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Claremont McKenna College

Didactic Democracy: Rethinking the
Roles of Individuality, Political
Freedoms and “Cultural Values” in the
Process of Development

submitted to
Professor Adrienne Martin

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for
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Introduction

“Democratisation” movements have risen and fallen all over the world over the past two decades, and the debate regarding the “incompatibility” between democracy and “Asian values” rages on. *Do Asian political systems fall short of securing freedoms—substantive freedoms—for their citizens?* Then again, even in the category of “Asian” countries, there exists a diverse range of political systems across the region. Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom* questions why Asian countries prioritize economic needs over securing political liberties, saying that these interests clash¹. At the nexus of this tension is Singapore. Similarly, Fukuyama described Singapore as “ha[ving] a rule of law in addition to a state but very limited democracy.”² He says this as if it is a bad thing. How much is having—or lacking—democracy really an important factor in considering the success of a government in developing a country/society?

What is really meant by “democracy” and what is the point of a government? How should we measure the “success” of a society? What truly lies at the core of this “East vs West” debate? Through an engagement with Amartya Sen’s work, this paper hopes to illuminate several threads of fundamental arguments to better understand these questions. By rethinking the process of individual identity formation, this paper challenges the fundamental individualistic assumptions of Sen’s framework, specifically with regard to his claim that democratic political freedoms are necessarily precedent to other freedoms.

My motivation for investigating this topic comes from a personal interest. I’ve been reflecting on the juxtaposition of my experiences growing up in Asia but also having extensive exposure to Western philosophy and the championing of “liberal democracy.” I’m interested in the questions above because I think discussions about the

¹ Sen Amartya. *Development as Freedom*. Anchor Books, 1999., pg 147

² Fukuyama, Francis. *Political Order and Political Decay: from the Industrial Revolution to the Globalization of Democracy*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2014., pg 25

government systems have deep assumptions that cut along cultural lines. There is also a current focus on the “differences” between East and West, which does not bridge the conversation or provide ideas for common ground.

Chapter 1: What are the goals we are working toward?

DEVELOPMENT & FREEDOM — WHY THEY MATTER

What does “development” in society mean? Amartya Sen proposes defining “development” as “a process of expanding the real/substantive freedoms that people enjoy [in a society].”³ Sen claims that “substantive freedoms” is the only true information base that fully captures the standard of living in a society. Sen explains that he refers to the conditions and opportunities one has for “good living”. But Sen’s “perspective on freedom” is rather vague; he does not provide a framework to explain what is encapsulated as these “substantive freedoms”. As such, this paper will refer to Martha Nussbaum’s 10 Universal Capabilities as the list of “substantive freedoms”.

Martha Nussbaum identified an Aristotelian set of ten universal, normative capabilities that act as “freedoms” that are generally protected by law. These may be viewed as needs, although they are also related to values. Here is the list of “Central Human Capabilities”⁴:

1. *Life*: Being able to live a complete and satisfying life into old age. Not having life cut short or being made such that it hardly seems worth living.
2. *Bodily Health*: Living with good health, and not in a state where ill health seriously affects the quality of life. Having access to medical help as needed. To have good food and be able to exercise in ways that sustain health.
3. *Bodily Integrity*: Being able to go where you want to go. Being free from attack and abuse of any kind. Being able to satisfy healthy bodily needs.
4. *Senses, Imagination and Thought*: Being able to use all of one's senses. Being free to imagine, think and reason. Having the education that enables this to be done in a civilized, human way. Having access to cultural experiences, literature, art and so on and being able to produce one's own expressive work. Having freedom of expression, including political and religious.

³ Sen, pg 17

⁴ Nussbaum, Martha. “CAPABILITIES AS FUNDAMENTAL ENTITLEMENTS: SEN AND SOCIAL JUSTICE.” *Feminist Economics*, vol. 9, no. 2-3, 2003, pp. 33–59., doi:10.1080/1354570022000077926. , pg 41-42

5. *Emotion*: Being able to become attached to other things and people outside of ourselves, loving and caring for them. Experiencing grief, longing, gratitude and justified anger. Not being subject to fear and anxiety or blighted by trauma or neglect.
6. *Practical Reason*: Being able to consider and develop understanding of good and evil, and to think critically about the world and one's own place in it. Being able to live with one's conscience.
7. *Affiliation*: Being able to associate with others, living with them and acting for them. Showing concern for people in general and interacting with others. Having sympathy and compassion, acting to help people. Seeking justice and making things right. Protecting others and the rights of people, including freedom of speech and freedom from fear.
8. *Other Species*: Being able to live with the full range of creatures and plants that inhabit the world around us. To be able to enjoy nature and appreciate its beauty.
9. *Play*: Being able to laugh, play games and generally have fun. Not having one's enjoyment and recreation criticized or prevented.
10. *Control Over One's Environment*: (A) Political: Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. (B) Material: Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason, and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

A person's ability to exercise these substantive freedoms are represented by their "capabilities set". Sen defines capabilities set as "the substantive freedoms to achieve the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for one to choose a life one has reason to value."⁵ This "capabilities" approach has two evaluative elements that focus on providing two pieces of information: first, an individual's "realized functioning" (what a person is actually able to do and tells us the things a person does) and second, their "capability set of alternatives" (one's real opportunities, which tells us the things a person is substantively free to do). In less formal terms, it is the set of various lifestyles (that

⁵ Sen, pg 74

substantively meet a decent threshold of these universal capabilities) someone can actually pursue.

According to Sen, his “capabilities set” model is the only solid informational base that can serve as a metric or standard for evaluative judgements, because all other models are all lacking.

The utilitarian approach does not clearly account for the actual distributions of resources and “utility” (whether it be mental satisfaction, pleasure or happiness). Although this approach “has the advantage of not requiring that we understand the difficult exercise of comparing different persons’ mental conditions”⁶, Sen explains that it closes the discussion entirely of the possibility of direct interpersonal comparisons of utilities⁷. Moreover, it also fails to incorporate non-utility concerns (like rights and the substantive freedoms we have established as desirable for a society).

Relatedly, “economic welfare” is a poor measure, as looking at material wealth doesn’t provide a holistic view about the social infrastructures in a society. Sen frames “real income” as a form of utility comparison (a “commodity basis” of utility)⁸. It is difficult to compare real-income basis since different people have diverse demand functions, and more fundamentally, different needs. Aside from different “preferences” of commodity bundles, people have different family structures (and thus varying dynamics) with different personal conditions among family members (for example, some members may have underlying health conditions that require a lot of medical treatment, etc). Sen explicates all these heterogeneities of “well-being” as the following:

⁶ Sen, pg 68

⁷ Ibid

⁸ Sen, pg 69

1. Personal heterogeneities: physical disabilities, illnesses, age, gender, implies a huge diversity of needs
2. Environmental diversities: climate circumstances, prevalence of infectious diseases, seasonal requirements all alter the quality of life that inhabitants of particular areas enjoy
3. Variations in social climate: elements like public educational arrangements, levels of crime and violence in the particular location, all influence the conversion of income into quality of life
4. Differences in relational perspectives: depending on the conventions and customs of a community, the requirements of established patterns of behaviour may vary. This point is related to a sense of the ability to “appear in public without shame” and a sense of basic self-respect
5. Distribution within the family: intrafamily distribution of incomes is crucial in understanding individual achievement and opportunities⁹

So merely looking at income levels does not provide substantive information regarding how well people are faring in society.

The Nozick libertarian framework calls for the “*complete* prioritisation” of liberty as the main evaluation standard. This uncompromising priority of libertarian rights can be particularly problematic. Claiming an absolute priority of liberty might come at the cost of other substantive freedoms, like avoiding premature mortality, maintaining a well-nourished and healthy life, being able to educate and grow oneself, etc¹⁰. However, Sen alludes to an approval of a Rawlsian libertarian view, that places a *comparative* prioritisation of liberty. We’ll read more on this below.

Sen says that the process of development in society has to be done in terms of whether these substantive freedoms have been enhanced. His view of freedom (and thus development) encompasses both the processes that allow for actions and decisions (which he calls its ‘instrumental’ role), and the actual opportunities that people have¹¹ (which he calls its ‘constitutive’ role). Sen uses the terms “freedom” and “development” almost

⁹ Sen, pg 70-71

¹⁰ Sen, pg 66

¹¹ Sen pg 17

interchangeably but I will be using the term “development” to talk about this end-goal of a society and “freedom” to refer to the “substantive freedoms” listed above.

Additionally, Sen says that the achievement of development is thoroughly dependent on the free agency of individuals. Sen places a strong emphasis on individual freedoms, reasoning that: first, having greater freedom to do the things one has reason to value is 1. Significant in itself for the person’s overall freedom, and 2. Important in fostering the person’s opportunity to have valuable outcomes; secondly, greater freedom enhances the ability of people to help themselves, and also to influence the world, matters which are central to the process of development. Sen says that this “freedom-based perspective” takes note of the utilitarianism’s interest in human well-being, libertarian’s involvement with the processes of choice and the freedom to act, the Rawlsian theory’s focus on individual liberty. But it also takes into account the resources needed for substantive freedoms¹². This model thus becomes a key foundation for his further elaboration of his framework.

“DEMOCRATIC POLITICAL FREEDOMS”

Sen seems to argue that there are some substantive freedoms that should be the measure of how good a social arrangement (aka a society’s development) is. Among them, he points to five forms of ‘instrumental’ freedoms that are absolutely necessary to achieving development: *political freedoms* (opportunities that people have to determine who should govern, and on what principles); *economic facilities* (opportunities that individuals respectively enjoy to utilise economic resources for the purpose of consumption, production or exchange); *social opportunities* (arrangements that society makes for education, healthcare, influences that make individuals’ substantive freedom to live better); *transparency guarantees* (the freedom to deal with one another under guarantees of disclosure and lucidity); and *protective securities* (fixed institutional

¹² Sen, pg 86

arrangements and ad hoc arrangements that prevent individuals from falling into a state of unfreedoms, like poverty)¹³.

But once again, Sen does not explicitly provide an exhaustive list of the elements constituted within the pool of “political freedoms”. So let’s expand a little bit on what I think he is trying to get at. Based on his writings, it seems that a few key elements of Sen’s political freedoms include: Representative government (or direct democracy), participation in protests and freedom of speech and expression.¹⁴

He emphasizes that different kinds of freedoms interrelate with one another, but “political and liberal rights” should take precedence over the others. In the selection of weights,[...] no such magic formula exists, since the issue of weighing is one of valuation and judgment and not one of some impersonal technology¹⁵. Sen does not make an explicit linkage here but he seems to be talking about political freedoms as what democracy embodies and uses the terms interchangeably. According to Sen, political freedoms have three distinct roles: firstly, it has a *direct (intrinsic) importance/relevance*, in human living associated with basic capabilities (including that of political and social participation). Secondly, it has a *constructive role* in the conceptualisation of needs. The exercise of basic political rights makes it more likely that not only will there be a policy response to economic needs, but also that the conceptualisation (including comprehension) of “economic needs” itself may require the exercise of such rights. Lastly, political freedoms have an *instrumental role* in that they enhance the chance that people will get heard when expressing their claims regarding political matters. Informed and unregimented formation of our values requires openness of communication and arguments, and political freedoms and civil rights can be central to this process.¹⁶

Herein lies a distinction between Sen and Nussbaum’s stance regarding what Sen

¹³ Sen, pg 38-39

¹⁴ Sen, pg 38-39

¹⁵ Sen, pg 97

¹⁶ Sen, pg 152

calls “democratic political freedoms”. And it is precisely this element of his framework that I will be contending with in this paper.

