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HEGEMONIC ENGINEERING:  
A CONTRIBUTION  
FROM SINGAPORE

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HEGEMONIC ENGINEERING: A CONTRIBUTION FROM SINGAPORE

Duncan Holaday and Lee Shu Hui

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews a series of studies conducted over the past eight years on media and the perception of election issues and public concerns in the context of two Singapore elections - 1991 and 1997 -- and the period in between. The studies by themselves are empirically-based, using methods of agenda setting, cultivation analysis and ethnography of communication, and are limited in their claims to generalization both in the statistical sense and in the sense of addressing a broadly applicable body of theory. Taken together, however, these studies are shown to roughly approximate a general approach to the study of hegemonic process.

The title implies a progression from descriptive studies of hegemony comparable to classical genetics toward applications through intervention in the basic unit, comparable to genetic engineering. The paper attempts to follow this progression by first reviewing the individual studies, their aims and results, then mapping these results onto a theory of hegemony with specific reference to the work of Laclau and Mouffe and the study of Housing and Political Legitimacy by Chua Beng Huat. Public housing and the resettlement of the population in the sixties and seventies, is taken to be the key for understanding hegemonic process in Singapore.

One of the new findings presented in the paper concerns issue coverage in the two elections, specifically the interjection of communal politics as a repeated pattern and indication of stalled hegemonic process in recent Singapore electoral politics. A second finding concerns the convergence, as the election approached, of public perceptions regarding what the important issues are. This is interpreted alternately, by applying empirical and critical frames of analysis, as a third-person effect and as the potential coalescence of subject positions around historically determined antagonisms. The paper concludes that the most promising area for further research is the observation of subject positions through ethnography of communication.
HEGEMONIC ENGINEERING: A CONTRIBUTION FROM SINGAPORE

By Duncan Holaday and Lee Shu Hui

"And, lo and behold, society can now be studied with the methods of the natural sciences!"
Antonio Gramsci, Prison Notebooks, p.244

The implication of our paper’s title is that there is a progression from descriptive studies of hegemonic process, comparable to classical genetics where theory and practice function at the level of an identifiable but immutable unit, toward interventions in the constitution of the units themselves, as in genetic engineering. This is clearly the direction taken by Laclau and Mouffe in Hegemony & Socialist Strategy, where the concept of ‘subject position’ opens up the traditionally fixed subject unit in Marxist sociology. Also, in Appadurai’s Modernity at Large, a similar argument is made against primordialist and essentialist positions for understanding ethnic violence in national contexts by advancing the concept of ‘ethnic implosion.’ Both Laclau and Mouffe’s and Appadurai’s concepts imply a disembodied social mind which would allow the social project to operate independently of the corporal plane; thus, while genetic engineers reconfigure and “correct” the corporal mass of humanity, hegemonic engineers configure the mental. Feminist critics of this radical disembodiment and technologization of culture have warned that this project “creates strategies in consonance with global capitalism, installing “a decentered, fragmented, porous subject (that) is better equipped for the heightened alienation of late capitalism’s refined divisions of labor, more readily disciplined by a pandemic corporate state, and more available to a broad nexus of ideological controls.” This should be exactly what a late capitalist global city-state such as Singapore is looking for; namely, higher levels of control, control of control, as it were, through theorization of the control mechanisms operative in national and global politics. But, it is not yet clear that the organic intellectuals can deliver.

We can scarcely pretend to apply these concepts directly to the small-scale studies of media and politics we have undertaken in Singapore. Yet, there appears to be at least one promising direction suggested by a combination of the well-documented analysis of public

1 Sue-Ellen Case quoting Rosemary Hennesy in The Domain-Matrix, p.36

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housing by Chua Beng Huat, and studies on agenda setting, cultivation analysis and ethnography of communication carried out at the School of Communication Studies in connection with the 1991 and 1997 Singapore elections and the period in between. In the simplest terms, Chua makes it clear that continuing hegemonic control by the Singapore government requires unending work. Our studies monitor and investigate the nature of that work in particular contexts and at micro-social levels. What we have seen can be summarized as patterns of crisis management through media and legal interventions. Yet, to say this is simply a re-articulation in other terms of the very ideology imposed through the hegemonic system. To open up the unit and make it accessible to theorization, to provide an “objective” view so to speak, requires both a closer look at articulations from the positions of the political subject and a radical rethinking of some of the explanatory frames in current use in communication studies.

