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Defining Singapore: Reconciling the National Narrative and the Global City Ethos

By Adrian W. J. Kuah

Synopsis

Singapore's national conversations have focused as much attention to issues of the Singaporean identity, national values, rootedness and the sense of belonging, as they have to bread-and-butter issues of economic growth, jobs and housing. This ground-up interest in the national narrative may be a reaction to Singapore's drive to be a global, networked and open city that points to an emerging tension with its nation-building enterprise.

Commentary

AS SINGAPORE'S national conversations – a series of dialogue sessions between government and society on Singapore's future – unfold, some unexpected themes have begun to emerge and dominate the discourse. Even more than the predictable bread-and-butter issues of economic growth, job prospects, housing and so forth, the issues of the Singaporean identity, national values, rootedness and the sense of belonging, and the social fabric have come to the fore.

Such abstract and ephemeral issues, long held to be subordinate to the more tangible - and therefore assumed to be more important - concerns of jobs and homes, suggest a renewed interest in the nation-building enterprise. After all, notions of place and belonging, values and identity, shared history and future, are nothing if not integral parts of the national narrative.

National Narrative versus Ethos of the Networked City

The problem is that Singapore's national narrative is in sharp contrast to its ethos as a networked city. Indeed, the perception of Singapore by the rest of the world is that of a global city whose fame and *raison d'être* are based on its business connectivity, its status as an international financial centre, and increasingly as a hub for scientific research and the arts. Whereas the national narrative emphasises the continuity and coherence of place, the clearly-bounded territory that is the locus of collective identity and values, the ethos of a global, networked city privileges and celebrates the transient flows of people and capital, with the city being an open arena of ambition and competition. It is not at all clear how the imperative of the national narrative and the ethos of a networked city can be reconciled, if at all.

Why then the resurgence of interest in the national narrative? And more importantly, why is it percolating from the ground up? In Singapore where the nation-building enterprise has predominately been driven by the

government, surely it is a good thing for nation-building to emerge from the societal and grassroots level? Not if the increasingly reactionary conversations on the national narrative represent what sociologists and urban theorists refer to as 'the revenge of place'.

Between Places and Flows

The sociologist Manuel Castells, writing in the mid-1990s on the rise of the network society, introduced the twin concepts of 'the space of places' and the 'space of flows'. The space of places is the space of the local, of face-to-face social relationships, of values and identities; in short, it is the space in which the national narrative can and must occur. By contrast, the space of flows is the space of networked cities, of dynamic flows of information, capital and ideas, where the constraints of physical place and boundaries are transcended, and where the limitations of time are overcome. More crucially, it is in the space of flows that the national narrative is neither possible nor necessary.

Singapore's challenge is that it is unapologetically a space of flows on the one hand, and unrelenting in wanting to remain a space of places, on the other. It is simultaneously a nation-state with the associated accoutrements of sovereignty, citizenship, collective memories and shared aspirations - imagined or otherwise - as well as a networked and open global city to which people are attracted in order to realise their individual ambitions. That is not to say that cities are devoid of values, meanings and identities. Rather, it is in the ethos of global cities to accommodate multiple and often conflicting values, meanings and identities, instead of setting out to articulate the singular and the homogenous.

This then is Singapore's contradiction: Singapore's open architecture serves to attract the flows of knowledge workers, funds, and knowledge, even as the national narrative seeks to delineate a site in which collective meanings are created. In other words, it is only in places that cultural and social meanings are possible. As networked cities divert and attract flows of people, power and knowledge, there is at the same time a growing nostalgic yearning for local identity if simply because the universal and homogenous culture of the global network is generating a sense of dislocation.

The conversations on national identity – that is, Singaporean-ness – reflect the fact that people define themselves not in terms of what they do, but on who they are, or at least, who they think they are. As Singapore cements its status as a space of flows, with the consequence of different nationalities, cultures and ideas occupying the same physical place, these emerging conversations on Singaporean-ness constitute a revenge of the place on global networked flows and the intrusion of the 'others' on the 'self'.

Taken too far, though, a dialogue on the national narrative that is provoked by an ever-globalising city can degenerate into a diatribe based on xenophobia and insecurity, which would not only derail nation-building but also jeopardise Singapore's position as a global city.

Places in Flows, Flows in Space

Despite the centrality of the nation-building enterprise in Singapore's socio-political life, what is often forgotten is that, almost from day one, Singapore's survival strategy consisted in promoting itself as a space of flows. There is thus clearly a need to balance the imperatives of both the national narrative and the networked city. However, it remains to be seen the extent to which the needs of the two can be reconciled. Suffice it to say that Singapore's challenge is a unique one: compared to other networked global cities like New York, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong and Paris, Singapore is the only one whose city limits coincide exactly with its national boundaries.

This perhaps explains the current problems and unhappiness with the state of immigration policies: what is being pitched by the government is the national package, while what foreigners find attractive are the bright lights of the city. The ethos of a global city is such that the myriad nationalities working and living in London and New York have no problems defining themselves as Londoners and New Yorkers.

Is Singapore ready to contemplate a loosening of the term 'Singaporean' to accommodate both the national narrative and the open ethos of the city?

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