TEASING OUT SEN’S ARGUMENTS

I will be focusing on the constructive and instrumental claims because they are center to understanding Sen’s conception of his framework. The foundations of his argument, which will be fleshed out below are what I will refer to as Sen’s “individualist assumption.”

On the point of the “constructive role”, Sen claims that individual political freedoms are necessary for achieving social agreement about value. To have a functioning society, we first need to know what the society values. Sen argues that the only way to do this is via political freedoms. Sen’s assumption is that individuals in a society have heterogeneous preferences, and so we need a way to aggregate everything. The way to do this is to have individuals express their preferences via platforms like free speech and unbiased media. Sen’s individual political freedoms are the only way to make sense & order the values and decisions and structure and functioning of society. He ties this back to his model of capabilities set mentioned earlier. The capabilities perspective is inescapably pluralist, and rightfully so because interpersonal comparisons of overall advantages require an aggregation over heterogeneous components¹⁷. Political freedom provides the opportunity for citizens to discuss and debate—to participate in the selection of—values in the choice of priorities¹⁸. This explains why, to Sen, political freedoms are the most important element to have in a society aka the first substantive freedom.

Sen further says that individual political freedoms are necessary for achieving substantive freedoms. For this instrumental claim, Sen seems to be saying that securing basic political liberties secures the causal conditions necessary for developing the other freedoms. Even if we had the communication about ordering these values, we still need to

¹⁷ Sen, pg 30

¹⁸ Ibid

take this further step to guarantee that this information is executed and delivered into society. Sen seems to be implicitly asking questions of political authority, accountability and transparency. We need a guarantee that these preferences are *actually* what shapes the social order. A crucial implied assumption here is that those in positions of leadership/authority may not be aligned with the values and wishes of the masses. Suppose there was a really nice supreme dictator who somehow, very efficiently, conducted regular mass surveys to keep up with everyone's capability sets and their preferences (broadly defined). Why would this not be an insufficient model of government? Is the dictator not agglomerating the preferences of his people and keeping up with their interests? Sen thinks that another key element of individual political freedom is the procedural definition of democratic choice, in the form of elections¹⁹. To express publicly what one values and to demand that attention be paid to it, people in society need free speech *and* democratic choice²⁰. Only this way will rulers have the incentive to listen to what people want, since they would have to face the people's criticism for any missteps.

Now, let us move onto illuminating how Sen has a mistaken understanding of individual identity formation that deconstructs a fundamental assumption of his framework.

¹⁹ Sen, pg 152

²⁰ Ibid

Chapter 2: What are some assumptions we've overlooked?

So far that we've seen from the previous chapter that Sen's account is relatively persuasive. But there's one key issue with his argument: the entirety of Sen's framework hinges on the assumption that individuals naturally have different preferences, that must then be aggregated together in society. The individual is assumed to have interests and preferences, defined independently of, and prior to joining any group. The process of aggregation and ordering enabled through political freedoms will then form society's identity. And this sense of societal identity will then be used as the basis of determining the policies of running the society. But this is flawed for two reasons.

THE FORMATION OF INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY

First, individual identity presupposes community identity. To understand why this is so, let us take a look at Elizabeth Anderson's paper "Unstrapping the Straitjacket of 'Preference'". Although the topic of Anderson's paper is not directly related to Sen's arguments in "Development as Freedom", the work of Sen that Anderson builds off supports my argument as it deconstructs the concept of the "individual," and serves as the framework of rebutting him. In an earlier paper ("Behaviour and the Concept of Preference" (1973)), Sen reframed the understanding of the concept of individual preferences into an instrumental one in determining behavior rather than as the end goals to be fulfilled by individual behavior, welfare, and rationality. The idea of preference has been misused by economists to perform three distinct tasks: a) describe a person's choices; b) represent whatever motives underlie a person's choices; and c) to represent a person's welfare.²¹ To "instrumentalise" the concept of individual preferences is to think about it in terms of the distinction between agency (in choosing whatever state of affairs one values) and welfare (the narrow sense of self-interest and welfare).²² The latter relates to why it is important (according to Sen) to enable individuals to take into

²¹ Anderson, Elizabeth. "Symposium on Amartya Sen's Philosophy: 2 Unstrapping the Straitjacket of 'Preference': a Comment on Amartya Sen's Contributions to Philosophy and Economics." *Economics and Philosophy*, vol. 17, no. 1, 2001, pp. 21–38., doi:10.1017/s0266267101000128., pg 22

²² Ibid

consideration their preferences in society. In Sen's world, this is represented by his capabilities set and functionings. Anderson concurs with all to this point.

But then we get to the question of judgements on rationality, and this is the key part to understanding why Sen's framework discussed above is lacking and somewhat mistaken. Consider the classic game theory prisoner's dilemma situation. Bearing in mind that social arrangements can be framed as iterated prisoner's dilemma situations, and given the current work/findings of economics and rational decision theory, the dominant choice for each player is to defect. However, even though the desirable outcome is for players to cooperate, this is not seen as rational. How then can we reconcile the "rationality" of committed actions with *individual* preferences?

Sen introduces a concept of commitment that is not framed in terms of preferences at all. His discussion of the prisoner's dilemma situations suggests that individuals who always act on their preferences are either fools or social misfits in circumstances where acting on social norms of cooperation brings about better consequences for all. A key concern that then follows is how can it be "rational" for the individual to act on socially and ethically desirable principles when doing so does not advance the satisfaction of her broad or narrow individual preferences. This is also a concern in the chapter we explored above: Assuming that political freedoms can help order the values of individuals in a society, as Sen argues, but how do we get them to actually act on the outcomes of these compromises?

However, Anderson argues that we need more robust conceptions of collective agency and individual identity. Returning to the examples of cooperative solutions Sen proposed in prisoner's dilemma scenarios, we need to then figure out how to reconcile this account with the ideas of rational principle that values preference-satisfaction. One way is to just assume that people have altruistic preferences, or alternatively, that the act of cooperation is valued intrinsically²³. But Anderson quickly proves why both theories

²³ Anderson, pg 25

do not hold by showing how once these accounts don't construct a prisoner's dilemma situation, which should be defined as a situation where people accept a principle of rational choice that has an act-consequentialist form²⁴.

So how then can we reconcile cooperation as a socially desirable trait and a rational action?

Anderson tries to pull together (from various pieces of his work), a prediction of what Sen would have said about this matter, and now we return to the question of identities. An argument in the spirit of Sen's POV would look something like this: Individual identities may be constituted by membership in various social groups. Since people act in accordance with what they understand is their identities. The solution to one-shot prisoner dilemmas would then be for parties to reach a collectively desirable action by treating the unit of selection as their joint strategy. Anderson writes that any group "whose members refer to one another as 'we' [would thus] see themselves as ready to be jointly committed to acting together."²⁵ By regarding themselves as "members of a single collective agent,"²⁶ Anderson reasons that "whatever can count as a reason for action for one member of the collective must count as a reason for all."²⁷ Having taken up this perspective of "collective agency," each individual party has rational justification for viewing "their actions as jointly advancing a desirable goal."²⁸ Additionally, the only reasons for action that each individual would be willing to accept are the considerations that they can reason every other person would also be willing to accept.²⁹ Anderson claims that this "practical identification" actually does not require any prior acquaintance or relationship, only that the collective in question sees themselves as "solving a problem by joining forces."³⁰

²⁴ Anderson, pg 26

²⁵ Anderson, pg 28

²⁶ Anderson, pg 29

²⁷ Ibid

²⁸ Anderson, pg 30

²⁹ Anderson, pg 29

³⁰ Anderson, pg 31

In reality, parties would need to consider various policies of mixed and conditional cooperation. But what remains problematic with this priority of identity to rational principle boils down to the concept of identity. Anderson's proposal is that, if a person identifies with a group in such a way that the group counts as a collective agent, then it is rational for that person to act on the principles of that group. But we have not yet resolved the question of *why* it might be rational to identify with a group.

Using Sen's own case study on material gender inequality and cooperative conflict in the family, Anderson shows how reframing the concept of identity formation. Using Sen's own work on gender and the division of family resources, she illustrates how the freedom to determine one's own priorities in committing oneself to various groups depends on those groups limiting their demands on members in ways that enable their members to identify with and function as members of multiple groups. Sometimes you can find yourself in different groups that make incompatible demands on you.³¹ Thus, the individual would need to be able to harmonise these different demands by adopting a perspective that can coordinate them well. Women can only achieve a true sense of "individual identity" by having mobility between different types of collective agencies—the freedom to move from the family sphere to other spheres of social organisations, outside of employment, politics, women's associations, etc.³²

Anderson's framework ties in with Margaret Somers' theory of identity formation through a "conceptual narrative" process. As one interacts with different community groups, they explore different ideas, experience different ways of life and eventually discover for themselves what they individually have reason to value³³. "People construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories [...] people make sense of what has happened and

³¹ Anderson, pg 36

³² Ibid

³³ Thanks to Benjamin McAnally for discussing this idea with me.

is happening to them by attempting to assemble or in some way to integrate these happenings within one or more narratives.”³⁴ These experiences inevitably include one’s interactions with other members of society. Thus, “the others [in society]” are *constitutive* rather than external to a sense of self, individual identity and agency³⁵.

We can use this line of argumentation to deconstruct Sen’s arguments presented in the earlier chapter. Rather than individual preferences being aggregated into the community’s values, the only sort of “individuality” that everyone in a society can be is one who identifies with multiple collective agencies and therefore accepts multiple social commitments. Individuals need to be able to have mobility across different types of collective agencies in order to figure out what values they want to take on themselves. The act of committing oneself to various groups enables the freedom to determine one’s own priorities, and consequently, the formation of individual identity.

The only sort of individual that everyone can be is one who identifies with multiple collective agencies, and who therefore accepts multiple commitments, not grounded in individual preferences, as reasons for action. This speaks to the importance of community in identity formation.

DISTINGUISHING “ASSOCIATION” VS “MOBILITY”

Consider for a moment a potential counterpoint: Sen could argue that you cannot be able to have this opportunity of exploring different community groups without the *political* right of freedom of association.

My counterclaim to this argument is to delineate the freedom of association as being more foundational than being part of the bundle of Sen’s “political freedoms.” Perhaps a more apt phrasing of this “freedom” is the freedom of “mobility between groups,” since freedom of association is conventionally thought of in terms of *political*

³⁴ Somers, Margaret R. “The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relational and Network Approach.” *Theory and Society*, vol. 23, no. 5, 1994, pp. 605–649., doi:10.1007/bf00992905., pg 614

³⁵ Ibid

association. Mobility between groups is a freedom that is necessary for exploring different “communal narrative experiences” as described in the above section. We can construe the value of “freedom of association” as having the “ordering” function in democratic political freedoms. “Mobility” deals with a construction of the narrative self while “association” usually implies the capabilities to also organise and to form and participate in groups that lead to some sort of action.