We will begin by reviewing the studies, their expressed aims and results, along with some recent findings not reported elsewhere. Then, we attempt to map these studies onto a theory of hegemony with specific reference to Chua’s analysis of *Political Legitimacy and Housing*. Finally, we discuss directions for further research.

Communication Studies of Elections in Singapore

In 1991, at AMIC’s request, Eddie Kuo and Duncan Holaday undertook a benchmark study on the role of media in a Singapore election as part of a broader multi-country research project. Neither Kuo nor Holaday had a direct interest in elections, but both saw the opportunity to advance their complementary research agendas: Kuo was interested in developing theories appropriate for the study of Asian media, and Holaday was keen to deconstruct Western theories in the context of the postcolonial postmodern subject. They quickly arrived at a research question related to agenda setting theory around which an array of data was gathered and analyzed. In short, they asked: if agenda setting theory states that what people think about is determined by what is written about in the press, then what happens when people are especially sensitive to what is not written about in the press; that is, what is the nature of agenda setting where censorship and self-censorship are the norm, as in Singapore?

3 Holaday & Kuo, 1993
4 AMIC 1993
5 Kuo, 1992 Research
6 Holaday, 1991 (self-Presentation...)

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At an early point in the research, it was already clear that the focus was not on elections per se but on elections as points of negotiation about control of media and control of masses through media. As Kuo put it, “a stable hegemonic state-media relationship had evolved whereby the role of the media is prescribed as pro-development and hence pro-government, in the name of national security and the public interest”, and in this light such concepts as ‘credibility’ and ‘agenda’ would need to be reconsidered. For Holaday, the ironic work of Leo Szilard provided the point of departure. In The Voice of Dolphins, Szilard pointed out that Americans might be free to say what they think, but they don’t think what they are not free to say. This put a positive twist on the comparison between Singapore and the presumably freer society, by suggesting that the inadequacy of agenda setting theory might stem from the relative close-mindedness or gullibility of Americans.

The questions were provocative, but the findings of the first study were inconclusive. Perhaps the most interesting findings concerned patterns of press coverage of election issues. Graph 1 represents the amount of space given in the newspapers to various election issues. A narrative reading of the graph runs like this: The ruling party, PAP, began the 18-day campaign by asserting its agenda for the election. A new style of government, “open and consultative”, was proclaimed as Goh Chok Tong took over leadership from Lee Kwan Yew. This issue dominated the news for the first half of the election period, although the opposition countered with a variety of issues related to the timing of the election and the need for a strong opposition. In the meantime, the question of rising costs of living began to assert itself from the ground, as it were. At about two-thirds of the way through the campaign period, as these alternative agenda items threatened to overtake the ruling party’s agenda, a new issue made a dramatic appearance. One of the opposition party members, Mohd. Jufrie, was accused of using tactics of communal politics. This made front page news and overtook all other issues in the closing days of the campaign. Only on the final day, the issue of Goh’s style of government was reasserted as the lead issue.

The agenda setting analysis compared the agenda setting effect on those who thought the media coverage was complete and fair, with those who said there were issues that were not covered in the press and saw it as generally unfair. It was found that the first group exhibited the classic (Western) agenda setting effect: what the newspapers wrote about was what they thought of as important. The second group, about 18% of our sample, whose education level was highest overall, showed no agenda setting effect. A third group, about one-third of the

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7 Kuo, Holaday and Peck, 1993
sample and lowest on education level and SES, refused to answer the questions and remained an enigma.

The findings were apparently circular: those who said they did not agree with the press coverage, also showed no agreement in terms of what the press covered and what they saw as the important issues. The most interesting thing about this group was that it was comprised of about 50% ruling party and 50% opposition voters, i.e., it was not party specific. The most frequent issue mentioned by them as not being covered by the press was ‘cost of living’. Post-election analysis\(^8\) attributed loss of seats by the ruling party to the fact that it did not address cost of living issues. Taken together, these facts, finding and opinions suggest as perplexing pattern: the cost of living issues was the one issue that gained coverage consistently throughout the period of the election, from zero coverage at the outset to third highest on the media’s agenda the day before the election. Yet, it was reported as missing from the ruling party agenda and as not being covered at all by the media! The researchers left this study of missing issues and unspoken agendas with the uncomfortable feeling that they had missed something.

Results of the 1997 Election Study
In 1995, with talk of an impending election, Kuo and Holaday, this time joined by Hao Xiaoming, decided to do a follow-up study. The general approach this time was to investigate whether or not and to what extent the public agenda could be said to be managed; that is, to what extent the hegemonic media-government relationship remained stable and responsive to the experience of the previous election. In addition, this study would look at the broader context of public concerns, over the months immediately preceding and following the election, to see how election issues might engage the ongoing and underlying concerns of the public. In this connection, cost of living would be the most interesting issue to watch.

