called for greater representation by a civic leadership.[43] Yet, with worsening economic and geopolitical conditions fuelling concerns about the sustainability of economic growth and long-term prosperity, the pockets of resistance described above might well extend to other arenas of contestation. Such has been the argument of scholars who see Singapore's political and social stability as having been built largely if not solely, on rapid economic growth.[44]

In many ways, the colonial port city has given way to the modern city-state. Somewhere along this journey, the political agenda of the 1960s city-state has swung from its social programme of affordable housing for citizens and jobs creation, to be displaced by the inexorable logic of the market. Singapore's search for an ethnic and cultural identity, and the selling of this identity on the global market, rather than being complete, appears to have only just begun.

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[1] Shachar, (1997), p. 19.

[2] Moulaert and Scott (1997)

[3] Hamnett (1995); Sassen (1991)

[4] Fainstein (1994),

[5] Moulaert and Scott (1997), *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[6] Cairncross (1997), p. 238.

[7] Moulaert and Scott (1997), *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15; Moulaert *et al* (1996).

[8] Autes (1998), p. 229.

[9] Habermas (1989)

[10] Castells (1977); Harvey (2000).

[11] Huff (1994); Regnier (1991)

[12] Regnier (1991); Huff (1994); Murray and Perera (1995); Perry *et al* (1997).

[13] Josey (1980).

[14] Regnier (1991) pp. 12-13.

[15] Hall (1955); Hall (1985).

[16] Huff (1994).

[17] Huff (1994).

[18] Walling (1931); Regnier (1991); Huff (1994).

[19] Regnier (1991). p. 27.

[20] Regnier (1991)

[21] Wong (1989).
[22] Ooi and Chow (2003)
[23] Bello and Rosenfeld (1990).
[24] Bello and Rosenfeld (1990) p. 334.
[25] Ford (1917), p. iii.
[26] *The Straits Times* 22 March 2003
[27] Ministry of Trade and Industry (2003) p. 27.
[28] Ibid, p. 27
[29] Ibid, p. 28
[30] Koh and Ooi (2002)
[31] *The Straits Times* 11 March 2001.
[32] Lee (2002) p. 20.
[33] *Today* 24 October 2001.
[34] *The Straits Times* 2 January, 2001; Koh and Ooi (2002).
[35] Lingle (1996).
[36] Low (2002); Huff (1999); Chalmers (1992).
[37] Lim (1989); Low and Aw (1998).
[38] Low (2002) p. 284)
[39] Low (2002) p. 283.
[40] Evans (1998); Johnson (1999).
[41] Lee (2000) p. 89.
[42] Kwok and Ali (1998) p. 113.
[43] Koh and Ooi (2002).
[44] Rodan (1993).

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