Further, a possible Anderson rejoinder to Sen would be that we cannot justify the value of [freedom of association] by appealing to its utility for agglomerating individual preferences, if we cannot get individual preferences without the freedom of association. Sen’s counter would be a circular one. Part of Anderson’s account does include the need to have some guarantees (that may be provided by individual political freedoms) so that we substantially have mobility between different groups in society and defend ourselves. However, this argument plays out differently for Sen because his motivation of placing preeminent importance on the freedom of association individual political freedoms is to enable the process of agglomerating preferences.

Sen’s individualist assumption for the instrumental value of political freedoms presupposes that individual preferences do not depend on prior membership in group agents. However, Anderson’s argument shows how there is more to be said about the formation of identities than Sen considered. Her “narrative” approach to identity formation shows that, to figure out how one comes to form their own identity, one must engage in intersubjective narrative practices of different communities. The role of the agent is not an *a priori* cartesian agent, and instead, the individual is constituted by and constituted of a whole. The exploration of Anderson’s work shows how Sen’s overemphasis on his individualist assumption weakens his claims about the preeminence of individual political freedoms.

Anderson’s account is essentially making a case of how people eventually develop as *individuals*, and I don’t have any qualms about that argument at all. But to

push further in this direction, let us entertain the possibility of whether we should even be thinking about individuality in the first place.

THE “INDIVIDUAL” AS AN ECONOMIC, IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT

The second reason why Sen’s individualist assumption does not hold as strongly as he takes as given, is because there is reason to think that the notion of the “individual” is not an *a priori* in societies. Perhaps it is worth raising some skepticism over the placement of the “individual” at the foundation of an argument that pertains to the nature of the classic democratic political liberties, since these liberties can be appealed to in an ideological fashion. Let us turn to Karl Marx and his essay “On the Jewish Question” to explore the thought that a sense of “the individualistic man” can be framed as an ideology that prevents one from actually being “free”.

In Marx’s work, he uses the word “emancipation” instead of “liberation” or “freedom” largely because, under his school of thought, the general population of humanity is divided between the oppressed and the oppressor. And thus when we talk about the kind of freedom/liberation in society, Marx talks about it in terms of emancipation. Marx defines “political emancipation” as the final form of human emancipation *within the framework of the prevailing social order*³⁶. It means the condition where the state no longer dictates people’s decisions in specific domains; the condition where one is free to do whatever one desires in a particular aspect of life.

But Marx argues that true emancipation is human emancipation; political emancipation is not enough. “Human emancipation” is the state where no form of oppression substantively exists in society. The state can liberate itself from some arbitrary constraint without the people in society being really liberated; a state might be a free state without man himself being a free man. The oppressive hierarchies, even when not sanctioned by the state, can still be continuously perpetuated in society.

³⁶ Marx, Karl. “On the Jewish Question.” *The Marx-Engels Reader*, by Robert C. Tucker et al., Norton, 1978, pp. 26–52. , pg 35

Responding to the issue of Jewish emancipation in a Christian state, Marx discusses the distinction between the rights of man and the rights of the citizen. He quotes Rousseau on the notion of the political man, illustrating that man, in a political society has his own powers taken from him and given “alien powers” which he can only employ with the help of other men [in the political society]. He concludes that human emancipation requires breaking the distinction made between man as an “egoistic being” in civil society and man as an abstract citizen in the state.

Marx argues that political emancipation “is a reduction of man, on the one hand, to a member of civil society, an independent and egoistic individual, and on the other hand, to a citizen, a moral person.”³⁷ Human emancipation would enable the individual to recognise oneself as a “species-being” and not separate their social power from oneself as a political power.³⁸ In virtue of being part of a society, man is dependent on other men. Here, Marx borrows the terms “egoistic being” and “species being” from Feuerbach’s work on the nature of man. Feuerbach argues that human beings distinguish themselves from animals by a particular kind of consciousness: not merely a consciousness of himself as an individual, but the consciousness of himself as a member of the human species.³⁹ Marx employs this term to further his argument that since this “species-consciousness” defines the nature of man, man is only living and acting authentically when he lives and acts deliberately as a “species-being” rather than an “egoistic being”.⁴⁰ That is, human beings are fundamentally socially dependent and interconnected beings, not as “individuals”.

Marx’s ideas provide an alternative view of emancipation that takes into account the relationship between an individual and their relation to their society. Although he does not particularly provide a positive argument of what this means for political

³⁷ Marx, pg 46

³⁸ Ibid

³⁹ Marx, pg 33

⁴⁰

societies, we can see how Marx's chain of arguments ties back to Anderson's above. Developing a sense of "individual self" requires a recognition and internalisation of one's relationship with others in society. This is the highest form of "emancipation", and the only true holistic view of human beings who are a part of society. What Marx calls "the consciousness of himself as a member of the human species" would be what is considered a byproduct of the final stage in Anderson's argument: A person, having had experienced different membership in various communities, is now able to determine what different values and ideas they want to take for themselves. And in doing so, the person now has developed a sense of "individual" self that incorporates their membership and thus relationship with these different communities in society.

But for the sake of continuing the conversation within Sen's world, let us entertain the understanding that a conception of "the individual" can exist without the oppressive existential angst Marx introduces. I should also clarify one critical point: I am *not* arguing against the conception and development of a sense of "individual self". My contention with Sen's work is deprioritising the emphasis of the individual. I am arguing that his understanding of the nature of interactions in society, particularly with regards to how we should think about governance and the development of society, cannot be centered solely on individuals as if they had *a priori* preferences.

Next we'll take a look at an empirical example to consider if there are indeed valid alternatives to Sen's political freedoms that can act as a value-ordering procedure in society that would still succeed in securing other substantive freedoms.

Chapter 3: Are the values embodied by “democracy” truly universal?

Previously we explored how Sen’s individualist assumption isn’t as well-grounded as he claimed. He also says that we absolutely need to first secure democratic political freedoms as the *only way* to achieve the things provided by its instrumental and constructive roles. But there are reasons to think that there exist alternative ways to achieve these functions through non-legal mechanisms. Additionally, Sen also appeals to this notion that “democracy is a universal value” and attempts to build on his previous arguments by insisting that political freedoms are intrinsically valuable and thus ought to be given importance by states regardless of their cultural background.

For the remainder of the paper, I will use the term “democracy” specifically as Sen uses it to refer to his conceptions of democratic political freedoms.

THE CULTURAL CRITIQUE

Aside from Sen’s claim that democratic political freedoms are preeminent, he also says that it is certainly not just a “luxury” that “poor countries cannot afford”. Among the criticism he addresses in his advocacy of democracy as an integral, fundamental aspect of society, he expounds greatly on the “cultural critique.” The cultural critique rejects Sen’s claims of the superiority of democracy on the grounds that democracy is “specifically a ‘Western’ priority, which goes against, in particular, Asian values.”⁴¹ We would be trying to fit a round peg into a square hole, so to speak. In chapter 10 of his book, Sen counters the cultural critique by citing historical examples of cultural/thought leaders from various Asian countries who advocate for “views of freedom, tolerance and equality.” Some examples include Confucius from ancient China, Emperor Ashoka and Kautilya from India, and the Moghul Emperor Akbar who practiced political and religious tolerance.⁴²

In order to evaluate the validity of Sen’s defense, we need to unpack a few elements that Sen failed to consider: the history of Western colonialism (which lead to a

⁴¹ Sen, pg 149

⁴² Sen, pg 234-239

difference in geopolitical powers, and perhaps better illuminate the discrepancies in Asian prioritisation of values) and the trans-temporal evolution of culture (which may imply that his historical examples are outdated).

In the following sections, we will expound on first, how Sen's response to the cultural critique is lacking a holistic view of the factors determining whether Asians value freedom. Secondly, even if we suppose that Sen *did* successfully establish that Asian countries *do* hold freedom as valuable, his arguments are not convincing that freedom should be treated as a *foundational* virtue, rather than as part of a cluster of core values.

THE COLONIAL HISTORY OF ASIA

First and foremost, it is easy to overlook the colonial history of Asian countries. These colonial legacies left behind institutions, practices, etc. that were not compatible with the native cultures of those places. These colonial legacies have an impact on the development of cultural thought as well as the social environment and systems of these countries.

Many economists and social scientists believe that differences in institutions and state policies are at the root of large differences in income per capita across countries. But in their paper, Daron Acemoglu et al. argue that differences in colonial experience could be a source of exogenous differences in institutions of different countries.⁴³ In their study, Acemoglu et al. focused on European colonisation and their different colonisation strategies on different countries. For example, in countries like Australia, New Zealand and the United States, European colonists settled in those areas and set up institutions that enforced the rule of law and encouraged investments⁴⁴. On the other extreme cases, like Congo or the Gold Coast, the European settlers set up extractive states, which were

⁴³Acemoglu, Daron, et al. "The Colonial Origins of Comparative Development: An Empirical Investigation." *American Economic Association*, vol. 91, no. 5, Dec. 2001, pp. 1369–1401., doi:10.3386/w7771.

⁴⁴ Acemoglu et al, pg 1370

intended to rapidly transfer resources to the metropole. These institutions did not introduce much protection for private property, nor did they provide checks and balances against government expropriation.⁴⁵ Acemoglu et al. proposes that the differences in these colonisation strategies were determined out of necessity depending on the local conditions that were or were not conducive to European settlement. In places where the environment (specifically, the disease environment of that country) was not favourable to European settlement, which resulted in high mortality rates among the early settlers, it was more likely that an extractive state was set up⁴⁶. Very clearly from their findings, we can see how the legacy of colonial experiences carry into the present.

So why is this legacy important to bear in mind? Developing a normative “ideal theory” account of what institutions and infrastructures a country should have is counterproductive—the fact is that there are very real contextual differences among these countries. So we cannot simply “plug-and-chug” democracy institutionally like some mathematical formula into other countries where their conditions are at a different starting point.

Consider Thomas Nagel’s account of the relationship between democracy and justice in his paper, “The Problem of Global Justice”:

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Acemoglu et al. pg 1373-1374

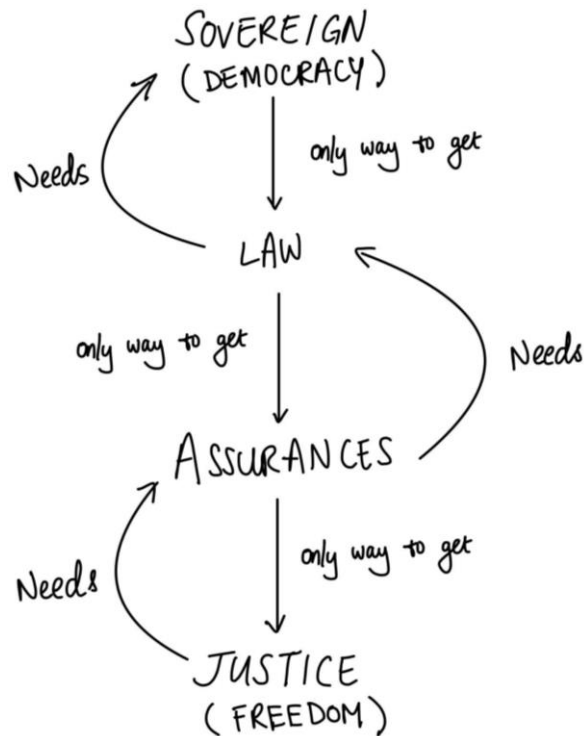


Figure 1: Nagel's flowchart

Nagel believes that having a sovereign is a necessary prerequisite in the securing of justice. Starting at the bottom, Nagel argues that in order to secure “justice” (of a certain kind) presupposes “assurances” (that answer questions “of what?” and “to whom?”), which in turn presupposes “laws” (regarding a certain set), which in turn presupposes having a “sovereign” (of a certain kind)⁴⁷. And then what this means is that a state might end up being formed as, or transformed into a democracy, because the people who want justice realize all of these presuppositions and therefore seek to establish a democratic sovereign.