Five telephone surveys were conducted over the period of 18 months, leading up to and shortly after the election; also, a door-to-door survey of 450 voters was carried out during the campaign period, together with a series of content analyses for six weeks prior to each telephone survey and during the campaign period. Figure 1 shows the timing of these measures over the period of the study. In the telephone surveys, it was asked, “What are your concerns these days?” and “What do you think are the concerns of other Singaporeans?”

\(^8\) ref

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The expectation was that there would be a change in the salience of some concerns, depending on whether they were drawn into or masked by the agenda of election issues as presented in the media. The roughly-formed hypothesis was that there would be a convergence between what Singaporeans reported as their own concerns and what they saw as the concerns of other Singaporeans. Further, it was expected that there would be a predictable pattern of correlation with the media agenda, such that perceived public concerns would adhere more closely to the media agenda throughout the period of study. (Kuo, Holaday, Hoa, Koh and Lee; 1996: pp120-21).

These expectations were based on two lines of research. One line of research which focuses on the micro-social level, attempts to reconcile social-psychological processes of attribution and person-perception with agenda setting theory. Lang and Lang, in their discussion of ‘agenda building’, raise a number of relevant questions about agenda setting, the key one being “What is an issue?” (Protess and McCombs, 1991) They conclude that issues have been variously conceptualized as personal concerns, perceptions of key problems, policy alternatives, public controversy, and determinants of political cleavage. In their view, the process of issue formation is complex: only when concerns are aligned with political cleavages through a process of interest aggregation and given a presence in the political landscape through association with symbols and spokespersons, do they solidify as issues in the public agenda.

Adding another level of complexity, the Langs pointed out that issues differ in terms of threshold of sensitivity. Economic issues tend to be low threshold because they affect everyone directly. Concerns about cost of living, for example, can be easily invoked as a reason for voting for or against a certain party. As Lang and Lang put it, “the economic issue moves onto the political agenda quite naturally.” Issues that do not affect voters so directly, such as world affairs, are relatively high threshold issues. Another range of personal concerns, including family and friend, health and education, may affect everyone but, by their nature, are not easy to politicize as election issues.

The second line of research that contributed to the formation of the research question was Noelle-Neumann’s ‘spiral of silence’ theory. She outlines a process by which the media tells people what to think about (the agenda setting function), allows people to consider if their opinion is an appropriate one (the legitimation function), and helps people to put their opinions into word (the articulation function) (quoted in Larsosa, 1990). Considering the

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9 We are indebted to Rodney Koh for his original articulation of these ideas in 1995.
appropriateness of one’s opinion, which involves a comparison with what one perceives to be other’s concerns (a sort of third-person effect), is thus seen as central to issue formation. The research on the context of the 1997 election attempted to operationalize this process in terms of the distinction between public concerns and perceived public concerns, or concerns reported for self and other Singaporeans. Convergence between these within a relevant public (such as an electorate) was expected to mark the emergence or solidification of election issues in the context of the impending election.

In the 1997 election, the pattern of election issue coverage was again interesting. It can be briefly noted that the percentage of critical voters, i.e., those who saw the media as not covering important election issues, was up from 18% in 1991 to 23% in 1997. Graph 2 sketches the media coverage of election issues, which can be narrated as follows: The ruling party began the very brief, 11-day campaign period by asserting its agenda. The dominant issue was to be HDB (public housing) upgrading, and the linking of electoral support in different constituencies to priorities for government-supported housing improvement programs after the election. This was countered by opposition claims that the ruling party does not represent the people’s real interests. Meantime, the U.S. State Department was accused of interfering in local politics when a diplomat suggested that this strategy of linking housing to votes was unethical ‘vote buying’. The cost of living issue began to assert itself from the ground. At a point halfway through the campaign period, as these alternative agenda items were about to overtake the PAP agenda, a new issue made a dramatic appearance. An opposition candidate, Tang Liang Hong, was accused of using tactics of communal politics. This made headlines, and dominated issue coverage until election day.

The first, obvious implication that can be drawn from a comparison of the two election studies, is that there is a repeating pattern. Our analysis in this paper, from the point of view of the state-media hegemonic relationship, suggests that the process of hegemony had stalled. In order to approach this level of analysis, however, we need to work from the assumptions about the process of issue formation that supported the original research, then attempt to look at the results from the point of view of a synthesized theory of hegemonic process.