We can replace “justice” with Sen’s “development/freedom”. In Sen’s world, a democratic government creates laws that provide assurances to secure individual freedoms. In the pursuit of justice and freedom, eventually conceived of the democratic system that we see today as they came to realize that democracy would be the system that

⁴⁷ Nagel, Thomas. “The Problem of Global Justice.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, vol. 33, no. 2, 2005, pp. 113–147. JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/3558011.

would provide them with the best form of justice *in their society*. But it does not guarantee that placing the topmost element (a democratic sovereign) in any society automatically guarantees the top-down flow. A prevalent view in political science that plugging a framework “at the top” will lead to a trickle down effect into society. But bearing in mind the contextual differences among countries (due to colonial legacies and the institutions that persisted), the way we should be thinking about this relationship flowchart is to look at the thought process as a bottom-up flow as the formative process, not a top-down flow.

But suppose Sen would rebut this point by denying that he is not urgently forcing non-democracies to adopt a democratic system. He might say that countries are welcome to address the immediate goals in their society, that may have been a result of their colonial past, but eventually, it would do well for them to set up a democratic government. Perhaps the broader consideration that Acemoglu et al.’s work points to is that the types of institutions that can be established in a given country may be a matter of geographic and material resources rather than values. Recalling that the reasons for what kind of institution the European colonists established in different countries depended on the material conditions of those colonised settlements that may or may not have been conducive to early European settlers. Different countries thus might need different forms of institutions to account for their geographical differences.

DIFFERENCE IN GEOPOLITICAL POWERS

Part of the legacy that colonised countries were left to deal with is from the environmental resource aspect.⁴⁸ British colonialists transformed the Malay peninsula into a plantation economy to meet the needs of industrial Britain and America. This included the expanding demand for cheap rubber during the industrial revolution. Colonising countries were able to develop technologically much faster in part by raiding resources from their colonies.

⁴⁸ McQuade, Joseph. “Earth Day: Colonialism's Role in the Overexploitation of Natural Resources.” *The Conversation*, 19 Apr. 2019, <https://theconversation.com/earth-day-colonialisms-role-in-the-overexploitation-of-natural-resources-113995>.

The effects of this exploitation is felt even today. Taking another example of Africa, a heavily colonised continent, we can see how little has changed with their patterns of economic growth and trade.⁴⁹ Africa’s economic growth is still largely driven by primary commodities and natural resources, reflecting the persistence of the colonial development model where natural resource-endowed nations served as feedstock to advanced economies.⁵⁰ Because manufactured goods with increasing technological content account for much of global trade, the continued reliance on colonial-era “extractivist” development models puts Africa at a disadvantage in the global economic and trading environment.⁵¹ However, now it is not only a matter of accessibility to *natural* resources, but also the availability of technological advancements.

Noting these stark historical differences in the countries’ development, we need to recognize the differences in geopolitical powers between Western and Asian countries. The difference in international status may require Asian countries to take different measures in the establishment of their country’s political structure to account for this. Countries may not necessarily agree with the values being touted but need to just follow them because it’s the “rules of the game” they have to work around.

Political structures are not just a binary between democracy and authoritarianism. Certainly, these are the two dominant political structures in the course of world history. Sen claims that some political systems “have even championed harsher [systems]—with denial of basic civil and political rights—for their alleged advantage in promoting economic development”.⁵² By “some”, he means some Asian systems, specifically pointing to Lee Kwan Yew’s infamous “Lee Thesis”, suggesting that certain Asian leaders have inclined more towards authoritarianism than democratic. Looking at

⁴⁹ Fofack, Hippolyte. “Overcoming the Colonial Development Model of Resource Extraction for Sustainable Development in Africa.” *Brookings*, Brookings, 31 Jan. 2019, www.brookings.edu/blog/africa-in-focus/2019/01/31/overcoming-the-colonial-development-model-of-resource-extraction-for-sustainable-development-in-africa/.

⁵⁰ Ibid

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Sen, pg15

Southeast Asian countries in the post-Cold War era, we saw how the West advocated so strongly for all these newly-independent countries to adopt democracy as their political structure. Indonesia was one such example. Having been colonized by the Dutch for over 300 years, the nation declared its adoption a democratic government structure after declaring independence, but only experienced the most growth—in all aspects—during President Suharto’s “dictatorship.” Sen rejects the counter-argument that Asian countries (or at least Southeast Asian countries) are “not ready” for democracy, instead emphasizing that they will be ready *through* democracy. Perhaps we can turn to South Korea as an example of a successful democratic Asian country. However, we can also point to differences in South Korea’s “democracy” and the general idea of Western democracies. For example, South Korea’s society is still marked by some extents of national indoctrination, such as the emphasis on love and devotion to the nation, as well as the integration of a “*danil minjok*” rhetoric (meaning “one people” Korean ethnic and racial nationalism) into the education system.

Thus, we can see that, due to the combination of unique historical conditions of Asian countries that inevitably places them at a different “development stage” than the West, which requires a different political-social structure. Further, perhaps these countries also value other “core virtues” in their societies aside from solely valuing “freedom”. The case of South Korea being a successful example does not detract from this claim because it only proves that there are inherent differences between Western and Asian societies that would not allow the latter from entirely adopting the former’s model of democracy.

THE TRANS-TEMPORAL EVOLUTION OF CULTURES

Sen’s use of historical examples does not apply to the present-day context. His examples of Ashoka from third century B.C. and Moghul emperor Akbar from the 1550s do not reflect Indian society’s general thought in 2021 (and even in the context of when he was writing his book and articles in the 1990s). Sen himself has noted the fluidity of society’s values and priorities, when he conceptualized the constructive role of

democracy. Without getting too technical about every particular religion and tradition that Sen expounded as examples, the general case is that modernization and progress brings with it changes in society, with or without a democracy to facilitate the discussion. Let us suppose, for argument's sake, that we apply Sen's claims in evaluating modern-day "Asian" thought leaders. There is a critical problem in using a "part" to represent the whole. Although Sen's line of reasoning goes that: these particular individuals, who can be said are thought leaders of a certain tradition or culture, exhibit traits that emphasize freedom-oriented values. Since they are part of that respective culture, we can thus say that there the culture also agrees with these freedom-oriented values. However, contemporary violent tragedies in numerous social groups exemplify how it is wrong to generalize beliefs and ideas of a leader as something that is applicable to the beliefs—and consequently, the actions—of the public. Take the case of the stark contrast between Pope Francis' speeches and the numerous Catholic Church sex abuse scandals. Just earlier in February this year, five major leaders were removed from position on charges of sexual abuse.

Additionally, sometimes thought leaders can themselves be a wrongful litmus test for public sentiment, as their words and the values they promote are not promoted through their own actions. A prime example is Indonesian Islamic scholar and politician Ma'ruf Amin, who is currently the chairman of the *Majelis Ulema Indonesia*. In Sunni Islam, the ulema are the guardians, transmitters and interpreters of religious knowledge, of Islamic doctrine and law. As the chairman of the Indonesian Ulema Council, Ma'ruf Amin holds one of the highest positions, and supposedly one of the most respected figures in the Islamic world. Since becoming the chosen running mate of the incumbent Indonesian president for the upcoming elections in April 2019, he has espoused messages promoting tolerance and acceptance. However, he has also issued several fatwas (a ruling on the grounds of Islamic law given by a recognized authority) that exhibit anti-human rights sentiments, particularly targeting the LGBT community in Indonesia. This case further emphasizes how terribly misleading it is to use the ideas *said* by these leaders as a reflection of the actual current state of a society's beliefs or practices.

Perceptions of norms and attitudes of rights or other moral values may evolve over time. However, it is also worth noting the distinctive difference of these norms and values with the core identity of certain cultures. The examples Sen presented are not directly pointing to a similarity between Asian and Western values in their society's core identity.

REFRAMING SEN'S TRIANGLE OF "FREEDOM"

For this section of our discussion, I will be using the term "value" as a verb, and use the term "virtue" as a noun, so as to avoid confusion when constructing sentences.

Sen's "burden of proof" in disproving the cultural critique lies in his claim that "[T]he real issue is not whether these non-freedom perspectives are present in Asian traditions, but whether the freedom-oriented perspectives are absent there."⁵³ In other words, Sen seems to be saying that it needs to be shown that those societies don't value freedom. It is not enough to show that they value other things, possibly as much as he values freedom. Yet freedom is in fact so important to all achieving all these other capabilities. So surely freedom must be at the core of a society's virtues? To visually illustrate this, perhaps we can characterise Sen's understanding of this "East vs Western virtues" debate as such:

⁵³ Sen, pg 234

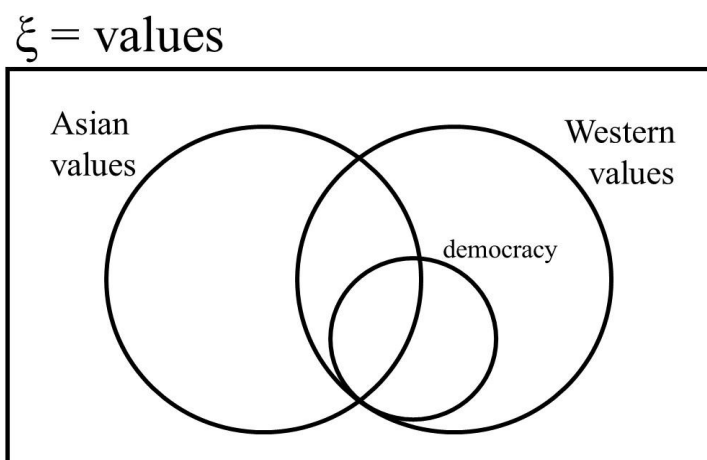


Figure 2: Venn diagram of Virtues

A society valuing democracy does imply the presence of freedom-oriented virtues. But the converse does not follow: the presence of freedom-oriented virtues does not directly imply that said society values democracy. There are other characteristics of Sen’s “democracy”, like an emphasis on the individual, that may not be something other societies would decide as a “core virtue”.

Perhaps we should take a step back and revisit Sen’s definition of “freedom” and its two roles. Recall that Sen frames the view of “freedom” as “both a *primary end* and *the principal means* of development.”⁵⁴ But we established earlier in Chapter 1 that for our discussion, we characterised Nussbaum’s list of Central Human Capabilities as what we mean when we are talking about Sen’s “freedoms as a primary end”. Chapter 2 explored why certain elements of Sen’s “freedom as a principal means” argument is more nuanced than he makes it seem, in particular with regard to his prioritisation of democratic political freedoms. Here, our investigation in this “cultural aspect” of his arguments illuminate how perhaps he has defined the end-goals virtue too narrowly.