It may be asked, then, how did the agenda of election issues engage with public concerns? Were any concerns masked or drawn into the election? The ‘hypothesis’ was that convergence between public concerns and perceived public concerns as the election approached would mark the emergence or solidification of election issues. Did this happen? The answer is yes.
Looking first at the list of concerns that the open-ended survey questions yielded, there were both high threshold and low threshold issues among them. Graphs 3 & 4 show the list of main concerns and their magnitude in terms of the percentage of the total sample (about 300 in each survey) who mentioned each concern as one of their own or as one of the concerns of other Singaporeans. The high threshold personal concerns which include ‘family and friends’ and ‘health’ are consistently most salient among those reported for self. In a clear case of third-person perception, materialism is reported as much higher, always a first priority, for other Singaporeans but not for self.

It can also be readily seen from the graph that there is a smaller overall percentage of concerns mentioned in the August survey, and a greater overall percentage in December, just before the election. There is reason to believe that this is not just an artifact of the interviewing process, but represents a real difference in the overall level of concerns among the public. In March 1996, for example, mounting tensions between Taiwan and PRC in run up to the Taiwan election, resulted in PRC firing missiles over the island. This dominated world news, and in Singapore anxiety about the potential for economic and political fallout in the region, explains the relatively high level of concern about world affairs. August, 1996 was a relatively quiet time in terms of domestic and world affairs, and this is reflected in the low percentage of concerns overall. If we take these measures to be valid, then the approaching election can be seen as a time of heightened public concern.

More relevant to the question about issue formation are the order and relative magnitude of the concerns within each survey, the comparison between concerns reported for self and other, and the overall trend in these measures across the four surveys. Looking at this trend in quantitative terms, a Pearson’s correlation yields the results shown in Figure 2. There is a moderate, though not statistically significant correlation of $r = .545$ between the order and magnitude of concerns for self and other in March 1996, nine months before the election. In August, five months before the election, there was a stronger correlation of $r = .622$, significant at the 0.05 level. In December, less than a month before the election, and two weeks before the initiation of the campaign period, there is a very strong correlation between concerns for self and other, significant at the 0.01 level, of $r = .716$. In March 1997, three months after the election, the number drops to the initial level, $r = .513$, a marginal but not statistically significant correlation.

Looking back at graphs 3 & 4, we can attempt to account for this trend by overlapping them and looking for shifts among specific concerns. One clear trend is that the cost of living issue dropped below survival and general economy for both self and other. Over the whole year,
cost of living dropped as the election approached, then went back up to its earlier level after the election. Controlling for the increased level of overall concerns in December, cost of living can be said to have been at its lowest level just before the election campaign. Conversely, concern about elections and politics increased modestly and overtook concerns about values. After the election, concern about education increased dramatically for both self and others; but where materialism went way up in salience for others, it dropped off for self. These shifts account for the closer alignment between the agendas for self and other as the election approached, and divergence afterward.

But, how might this phenomenon be explained? First, it can be noted that there are consistent patterns of correlation between the two agendas of public concerns and the agenda of newspaper coverage during the six week period prior to each survey (Figure 3). There is a consistent negative correlation between the rank order of concerns in the personal agendas and the media agenda. This results from the fact that highly salient personal concerns, such as health and education, do not figure prominently in the media’s agenda. Conversely, the priority for world affairs and politics in the news, is not matched by the relative order of importance accorded to these events by the public. These finding are anticipated in the Lang’s theory by the concept of ‘threshold of sensitivity’, and, by themselves, say little about particular circumstances of the election in Singapore. However, if we look at changes within these consistent patterns there are some distinctive findings. For example, the relative media coverage of the cost of living diminished as the election approached while election coverage increased. This matches the changes in priority of public concerns for both self and other. In other words, there appears to be an agenda setting effect in relation to this change of emphasis in the public agenda. Furthermore, looking at the relation between the media agenda and the agendas for self and other, there is a slight divergence between media and self, and slight convergence between media and other. These two small shifts account for a much larger shift between the agendas for self and other.

These findings suggest that the research instruments were actually measuring something, which, in itself, can be cause for excitement among researchers of the empirical persuasion. Also, they appear to support the researchers’ expectations regarding issue formation, i.e., that issue formation would be marked by a comparison between one’s own concerns and those of others, that there would be a convergence between these agendas as the election approached, and that this convergence could be explained, at least in part, by agenda setting. But, it may be asked, what was the nature of the issue or issues being formed? That is to say, the instruments measured patterns of change, but told little about the nature of the change. The assumption that an issue is a determinant of political cleavage, posited by the Langs, cuts
short the explanatory process at this point. Following this theory, we might stretch the implication of the above observations so far as to say that it appeared unlikely that the cost of living issue would have determined a political cleavage because of its low level of salience before the election in both the media and public agendas.