In earlier sections, we established that although Sen claimed to have successfully proved his burden, the burden in the first place seems to be an insufficient basis to weigh

⁵⁴ Sen, pg 36

his proof. But even if we suppose that Sen did show that Asians fundamentally value freedom the way he does, it might be mistaken for him to think about freedom as a sole virtue “ends.”

After all, Asian virtues are not entirely distinct or antithetical to “Western values”. Many “Asian” virtues, such as respect for traditions, strong family ties, and emphasis on the communal spirit, can also be found in other countries and so are not unique to a particular geography. Rather than forcing a framing of all the 10 Universal Capabilities as some manifestation of “freedom,” we can explore the possibility that they embody some virtue than this umbrella blanket term of “freedom.” Additionally, we should not assume that a society should absolutely prioritise a sole virtue as though virtues in society are hierarchical like a pyramid (diagram on the left in figure 3 below). Instead, we can characterise society’s values as being a ring or chain of interrelated values, all of which contribute to Sen’s view of “development as freedom.”

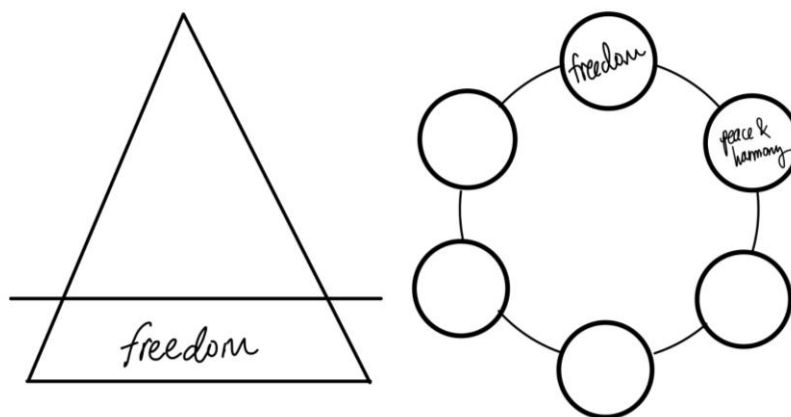


Figure 3: Comparison of thinking about the positionality of virtues

The venn diagram (figure 2) depicts the different virtues people could value, and as we can see, there may be intersections. That is not to say that one virtue in the Asian set is entirely impossible to achieve in the Western set. It just means to say that is less emphasised in the other set. Figure 3 here now provides an illustration of two plausible ways that freedom might relate to other virtues a particular society would like to secure.

The ring model (figure 3 on the right) depicts different positionality of virtues and considers the role they each may have in enforcing the other virtues a society values. However, unlike the pyramid model, these different virtues mutually reinforce each other, but if one is removed, the entire structure does not collapse immediately.

CLOSING THE DEBATE ON THE CULTURAL CRITIQUE

At this point, you might be wondering: so what *is* my stance on this debate? On one hand, I say that we cannot look to present-day social values in Asian societies for evidence of a preference for democracy, because they are confounded by the influence of Western colonialism; and yet I also make a case that we cannot look to pre-colonial values because Sen's portrayal of them is lacking or incomplete, and frankly, historical examples can be outdated.

However, there are just too many confounding factors to assess whether "Asian values" actually do or do not line up with Sen's "freedom-oriented" framework. Clearly, culture matters. But how it matters depends on the ebb and flow of historical events within each country but also internationally. Fareed Zakaria aptly writes:

"A century ago, when East Asia seemed immutably poor, many scholars (most famously German sociologist Max Weber) argued that Confucian-based cultures discouraged all the attributes necessary for success in capitalism. A decade ago, when East Asia was booming, scholars turned this explanation on its head, arguing that Confucianism actually emphasized the essential traits for economic dynamism. Then the wheel turned again, and many came to see in Asian values all the ingredients of crony capitalism. Lee Kuan Yew was compelled to admit that Confucian culture had bad traits as well, among them a tendency toward nepotism and favoritism. But surely recent revelations about some of the United States' largest corporations have shown that U.S. culture has its own brand of crony capitalism."⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Zakaria, Fareed. "The Dustbin of History: Asian Values." *Foreign Policy*, *Foreign Policy*, 9 Nov. 2009, foreignpolicy.com/2009/11/09/the-dustbin-of-history-asian-values/.

So in the first place, all of Sen's counterpoints are not very reliable metrics to determine whether he is right about the "universality of democracy", because the topic of culture is such a complex field.

I am not trying to provide a rejoinder in favour of the cultural critique; I'm offering a critique about the entire debate as it is currently being presented. Everything discussed right now is difficult to conclusively determine, so it would bear little significant result if we continued this line of discussion. The dynamic nature of cultural development makes people prone to fall into a slippery slope of retrospectively linking evidence for a society's prosperity. Furthermore, whether a state or a society is conducive for particular political systems may not have to do with values in the first place. To reiterate the implications of Acemoglu et al.'s paper, we can reasonably suspect that differences in culture is not as much of a determining factor as material conditions of a region. The exploration of which is not within the scope of this paper.

Now that we've combed through the theoretical discussion, let us move onto an empirical evaluation of a country that serves to substantiate the arguments we have made thus far.

Chapter 4: How well do these counterarguments fare empirically?

THE CASE OF SINGAPORE

After the end of WWII, Singapore returned to being a British colony, with increasing levels of self-government being granted, culminating in Singapore's merger with the Federation of Malaya to form Malaysia in 1963. However, social unrest and disputes between Singapore's ruling People's Action Party and Malaysia's Alliance Party resulted in Singapore's expulsion from Malaysia. Singapore became an independent republic on 9 August 1965. Due to their colonial past, the country inherited the basic democratic institutions of the British political traditions.⁵⁶ And yet the introduction of elections and representative institutions did not produce widespread sense of “democracy”. The main political party dominating the arena at that time until today is the People’s Action Party (PAP). Despite the criticism about Singapore being an authoritarian state and the harsh draconian laws that citizens are subjected to, it is undeniable that Singapore’s success story goes beyond the growth of their GDP.

Sen points to Singapore as an example of a society that he claims to be antithetical to his ideal framework⁵⁷: Singapore is among the countries who prioritised economic growth at the expense of political liberty and civil rights. Singapore is an empirical example of a country that, in Sen’s view, does not have an sufficient level of political freedoms but seems to have achieved other substantive freedoms. So how come Singapore is able to achieve this? I reason that it is because of a strong community spirit and a de-emphasis on an individualistic mindset. The example of Singapore shows some ways that the arguments in chapter 2 may be applied in practice. This is not to say that Singapore is a perfect model of government, but perhaps we can learn from Singapore that there plausibly exists an alternative of some informal (non-legal) mechanism that

⁵⁶ Means, Gordon P. “Soft Authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore.” *Democracy in East Asia*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 96–112., pg 97

⁵⁷ Sen, pg 147

functions in place of the things that Sen deems exclusive to the constructive and instrumental roles of political freedoms.

In this section, we will investigate whether Singapore has actually secured a reasonable amount out of the 10 Central Human Capabilities checklist. Through this investigation, we delve into the question of what is truly the point of government, reassess whether the foundations of liberal democracy is truly superior to other alternative forms of political ideology, and finally, assess whether Singapore proves itself as a sufficiently valid empirical counterpoint to Sen's framework.

THE PURPOSE OF GOVERNMENT

Recalling, as Sen laid out, that the purpose of a government is to lead a society towards securing substantive freedoms, and thus achieve development. Although Sen acquiesced that Singapore has “an admirable record in fostering intercommunity amity and friendly coexistence,”⁵⁸ he maintains that it is problematic that they severely lack basic civil and political rights. While it is definitely true that Singapore is not beyond reproach, it is worth exploring the rationale behind Singapore's philosophy of governance and consider their view of freedom.

Former politician aligned with the Singaporean People's Action Party, Calvin Cheng, wrote that “freedom is being able to walk on the streets unmolested in the wee hours in the morning, to be able to leave one's door open and not fear that one would be burgled. Freedom is the woman who can ride buses and trains alone; freedom is not having to avoid certain subway stations after night falls.”⁵⁹ Contrasting their experience with the West, the general sentiment among Singaporeans maintains that they are living in a more civilised society whose individual freedoms are enhanced because of the so-

⁵⁸ Sen, pg 232

⁵⁹ Cheng, Calvin. “The West Has It Totally Wrong on Lee Kuan Yew.” *The Independent*, Independent Digital News and Media, 26 Mar. 2015, www.independent.co.uk/voices/comment/the-west-has-it-totally-wrong-on-lee-kuan-yew-10135641.html.

called “draconian laws.” Singaporeans generally do not feel oppressed by their government.

In a conversation with Fareed Zakaria, Lee Kuan Yew said that in the East, “the main object [of a governmental system] is to have *a well-ordered society* so that everybody can have *maximum enjoyment of his freedoms*.”⁶⁰ Substantially, LKY’s claim echoes those of Sen’s central thesis: the success of a society should be evaluated primarily by these substantive freedoms.

In an attempt to better illuminate this discussion, we need to take a look at a *holistic* picture of substantive freedoms Singapore enjoys. At the same time, we need to understand the country’s justification for their different prioritisation of values, which seems to not put political liberties at the forefront of “freedoms” valued.

1. *Life: Being able to live a complete and satisfying life into old age. Not having life cut short or being made such that it hardly seems worth living.*

The life expectancy of Singaporeans is among the highest in the world at 81.4 and 85.7 for men and women respectively in 2019, according to the latest report released by The Singapore Public Sector Outcomes Review.⁶¹ Relatedly, Singapore has a reputation for being one of the safest cities in the world. Violent crime is rare – as of 2017, its intentional homicide rate was just 0.7 per 100 thousand population⁶². One reason for this could be the harsh penalties for offenders, as well as a strict ban on weapons for those not in law enforcement. Singapore still carries out capital punishment for crimes such as

⁶⁰ Zakaria, Fareed, and Lee Kuan Yew. “Culture Is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew.” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 73, no. 2, 1994, p. 109., doi:10.2307/20045923.

⁶¹ “Singaporeans' Life Expectancy among Highest in the World: Public Sector Report.” *Channel News Asia*, 26 Nov. 2020, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/public-sector-report-life-expectancy-spor-covid-19-13643488.

⁶² Hirschmann, R. “Singapore: Intentional Homicide Rates.” Statista, 25 Sept. 2020, www.statista.com/statistics/677534/intentional-homicide-rates-singapore/.

murder and the illegal possession of firearms carry the death penalty⁶³. The most common type of crimes committed in Singapore are mostly commercial crimes, mostly scams and fraud⁶⁴. Although these cases have increased in the past year, the Singapore Ministry of Home Affairs reasoned that this most likely due to the increased reliance on internet activity because of the pandemic⁶⁵. In general, cases of murder or violence (resulting in the victim being severely injured) are rather low: In 2018, the homicide rate for Singapore was 0.2 cases per 100,000 populations, which had fallen gradually from 1 case per 100,000 populations in 1999.

2. *Bodily Health: Living with good health, and not in a state where ill health seriously affects the quality of life. Having access to medical help as needed. To have good food and be able to exercise in ways that sustain health.*

According to the same The Singapore Public Sector Outcomes Review as above, the health adjusted life expectancy at birth for Singaporeans is also one of the highest in the world. Measuring the number of years a person is expected to live in good health, the expectancy is 72.6 for men and 75.8 for women in 2017⁶⁶.

Singapore's healthcare system frequently ranks among the best in the world, coming in 6th back in 2000⁶⁷. More recently in 2019, the United Nations ranked them number one out of 188 nations in the United Nations' health goal rankings⁶⁸. Singapore's

⁶³ Hirschmann, R. "Singapore: Judicial Executions Numbers by Crime Committed 2020." *Statista*, 17 Mar. 2021, www.statista.com/statistics/961037/number-of-capital-executions-by-crime-committee-singapore/.

⁶⁴ "Singapore's Crime Rate up in 2020 amid Rise in Scam Cases." *CNA*, 7 Feb. 2021, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/mha-scam-cases-increase-2020-physical-crime-decrease-accidents-14096118.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*

⁶⁶ "Singaporeans' Life Expectancy among Highest in the World: Public Sector Report."

⁶⁷ "World Health Organization Assesses the World's Health Systems." *World Health Organization*, World Health Organization, 7 Feb. 2000, www.who.int/news/item/07-02-2000-world-health-organization-assesses-the-world's-health-systems#:~:text=Singapore%20is%20ranked%206th%20%2C%20the,in%20the%20top%2010%20countries.

⁶⁸ Fullman, Nancy, et al. "Measuring Progress and Projecting Attainment on the Basis of Past Trends of the Health-Related Sustainable Development Goals in 188 Countries: an Analysis from the Global Burden of Disease Study 2016." *The Lancet*, vol. 390, no. 10100, 2017, pp. 1423–1459., doi:10.1016/s0140-6736(17)32336-x.

healthcare system has a unique approach: All workers are mandated to put a percentage of their earnings into savings for the future. In 2012, workers up to age 50 had to put 20% of their wages into these accounts, matched by another 16% of wages from their employer.⁶⁹ The funds from these accounts may be spent on healthcare, housing, education, and insurance, with part of this being contributed by their employers⁷⁰. Day-to-day healthcare services are relatively affordable in Singapore. A routine check-up with a General Practitioner plus (generic) medicine will likely cost you around S\$20-S\$30 while blood-work and x-ray will cost you around S\$50-S\$80⁷¹. Roughly 20% of primary health care is provided through the government polyclinics, while the remaining 80% is provided through some 2,000 private medical clinics⁷². Specialist consultation in a private clinic costs between S\$75 -S\$125⁷³.

3. *Bodily Integrity: Being able to go where you want to go. Being free from attack and abuse of any kind. Being able to satisfy healthy bodily needs.*

There is affordable and accessible public housing, with 80% of resident households living in Housing and Development Board flats, with 90% owning their own homes. According to Mercer's Quality of Living survey in 2016, Singapore has the highest quality of living in Asia-Pacific, with the highest rank in personal safety⁷⁴. A few statistics to illustrate how Singaporean people are generally "free from attacks and abuse" include:

⁶⁹ Healthcare Triage. "Healthcare in Singapore" *Youtube*, 17 Jun 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WtuXrrEZsAg>

⁷⁰ Haseltine, William A. *Affordable Excellence: The Singapore Healthcare Story*. Brookings Institution Press, 2013.

⁷¹ "Healthcare in Singapore." *GuideMeSingapore*, www.guidemesingapore.com/business-guides/immigration/get-to-know-singapore/healthcare-in-singapore#:~:text=Primary%20healthcare%20costs,around%20S%2450%2DS%2480.

⁷² *Ibid*

⁷³ *Ibid*

⁷⁴ Tay, Vivienne. "Singapore Tops Quality of Living Ranking and Personal Safety for Asia: Mercer Poll." *Business Times*, 13 Mar. 2019, www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/singapore-tops-quality-of-living-ranking-and-personal-safety-for-asia-mercere-poll.

Issue	Number of cases per 100,000 population
Assault ⁷⁵	7.6
Robbery ⁷⁶	1.3
Rape ⁷⁷	2.9
Burglary ⁷⁸	3.5
Private car theft ⁷⁹	2

It should be recognised though that cases of attacks and abuse do exist and are mostly found among domestic workers and their employers. Just earlier this year in February 2021, a 41-year-old housewife starved, tortured and ultimately killed her domestic worker from Myanmar⁸⁰. Gaiyathiri Murugayan, the wife of a policeman, pleaded guilty to 28 charges, the most serious being culpable homicide, for which prosecutors had sought the maximum sentence of life imprisonment⁸¹. The Ministry of Manpower launched a new initiative in April 2021 to “ensure employers are treating them right,” by conducting random visits to meet maids and employers at their homes and highlight safe working conditions as well as the channels through which maids can get help if they need it⁸².

⁷⁵ “Singapore Assault Rate, 2003-2020.” *Knoema*, knoema.com/atlas/Singapore/Assault-rate.

⁷⁶ “Singapore Robbery Rate, 2003-2020.” *Knoema*, knoema.com/atlas/Singapore/Robbery-rate.

⁷⁷ “Singapore Rape Rate, 2003-2020.” *Knoema*, knoema.com/atlas/Singapore/Rape-rate.

⁷⁸ “Singapore Burglary Rate, 2003-2020.” *Knoema*, knoema.com/atlas/Singapore/Burglary-rate.

⁷⁹ “Singapore Private car theft Rate, 2003-2020.” *Knoema*, knoema.com/atlas/Singapore/Private-car-theft-rate.

⁸⁰ Lum, Selina. “Cop's Wife Who Starved, Tortured Myanmar Maid to Death Makes Legal Moves to Avoid Life Imprisonment.” *The Straits Times*, 29 Apr. 2021, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/cops-wife-who-starved-tortured-myanmar-maid-to-her-death-makes-legal-moves-to.

⁸¹ *Ibid*

⁸² Menon, Malavika. “MOM Starts House Visit Scheme to Ensure Welfare of Maids.” *The Straits Times*, 26 Apr. 2021, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mom-starts-house-visit-scheme-to-ensure-welfare-of-maids.

Related to safely “being able to go where you want to go,” Singapore’s transportation infrastructure (like road paving quality, pedestrian walkways, illumination and signage) is relatively well-planned and maintained⁸³. As a result of the high cost of owning a personal vehicle and the government’s significant emphasis on promoting public transportation, Singapore offers a wide variety of publicly accessible forms of transit (i.e. bus, rail, taxi, and increasingly, ride-share services)⁸⁴. At least half of Singapore’s population rides public transportation, with about 5.4 million trips made each day⁸⁵.

4. *Senses, Imagination and Thought: Being able to use all of one's senses. Being free to imagine, think and reason. Having the education that enables this to be done in a civilized, human way. Having access to cultural experiences, literature, art and so on and being able to produce one's own expressive work. Having freedom of expression, including political and religious.*

In May 2015, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) led a study that rated Singapore as having the best education system in the world.⁸⁶ In general, classroom instruction in Singapore is highly-scripted and uniform across all levels and subjects. Teaching is coherent, fit-for-purpose and pragmatic, drawing on a range of pedagogical traditions, both Eastern and Western.⁸⁷ However, despite their extremely high performance in standardised examinations across majority subjects, Singapore has also been criticised for rote learning techniques to deliver the learning material—relying heavily on textbooks, lots of worksheets and practice problem sets, etc... Since the late 1990s, Singaporeans have come to realise that “the pedagogical model that had propelled [them] to the top of international leagues table is not

⁸³ “Singapore 2020 Crime & Safety Report.” *OSAC*, 4 July 2020, www.osac.gov/Country/Singapore/Content/Detail/Report/7f0cc2bc-ba9b-4485-b58b-1861aa0f8fc3.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*

⁸⁵ *Ibid*

⁸⁶ Truax, Bruce Edwin Ayres. “Why Education in Singapore Is So Good.” *The Borgen Project*, Borgen Project https://Borgenproject.org/Wp-Content/Uploads/The_Borgen_Project_Logo_small.Jpg, 29 June 2020, Borgenproject.org/why-education-in-singapore-is-so-good/.

⁸⁷ Hogan, David. “Why Is Singapore's School System so Successful, and Is It a Model for the West?” *The Conversation*, 11 Feb. 2014, theconversation.com/why-is-singapores-school-system-so-successful-and-is-it-a-model-for-the-west-22917.

appropriately designed to prepare young people for the complex demands of globalisation and 21st knowledge economies.”⁸⁸ Specifically, there has been a paradigm shift to foster more creativity and the process of learning rather than the output (grades, awards, etc) . Singapore is now shifting to a more relaxed style at the primary and secondary levels, hoping to nurture people who can flexibly adapt themselves to a changing economy. The Education Ministry announced it will scrap their “three-path system” by 2024.⁸⁹ The “three-path system” is a sorting system that determines which secondary schools students would be able to attend depending on their Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) at the end of sixth grade. Instead, it will introduce a subject-based system where students can choose the levels of each subject based on their strengths.⁹⁰

Even though they are a small city-state with a young history, there is strong evidence of widespread public interest in arts and culture. According to the 2020 Singapore Cultural Statistics released in January 2021, attendance at arts and cultural events reached an all-time high of 15.6 million in 2019, surpassing 2018’s record of 13.6 million.⁹¹ Visitorship to national and private museums and heritage institutions reached an all-time high of close to 9.6 million in 2019.⁹² Singapore is also very encouraging of local artists in the fields of literature, visual arts (like painting, portraiture, photography, sculptures), architecture and music.⁹³

Regarding the ability to express religious and political views, the spaces *technically* exist. But in reality, the government maintains a tight scrutiny over the expression of views that oppose the government and Singaporean traditions. The “Speakers’ Corner” was established in September 2000 at Hong Lim Park to provide a

⁸⁸ Hogan, “Why Is Singapore’s School System so Successful, and Is It a Model for the West?”

⁸⁹ Lee, Justina. “Singapore Eases up on School Testing to Foster Creativity.” *Nikkei Asia*, Nikkei Asia, 13 Mar. 2019, asia.nikkei.com/Politics/Singapore-eases-up-on-school-testing-to-foster-creativity.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*

⁹¹ “Strong Public Interest in Singapore’s Arts and Culture in 2019.” *Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth*, 27 Jan. 2021, www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/press-statements/2021/jan/strong-public-interest-singapore-arts-and-culture-in-2019.

⁹² *Ibid*

⁹³ “Art & Culture.” *Visit Singapore*, www.visitsingapore.org/about-singapore/art-culture/.

place for Singaporeans to express themselves in various ways, such as delivering public speeches, holding peaceful demonstrations, exhibitions or performances.⁹⁴ However, one would have to apply to the National Parks Board and inform the government of when and what they intend to utilise the space. Furthermore, one would have to apply for a Police permit if the topic of the speech deals with matters that “may cause enmity or ill-will between different racial or religious groups.”⁹⁵

5. *Emotion: Being able to become attached to other things and people outside of ourselves, loving and caring for them. Experiencing grief, longing, gratitude and justified anger. Not being subject to fear and anxiety or blighted by trauma or neglect.*

Singaporeans are known to have a sense of community spirit that emphasises a lot on giving back to the community in the form of volunteering at nonprofits programming or social enterprises. Social initiatives range across a spectrum of fields, from providing aid to migrant workers, physical and cognitive therapy for the differently-abled, and stray animal rescue shelters...⁹⁶ Some examples of social enterprises in Singapore include: an angel investor group who focuses on investing in low-income women-led social enterprises, a delivery service that specifically caters health-conscious snacks to promote healthier living, and an independent disaster relief agency who works to uplift and empower communities through focus areas.⁹⁷ Additionally, people are also very proactive in sharing resources on how to find and involve oneself with these associations and initiatives.⁹⁸

⁹⁴ “Who Can Organise and Take Part in Events at Hong Lim Park?” *Ministry of Communications and Information Singapore*, 30 Apr. 2013, www.gov.sg/article/who-can-organise-and-take-part-in-events-at-hong-lim-park.