Now, it can be asked how this pattern of public concerns engaged with the ensuing election issues. The introduction of HDB upgrading issue as a basic cost of living concern, could be seen as an attempt by the ruling party to preempt space for economic discourse by introducing in advance the terms for negotiation. However, this strategy appears to have backfired. Once on the agenda, economic issues did became a site for political cleavage. Further, it might be said that the evocation of communal politics, while threatening a radical split in the electorate, paradoxically offered a solution to any further deepening of this cleavage by requiring emergency suturing. Still, the questions remain, how were these issues linked in the mind of the public? And, was there some underlying dynamic which explains these patterns in issue formation?

Completing the Modernist Project

Two other lines of research at the School of Communication studies — cultivation analysis and third person effect — contributed to theory construction around these questions.

Third-person perception theory is a philosophically liberal and politically conservative theory for rationalizing the consistent finding that people consider themselves to be less vulnerable to media effects than others. Al Gunther and Ang Peng Hwa used the Singapore case to show that the justification and support for censorship is linked to the third person perception that others need protection from the deleterious effects of pornography.\textsuperscript{10} Doug McLeod, Ben Detenber, and William Eveland took this argument further by suggesting a link between this effect and paternalistic attitudes.\textsuperscript{11} Justification for these perceptions and effects devolve upon what one theorist referred to as a “desire for ego-enhancement.” That is, personal characteristics assumed to reside within the individual are the foundation on which this theory rests. The invocation of this theory to justify the difference between one’s own agenda of concerns and what one perceives to be the agenda of other people, therefore implies that the ‘subjects’ of the study were wrong. They were either exaggerating their own priority for selfless and ethical concerns, or exaggerating the materialism and selfishness of others.

In a less objectivist vein, Holaday and Hao undertook at three-year cultivation analysis entitled “Cultivating Unity” aimed at determining whether the images of women, violence

\textsuperscript{10} Gunther and Ang
and ethnic others were similar or different in the different language media in Singapore. They asked: if such differences exist, do they cultivate different perceptions of society in different segments of the society? This study began before the 1997 election study, ran parallel to it, and was ultimately incorporated into it. The question underlying both studies concerned the cultivation or coercion of support for an official perception of the world, or ideology.

Two themes from the cultivation study contribute directly to the theoretical thrust of this paper. First, Gerbner’s cultivation analysis is based on a theory of hegemonic media effect. It implies an almost mechanical historical movement from dominant interests to domination through cultivation of pervasive attitudes and perceptions in the population. The classic effect is a skewing of the perception of real world toward the “mean world” presented in the media. An exaggeration of violence in the media is assumed to create insecurity in the audience, which leads in turn to support for the police and other state apparatuses of control. Our aim was to test this theory in a “multicultural society” by asking whether those who participate in more than one cultural system, are not therefore immune to cultivation effects. This hypothesis had been loosely suggested by Robert Part, Margaret Mead and Homi Bhabha among others, all of whom assume that one strength of those on the margins of society or those who regularly cross cultural boundaries is that they can see and therefore negotiate beneath or around the constraints of a single hegemonic system. At another level, this study was an attempt to critique the mechanistic quality of Gerbner’s theory by showing that the cultivation “effect” might devolve upon different characteristics of the individual, i.e., – the uni-cultural vs. multi-cultural individual. In this regard, the critique was a retrogression to liberal assumptions, falling back as it did on the individual as the unit of analysis. Nevertheless, the findings were interesting.

Where it was predicted that the marginal or multicultural person would be immune to cultivation effects, it was found that the opposite is true. Singaporeans who had grown up in Chinese-speaking households but who now preferred English-language TV, were more, not less, susceptible to cultivation effects than those who were from either English speaking or Chinese-speaking backgrounds only. For example, a clear difference was found in the depiction of women on Chinese-language and English-language TV: women on English-language TV were more likely to be shown in positions of power, but were also more likely to be proven incompetent as the story develops. High frequency TV viewers in the cross-over (Chinese-English) group showed a significantly greater agreement with the English-language

\[\text{11} \text{ McLeod, Detenber and Eveland} \]
\[\text{12} \text{ refs} \]
\[\text{13} \text{ Tong} \]
TV image of women than low-frequency viewers in the same group. This classic cultivation effect did not appear for the other two categories of viewers.