⁹⁵ *Ibid*

⁹⁶ “Charities and Organisations to Volunteer at in Singapore.” *Time Out Singapore*, 1 Mar. 2021, www.timeout.com/singapore/things-to-do/places-to-volunteer-at-in-singapore.

⁹⁷ “21 Social Enterprises and Non-Profits You Can Volunteer With in Singapore.” *The Everyday People of Singapore*, 9 Nov. 2018, www.everydaypeople.sg/social-enterprises-and-non-profits-you-can-volunteer-with-in-singapore/.

⁹⁸ Personal experience, which was reaffirmed during my experience researching for this topic and discovering a number of posts that list out all these different opportunities.

Among the key facets of Singapore’s development as a city-state in the 21st century is their commitment to urban governance, specifically with regards to balancing the needs of life, work and play.⁹⁹ In general, Singapore is perceived to have a relatively harmonious multicultural society. More recently, Singapore’s Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, launched “Our SG Heritage Plan”, a masterplan for Singapore’s heritage and museum sector with the intention of promoting “placemaking” through arts and culture.¹⁰⁰ Placemaking refers to the concept and process of inspiring people to collectively reimagine and reinvent public spaces within their community.¹⁰¹ The goal is to strengthen the connection between people and the places they share, and encourage a collaborative process by which members of a particular community empathise and relate to the physical, cultural, and social identities that define a place and its ongoing evolution.¹⁰² Singapore’s goals for this place-making masterplan is to tap into their “multicultural identity and rich history [...] to ensure that our tangible heritage continues to resonate with our people, both as historical markers and as living everyday spaces.”¹⁰³

Although it might be worth pointing out that some Singaporeans think the topic of racial harmony and multicultural cohesion “feels sanitised.”¹⁰⁴ because the various ethnic groups in Singapore (namely the Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) were never “possessors” of their own ethnic discourse.¹⁰⁵ User @patcheezie (pen name Bella) on Medium wrote that Singapore’s claims of multiculturalism is “arguably a form of ‘fictive ethnicity’” which is “the creation of a master narrative by the state that represents different ethnic groups in the nation’s past, present and future, as if they are a natural and

⁹⁹ Daniel, Rosa. “Reimagining Singapore: Placemaking through Arts and Culture.” *Civil Service College Singapore*, 8 July 2018, www.csc.gov.sg/articles/reimagining-singapore-placemaking-through-arts-and-culture.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid

¹⁰¹ “What Is Placemaking?” *Project for Public Spaces*, 2007, www.pps.org/article/what-is-placemaking.

¹⁰² Ibid

¹⁰³ Daniel, “Reimagining Singapore: Placemaking through Arts and Culture.”

¹⁰⁴ Bella. “The Myth of Multiculturalism in Singapore.” *Medium*, 3 June 2017, medium.com/@patcheezie/the-myth-of-multiculturalism-in-singapore-d0712706db4.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid

continuous community.”¹⁰⁶ She argues that the PAP enshrined and institutionalised this ideal to frame Singapore’s multiculturalism as an “organic, pre-mark of Singapore, even though it was state initiated.”¹⁰⁷ And yet even today, the PAP continues to perpetuate this myth of multiculturalism through codified policies, structuring them along racial lines.¹⁰⁸

6. *Practical Reason: Being able to consider and develop understanding of good and evil, and to think critically about the world and one’s own place in it. Being able to live with one’s conscience.*

Ever since their pivot away from traditional rote-learning education, Singapore has also channeled their strive for excellence in areas of interdisciplinary, global-minded exploration and learning. One concrete example of a museum that exemplifies the integration of critical and creative thinking about various topics is the Singapore ArtScience Museum. The museum, opened back in February 2011, features major exhibitions that blend art, science, culture and technology. What makes this museum unique are the immersive exhibits and the interactive installations that present very pertinent topics for people to engage with as they wander around the museum. The “Future World: Where Art Meets Science” exhibition produced by teamLab “aims to push the walls around our ideas of how one is supposed to experience art, while also re-imagining the way we understand and engage with our natural environment.”¹⁰⁹ The installations for this exhibition utilises computer graphics and touch sensors displaying virtual murals of blooming flowers and sounds that disappear when the viewer touches the surrounding space on the wall. ArtScience museum also hosts workshops, speaker events and limited campaigns in partnership with various social, academic and even entertainment organisations. Some of their examples include the launch event for Clean4Change, an initiative by Alliance to End Plastic Waste, aims to improve people's

¹⁰⁶ Ibid

¹⁰⁷ Ibid

¹⁰⁸ Ibid

¹⁰⁹ Nair, Shraddha. “ArtScience Museum in Singapore Adds New Works to 'Future World' by TeamLab.” *STIRworld*, STIRworld.com, 16 Sept. 2020, www.stirworld.com/see-features-artscience-museum-in-singapore-adds-new-works-to-future-world-by-teamlab.

knowledge of recycling and encourage community clean-up efforts.¹¹⁰ ArtScience museum integrated these partnerships into some of their exhibit installations, like the “Museo Aero Solar” by Tomás Saraceno as part of their “Floating Utopias” exhibition. The Museo Aero Solar is a solar sustainability themed gallery, meant to emulate a “workspace” for visitors to make their own contribution to the piece. Visitors cut up used plastic bags to add onto giant reels of used bags, which will then be put together into a huge patchwork balloon that’ll be solar-powered and launched by the end of the exhibition.¹¹¹ As mentioned earlier, the museum also brings in exhibits and installations that address a wide range of topics, including pop culture. ArtScience Museum will be hosting the “Star Wars Identities: The Exhibition” during the first semester of 2021.

7. *Affiliation: Being able to associate with others, living with them and acting for them. Showing concern for people in general and interacting with others. Having sympathy and compassion, acting to help people. Seeking justice and making things right. Protecting others and the rights of people, including freedom of speech and freedom from fear.*

This first half of this point echoes that of point 5, but to add another very relevant example of Singaporeans showing care and empathy towards members of their community is their collective response to the COVID-19 pandemic. “[Singaporeans] have seen residents placing hand sanitisers in lifts to share with neighbours, individuals donating their S\$600 Solidarity Payments to those who need it more, and groups coming together to appreciate front-line workers and helping the vulnerable in society.”¹¹² Grassroots organisations took a leading role in initiating social programs that spread

¹¹⁰ Goh, Timothy. “New Programme Aims to Spur Efforts Here to End Plastic Waste.” *The Straits Times*, 20 Apr. 2021, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/environment/new-programme-aims-to-spur-efforts-here-to-end-plastic-waste.

¹¹¹ Personal experience, but also from Teo, Jasmine. “Giant Inflatables At ArtScience Museum's 'Floating Utopias' Exhibition - And The Fascinating Stories Behind Them.” *TODAYonline*, 29 May 2019, www.todayonline.com/8days/seeanddo/thingstodo/giant-inflatables-artscience-museums-floating-utopias-exhibition-and.

¹¹² Wan, William. “Commentary: COVID-19 Has Shown That We Can Be Gracious. How Do We Make It Last?” *CNA*, 6 June 2020, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/covid-19-singapore-gracious-society-kindess-ground-up-12808722.

kindness and support. An example is “Kampung Kakis”, a support system network initiated by a young COVID-19 survivor who had a first-hand view of how elderly patients suffered in isolation.¹¹³ The program matches needy residents with neighbours to provide assistance and a support network.¹¹⁴ Another initiative involves recruiting volunteer drivers to ferry healthcare professionals to and from their workplaces.¹¹⁵

Following up on point 4 above, even within the private lives of Singaporeans, the government is willing to pursue legal action to stifle dissenting opinions. Singaporean Leong Sze Hian was sued and lost a lawsuit filed by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (LHL) for merely sharing a news story on Facebook.¹¹⁶ The article in question was published by Malaysian website *The Coverage* in November 2018, and falsely alleged that Lee was involved in financial fraud and working in cahoots with former Malaysian prime minister Najib Razak to launder funds in the multi-billion dollar 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal. PM LHL sued Leong for libel “in his capacity as a private citizen” in order to “protect his reputation and integrity against the accusations made.”¹¹⁷ It seems ridiculous that the court ruled against Leong, stating that he had “‘published’ the article by merely sharing it”.¹¹⁸ Another example that is more actively political in nature is the Jolovan Wham, a civil rights activist who has made a name for himself in recent years drawing attention to the issue of freedom of speech (or rather, the lack of it) in Singapore.¹¹⁹ Singapore’s government requires a police permit for any assembly in a public place linked to a cause or a demonstration of a view, defending these public assembly laws on grounds of upholding social order and safety.¹²⁰

¹¹³ Ibid

¹¹⁴ Ibid

¹¹⁵ Ibid

¹¹⁶ Bowie, Nile. “Singaporeans Standing up to Lee's Libel Lawfare.” *Asia Times*, 10 Apr. 2021, asiatimes.com/2021/04/singaporeans-standing-up-to-lees-libel-lawfare/.

¹¹⁷ Ibid

¹¹⁸ Ibid

¹¹⁹ Jha, Preeti. “Singapore: Jolovan Wham Charged for Holding up a Smiley Face Sign.” *BBC News*, BBC, 27 Nov. 2020, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55068007.

¹²⁰ Ibid

8. *Other Species: Being able to live with the full range of creatures and plants that inhabit the world around us. To be able to enjoy nature and appreciate its beauty.*

With around 90 per cent of households in Singapore living within a 10-minute walk from a park, Singapore is among one of the world's greenest and most liveable cities¹²¹. 70% of households are also within a 10-minute walk from a train station.¹²² Despite being located on the equator, Singapore's lush greenery keeps the city relatively cool. Most famously, there is Singapore's Botanical Gardens, but there are at least 15 other parks, nature reserves and natural green spaces around the little island. The pockets of natural landmarks around Singapore include: Coney Island, Tampines Eco Green, the Kranji Marshes, Sungei Buloh Nature Park, and Bukit Timah Nature Reserve. Aside from these nature spots, there is also a push to integrate natural elements inside buildings, such as Changi airport's natural attractions within the airport, the Changi Jewel mall, and Gardens by the Bay at Marina Bay Sands. One might object and say that these are artificial initiatives, but for Singapore's geographical size, I say that it is commendable how they continuously attempt to integrate the natural environment into different avenues in the country.

9. *Play: Being able to laugh, play games and generally have fun. Not having one's enjoyment and recreation criticized or prevented.*

Singaporeans generally do not believe in "the talent myth" (which states that some people are naturally more talented than others). This means that they do not see a reason for a child to underperform and "tiger parents" tend to exact very strict, tough love on their children to perform in school. This cycle is perpetuated into adulthood and here we see the "ugly side" of Singapore's highly competitive meritocratic culture: stress and burnout is extremely common among youths and adults alike. Of course, this is not to say that Singaporeans are not happy in general, but oftentimes the work-life balance tips on the side of "work". But according to a Cigna 360 Well-Being Survey done in 2019, 92%

¹²¹ Tay, "Singapore Tops Quality of Living Ranking and Personal Safety for Asia: Mercer Poll."