This unexpected finding gained some small recognition, and a Straits Times reporter interviewed Holaday on its significance. The unpublished interview was inconclusive but revealing. The reporter insisted on asking what use this finding could serve. Holaday stubbornly answered that, although it was found that a particular group was vulnerable to cultivation effects, the research team, as academics, had no policy recommendations to make based on this finding. The reporter took this as a cop-out, suggesting that the research project had an implicit agenda. Indeed, if the research team were self-declared hegemonic engineers, then the significance of the finding and the research agenda would have been perfectly clear: that is, the government should target this group as a model for others, and should replicate these conditions of vulnerability throughout the population.

Elections, Housing and Hegemony

At this point, we can begin to close in on the theoretical focus of this paper. We have been attempting to describe and explain the mechanisms of issue formation in an election by cobbling together bits and pieces of theory from various lines of empirical communication research. We will now attempt to map this elaborate construction onto a more eloquent theory synthesized around the concept of hegemony. Let us introduce this shift by way of an analogy.

In 1988, Holaday gave a paper at the IAMCR in Barcelona on research done ten years earlier in West Java. He asserted that when the research team entered rural villages with a camera to be used by local residents to make statements about rural development in their villages, it was the events of twenty years before -- the agrarian reform, transmigrations, and the upheaval -- that were the principal forces shaping the response to the camera in the late 70's. The implication was that at least 20 years of history, and more like a century of colonial history, was required in order to understand the use of media in rural Indonesia in the 1970's. Bela Mody, with the authority of SITE Project in India behind her, stood up and said this was ridiculous. The PKI was all but forgotten, she insisted, and the operant political forces were those of Suharto's New Order. Recent events in Indonesia, however, for example in West Kalimantan, have lent support to the kind of historical analysis Holaday was

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14 AMIC award for research on journalism
15 Holaday, 1992 (paper delivered at Ministry of Information, Jakarta)
advocating then and which we will propose here. Fault lines between transmigrated populations and the more long-term residents, have erupted in violence with of the removal of hegemonic and military controls in the late 1990’s.

Chua Beng Huat’s study of housing and the massive resettlement of Singapore’s population in the sixties and seventies is, in our view, the key to understanding hegemonic process in recent electoral politics as well as other areas of political and social control in Singapore, just as the agrarian reform and transmigrations of the sixties and seventies in Indonesia are the key to recognizing underlying patterns in current Indonesian politics. Fault lines established by these earlier mass dislocations, forced or otherwise, remain the potential sites for eruptions of violence and disruption of hegemonic control. In order to see these continuities, however, one must recognize that the corporal person is not the unit of their expression. In fact, children for whom these events are now unspoken and unseen, may nevertheless be sites for their partial expression. Awareness at the individual level has little to do with participation in subsequent and consequent events.

Let us go back to the stalled pattern of hegemonic process in Singapore’s electoral politics. Simon Tay and Cherian George wrote a piece during the period between the 1991 and 1997 elections, advocating an easing of media controls by ruling governments during elections as part of an Asian (ASEAN) model for media and elections. Their argument is that during the brief period when parliament is dissolved and elections carried out, the media, which can normally be expected to support a government’s efforts in nation building, should be free to present more objective coverage. Only infractions of the rules of free speech and political participation, such as communal politics, they insist, can justify the media’s realignment with the ruling party to censure opposition. In light of this, it is irrelevant whether we regard the assertion of communal politics in two consecutive Singapore elections as a tactic or a fact. Its presence indicates a rupture in the acknowledged procedures for carrying out elections, which forced a contingency plan for reasserting normal process. Of course, this too, is simply a restatement in other terms of the hegemonic discourse of crisis management. But, how do we get out of this cycle of self-reifying discourse. Where is the aporia?

What is most interesting about Chua’s analysis of housing is what it leaves unsaid. The thrust of the book’s argument is that once people are resettled, and the concrete symbols of the government’s success are everywhere apparent, discontent and disruption turn into political

16 Subsequently, Holaday related these finding to a critique of Godwin Chu’s study of the Impact of Satellite on Rural Indonesia.
legitimacy. But, why then does he say that the work is never done? Although Chua’s narrative has a persistent positive tone, one can reconstruct, between the lines, a story of considerable hardship in what he refers to as the “draconian compulsory acquisition of land in the interest of ‘national development.” (p.133) Thirty percent of those moved from their homes were in the untenable economic position of having their rent increased up to tenfold, only to find that the concrete space for which they had ‘exchanged’ their homes had no floors or counters. In exchange for the security of their neighborhoods, which had grown organically over the previous decades, they underwent forced separation from family, community, and kind. From these observations, it can be seen that the two repeating election issues – cost of living and communal politics – are both rooted in, or were radically reasserted at the time of, the resettlement program. Seen in this light, cost of living, both as a personal concern and potential election issue, is an expression of anxiety that the promise of a better life might remain a permanent, personal economic crisis. The communal politics issues can likewise be traced back to resettlement where it might take various forms including nostalgia for the ‘kampong’.

Chua’s contention is that Singapore has succeeded in this strategy of urban renewal where Western countries such as Britain, US and Sweden have failed, because it provided 100% housing. The issue was thus apparently depoliticized, because the provision was universal. However, Chua warns that this depoliticization is an ‘effect’, and not a reality. The hegemonic work of the ruling party is unending because it must continue to reinforce the sublimation of a potential over-politicization of the housing issue in the direction of economics or community. In a further complication of his analysis, Chua points out that the ruling party wants, nevertheless, to maintain a certain controllable degree of politicization, because it is precisely the success of the housing program that substantiates its leadership position. Thus, as he delicately put it, “the Prime Minister has waved the upgrading program as a ‘carrot’ for voting for the PAP during the campaign run-up to the 1997 general election.”

In our view, Chua’s analysis of housing and ideological hegemony does not go far enough. We would suggest that it is precisely the concretization of universal housing in the form HDB flats as visual symbols of success, that has stalled the hegemonic process. This reification of the citizen as homeowner (or rather leaser) has limited the strategies for resolving the contradiction between cost of living and communal politics. The success of other late capitalist societies, in this regard, is linked to the fact that they have allowed homelessness to

18 Chua, p.136
proliferate at the bottom layer of the social-economy, where the population's identity bleeds into facelessness and total lack of subject position. What may be missing, then, from the PAP strategy, is precisely this: that it has not embraced homelessness. The carrot of upgrading is the promise of a positive solution to the cost of living issue; the converse, the threat of homelessness, puts the burden back on the voter to avoid the worse fate of having no community at all around which to congeal a political identity. Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of antagonism helps to clarify the social dynamic underlying this interpretation.

If we understand Laclau and Mouffe correctly, antagonisms are historically specific; they are not necessary, but are contingent upon a variety of conditions. There must first be a condition of domination and subordination. Then, the subject position of the subaltern must be such that it cannot be fully realized, or completed, because of the presence of the dominant other. Such circumstances accompany the instances of forced migration we have referred to above: the migrant is dislocated and promised something better; that something remains elusive however, and is replaced by an unending series of partial compensations and further tasks toward the promise of ultimate satisfaction. The forced resettlement of Singapore is a particular variant of this pattern, albeit a benign and highly successful one, unlike the Madurese transmigration and Pol Pot’s de-urbanization of Cambodia, for example. The capacity for successful hegemonic relations in each case depends on work accomplished toward a preferred imagining of the past and present.

What we observed in the election studies can be understood, in this view, as the work of rationalizing the unfinished business of resettlement. The studies themselves would, thus, be rationalizations of rationalization. Laclau and Mouffe, drawing upon post-structuralist theories of power and subject, offer an alternative, and in some ways more direct, way of articulating the problem under study. Where the individual person is the basis for analysis, as in our small contribution to the ‘modernist project’ described above, one thinks in terms of forces and balances imposed on corporal units, that is on human beings. The alternative is to regard subjects as expressions of historically determined antagonisms. Put another way, where Lang and Lang saw issues as determinants of political cleavage, Laclau and Mouffe would see political cleavage as rooted in the fault lines of antagonisms, and the emergence of election issues as inevitable expressions of antagonisms during crises of authority.

A comparison with third person theory makes the difference in these two ways of conceiving the problem clear. In the 1997 election we found evidence of Third Person perception: when asked if the HDB upgrading issue affected their votes, 20.3% of the sample said it did. When asked if it affected the decision of other voters, 52.2% said it did. This, together with the
graphic demonstration of the third-person effect in the results of our longitudinal survey, suggests that the subjects of the surveys were projecting an inaccurate description of their personal realities.

If we look at this phenomenon in terms of Laclau & Mouffe’s theory, we can begin by assuming that both descriptions of one’s own concerns and those of others are both accurate representations of two subject positions that happen to coexist within the same sampling unit, i.e. within the same “person”. In light of this, we would venture the following interpretation. These subject positions converged as the impending election prefigured a crisis of authority. In the election period itself, they were poised to coalesce as a unified subject-person which could recognize that both the problem and solution to issues such as the cost of living fall within their control. This must appear as a dangerous situation for the hegemonic state apparatus, threatening, as it did, a loss of power and control. The response was a de-linking of subject positions through the imposition of the alternate discourse of communal politics. In other words, the pattern observed in the two elections, was a playing out of a submerged, long-term antagonism between subject positions that was inscribed on the population during resettlement.

Observing Subject Positions: Ethnography of Communication

Although concrete structures have reified these subject positions such that one remains within and the other outside the living unit, the antagonism they embody now threatens to erupt within the household, between generations. In his work on the analysis of feature films, Michael Lee has begun to explore this dimension. He is looking at family secrets and the symbolic representation of tensions within the household and their relation to state apparatuses of control.

The ethnography of communication is the best method for examining such dynamics. It is based on self-education, and cannot work as an alienated, objectivist mode of discovery. Rather, it must embody the process of looking at oneself looking at others, questioning the lens while looking through the lens. This double awareness has the power to reveal lines of demarcation across persons, such as to make visible subject positions occupied by the same person at different time, and even by the same person at the same time. Deleuze and Guattari have theorized this complex phenomenon in their remarkable work, *A Thousand Plateaus: Captitalism and Schizophrenia*.

Here, it must suffice to mention the few modest steps in this direction taken by students at the School of Communication Studies. It needs to be emphasized that these studies were
“spontaneous” in that they were initiated by young people who simply and innocently wanted to know more about ‘where they live an what they lived for’. Their gaze went naturally to the objects of their curiosity: to the margins of society, and in some cases to a microscopic view of the familiar, a de-familiarizing center. What they saw, was neither innocent nor natural. The best example is the study of resettlement on Ubin Island by Lee, See and Tham. Ubin provided them with a very recent example of the process resettlement that began a quarter of a century ago, the earlier part of which was studied by Chua. The resulting video, Pulau Harimau (Tiger Island), showed the mounting confusion of the students as the ‘subjects’ they videoed performed “schizophrenias” right in front of their lens: a taxi driver’s jovial reception turned to dark rejection on their next visit to the island; a suspiciously-dressed volunteer from the mainland transformed from casual analyst to the ‘voice of authority’ within the same camera shot. Perhaps the most revealing, and most confusing part of the video is from the final scenes, shot by a young resident of the island who was asked to record his own views on resettlement. He chose to show his household altar, a lizard eating a red flower, and paper money being offered to the ancestors. The open, de-centered, fragmented, porous subject is presented on the screen by way of the subjective camera, as vulnerable and available to ideological controls. Most viewers of this video criticize the ending as lacking closure. They are right; and that is precisely as it should be.

Perhaps, we could conclude at this point that the margins expressed what is repressed at the center; that those crossing boundaries are likely to be vulnerable to hegemonic controls; that our images of others come closer to our images of ourselves as a crisis of authority approaches. Such conclusions are snapshots of the dynamics of subject positions. We earn the privilege of seeing these representations of our social and political selves by looking unabashedly at and through the subject positions embodied in ourselves. Our own confusions thus becomes the way to clarity.

After-Word
We have attempted to cross a boundary of discourse between the modern and post-modern, the objectivist and post-structuralist. The results are mixed. The quote at the top from Gramsci is ironic; he did not believe that the methods of natural science could be applied to society. At times, we were trying to be ironic too. For example, we do not really hope to see conditions of vulnerability imposed on the population of Singapore, or any other population. Nor do we think it is a good idea to embrace homelessness. But, it is with a twinge of conscience that we consider Braema Mathi’s point. What, in fact, can our work lead to?
We see two directions. One goes full tilt in the direction of the technologization of culture. A computer program entitled Agenda is now being developed in a joint research project with the School of Applied Science, represented at the School of Communication Studies by Bian Hee Kaw, which will rapidly read the media’s agenda without human intervention. This program could enormously increase the power and control of those who wish to manage agendas, both media and public. Of course, Bian is aware of and interested in studying the social implications of its application while at the same time contributing to its invention. The other direction is the ethnography of communication. Studies by Michael Lee, William Phuan and Tan Chee Tat of gay communication and by B. Elamaaran, Chua Chin Hon, Ernest Khoo and Ray Ng of music sub-cultures, show considerable promise for extensions of visual anthropology and grounded theory toward the understanding subject formation in postmodern, global society. Our hope is that there will continue to be room for such open and open-ended studies in research agendas that normally emphasized immediate results and closure.
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