¹²² Ibid

of working Singaporeans are stressed, which is 8% higher than the global average.¹²³ Another study conducted by healthcare consultancy firm Asia Care Group has found that “Singapore spends about US\$2.3 billion (S\$3.1 billion), or 18%, of its total healthcare expenditure on stress-related illnesses annually.”¹²⁴ In 2017, the OECD conducted their triennial test (called the Programme for International Student Assessment, or PISA for short) that tried to study the connection between wellbeing and achievement. The 5,825 Singaporean students who were revealed that most were anxious about tests and grades.¹²⁵ Survey results indicated that their anxiety levels were significantly higher than the OECD average for most questions on the survey: 66% of students across all OECD countries said they were worried about poor grades at school, but among Singapore students, it was 86%.¹²⁶ National Institute of Education don Jason Tan said the finding on high anxiety levels is “not out of step with a school system that uses exams to channel students into different secondary and post-secondary pathways.”¹²⁷ However, it is worth noting that the Ministry of Education has introduced changes in the national education system to reduce stress and anxiety among students, most notably being the revised PSLE scoring and secondary-school cut-off system¹²⁸ (although to mixed responses from the public)¹²⁹.

Exploring a different facet of “play” and enjoyment in Singapore, let us consider the infamous example of Singapore’s chewing gum ban, which was instituted as early as

¹²³ Makundi, Wendy. “Are You Part of the 92%? Singapore's Stress Report.” *Lifeskills Institute*, 29 Jan. 2021, lifeskillsinstitute.sg/are-you-part-of-the-92-singapore-stress-report/.

¹²⁴ Goh, Timothy. “Singapore Spends \$3.1 Billion on Stress-Related Illnesses Annually: Study.” *The Straits Times*, 21 Nov. 2019, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/health/singapore-spends-31-billion-on-stress-related-illnesses-annually-study.

¹²⁵ Davie, Sandra. “Singapore Students Suffer from High Levels of Anxiety: Study.” *The Straits Times*, 19 Aug. 2017, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/education/spore-students-suffer-from-high-levels-of-anxiety-study

¹²⁶ Ibid

¹²⁷ Ibid

¹²⁸ Tseng, Cherie. “Commentary: New PSLE Scoring, Cut-off Points for Secondary School Are Stressful for Parents All the Same.” *CNA*, 30 Apr. 2021, www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/new-psle-scoring-cut-off-points-change-secondary-school-14717162.

¹²⁹ “Online Users Slam MOE's New PSLE Scoring System; Call It Unfair and ‘Worst System.’” *The Online Citizen Asia*, 28 Apr. 2021, www.theonlinecitizen.com/2021/04/28/online-users-slam-moes-new-psle-scoring-system-call-it-unfair-and-worst-system/.

1992. This ban “remains one of the best-known aspects of life in Singapore.”¹³⁰ Other punishable everyday actions include littering, graffiti, jaywalking, spitting, expelling “mucus from the nose” and urinating anywhere but in a toilet.¹³¹ If it is a public toilet, you are legally required to flush it.¹³² On the practical level, this is part of the broader effort to uphold high standards of public hygiene and cleanliness. Former PM Lee’s rationale was that chewing gum is a trivial price to pay for clean, comfortable living in public areas. To clarify, the ban was placed on the sale and importation of chewing gum, not necessarily the possession and consumption of it.¹³³ Outsiders may say that this is ridiculous. But the effect of the original ban was immediate—within a few months, chewing gum more or less disappeared from Singapore and public areas experienced tremendous improvements: flattened clots vanished from pavements, train doors went about their business unimpeded since the sensors on their doors were not covered by gum.¹³⁴ An associate professor of law at Singapore Management University, Eugene Tan, said that “[Singaporeans] joke about these policies... we describe Singapore as a ‘fine city’—a tongue-in-cheek reference to the many fines that can be imposed for various types of social misconduct.”¹³⁵ But personally, he does not miss chewing gum, saying that “the footpaths look a lot nicer without the ugly gum marks.”¹³⁶ A Singaporean student studying in London, Pei-yi Yu, also sees advantages in going gum-free, recounting that he “has often had the unpleasant experience of getting my body parts into contact with both fresh and stale chewing gum in lecture theatres and classrooms across the UK.”¹³⁷

¹³⁰ Metz, Elle. “Why Singapore Banned Chewing Gum.” *BBC News*, BBC, 28 Mar. 2015, www.bbc.com/news/magazine-32090420.

¹³¹ Ibid

¹³² Ibid

¹³³ Benedictus, Leo. “Gum Control: How Lee Kuan Yew Kept Chewing Gum off Singapore's Streets.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, 23 Mar. 2015, www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2015/mar/23/gum-control-how-lee-kuan-yew-kept-chewing-gum-off-singapores-streets.

¹³⁴ Ibid

¹³⁵ Metz, “Why Singapore Banned Chewing Gum.”

¹³⁶ Ibid

¹³⁷ Ibid

The concept here is not just about the chewing gum itself, on a more cultural level, Lee aimed to cultivate a sense of “good public behaviour” in his aim to build the “perfect Singapore.”¹³⁸ Some other aspects of entertainment and private enjoyment that are banned include recreational fireworks (during non-festival occasions) on the basis of minimising public hazard.¹³⁹

10. Control Over One’s Environment: (A) Political: Being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one’s life; having the right of political participation, protections of free speech and association. (B) Material: Being able to hold property (both land and movable goods), and having property rights on an equal basis with others; having the right to seek employment on an equal basis with others; having the freedom from unwarranted search and seizure. In work, being able to work as a human being, exercising practical reason, and entering into meaningful relationships of mutual recognition with other workers.

(B) To expound a little more on point 3 about house-ownership, there is a distinction between house ownership and land ownership. Due to Singapore’s historical land acquisition act back in 1967¹⁴⁰, all land ultimately belongs to the state, so there are restrictions to the terms and conditions of “owning land” or rather, leasing it for 99 years¹⁴¹.

Regarding equity in property rights and employment opportunities, Singapore does not have a framework of dedicated anti-discrimination legislation¹⁴². However, they do have the “Tripartite Guidelines on Fair Employment Practices” which applies to employment practices such as recruitment and hiring, performance management, and

¹³⁸ Ibid

¹³⁹ Mawi, Sadali. “10 Surprising Things That Are Completely Banned in Singapore.” *Culture Trip*, The Culture Trip, 17 Aug. 2017, theculturetrip.com/asia/singapore/articles/10-things-that-have-been-banned-in-singapore/.

¹⁴⁰ “Land Acquisition Act 1967.” *Eresources.nlb.gov.sg*, 2013, eresources.nlb.gov.sg/history/events/1f669eff-bc82-49d1-a27c-2624e4cab8c6.

¹⁴¹ “Land Ownership in Singapore - Here Is Everything You Need to Know.” *Property Blog Singapore - Stacked Homes*, 18 May 2020, stackedhomes.com/editorial/land-ownership-in-singapore/#gs.zok2ya.

¹⁴² Mitra, Karen, and Dawn Tan. “Anti-Discrimination Requirements for Recruiters in Singapore.” *HRD Asia*, HRD Asia, 23 Sept. 2020, www.hcamag.com/asia/specialisation/employment-law/anti-discrimination-requirements-for-recruiters-in-singapore/234250.

dismissals. Although there is a strong culture of meritocracy in Singapore, there does exist some racist undertones in society (as you may have gathered from the above points). Although the Ministry of Manpower has introduced and emphasised anti-discriminatory policies, most recently in the form of a licensing condition to make clear the obligations of agencies to uphold fair employment practices¹⁴³, despite so, it is unclear how these practices are actually implemented in the workplace.

(A) From the examples interspersed throughout the paper, it seems clear enough that Singaporeans only have formal democratic political freedoms in writing, and not so much in practice. This is, after all, the main point of contention we are examining.

Now that we have a better picture of Singaporean society, let us move into an analysis of their emphasis on the community as opposed to the individual.

ADOPTING A COMMUNITARIAN EMPHASIS

Earlier we made the case of why Sen's "individualist" assumption was faulty on the basis of the process of identity-formation necessitating communal associations. Further we also explained how Anderson's argument frames Marx's debunking of the construct "individuality" in the context of rebutting Sen's liberalist perspective. Let us investigate how Anderson's communal view of identity formation plays out empirically in a society like Singapore.

On the account of being part of a society, we cannot think of ourselves as "egoistic" individuals in society. Thus, we are not as "free" as we'd like to think of ourselves. In liberalism, the individual stands at the centre of liberalism. Individuals should be able to freely associate with others as well as be the rational judge of their own interests and welfare. However, being part of a political society mandates interaction

¹⁴³ Seow, Joanna. "New Licensing Conditions for Employment Agencies from Oct 1 to Ensure They Consider Singaporeans Fairly." *The Straits Times*, 22 June 2020, www.straitstimes.com/singapore/manpower/new-licensing-conditions-for-employment-agencies-from-oct-1-to-ensure-they.

amongst the individuals who are part of it. Yet formulations about liberal democracy tend to not include the discussion of the nature of these very social elements. At both individual and group levels, the state is supposedly a neutral body to maintain the rules of social transactions¹⁴⁴. If we continue to conceive of social relations as a secondary factor in the discussion of political societies, it would be challenging to develop concepts of “collective interest” and “collective responsibility” in the social and political spheres.

Isaiah Berlin, in his essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, characterised the fundamental human nature as one being a social creature. Berlin writes that “[I] am a social being in a deeper sense than that of interaction with others. [...] perhaps all of my ideas about myself, in particular my sense of my own moral and social identity, are intelligible only in terms of the social network in which I am an element.”¹⁴⁵ The individual is never just the individual. Communal links of identity are much more intricate and much more instrumental in cultivating each person’s personhood. “My individual self is not something which I can detach from my relationship with others.” The communal view of identity formation we explored in chapter 2 provides the framework that justifies this reasoning.

A discussion on fundamental natural rights, duties and goals of development would be incomplete without including the social, relational aspect of the matter. It is not enough to think about our natural duties towards others as detached persons, nor would it be possible to grasp a holistic view of the Central Human Capabilities developmental goals without recognising these intricate relationships. There is a layer of duties and obligations that we have towards particular groups of people—given, to varying degrees—in virtue of being related to them in some way. Some of these “duties” (or

¹⁴⁴ Sen, pg 18

¹⁴⁵ Berlin, Isaiah, “Two Concepts of Liberty.” *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997., pg 226

value-ends, if you'd like to call them) are more fundamental than civic and moral considerations of natural and voluntary duties. Recognising that being part of a social unit cultivates an understanding that you are an agent extending *from* this unit, rather than your agency being extended *to* obligations in that unit. The directionality should be understood as group ties being fundamentally part of the individual rather than individual absorbing these ties to the group into their identity. Internalising values and interests of different communities as part of the "self" develops an understanding of certain duties and expectations to uphold. As such, there would inevitably be some further restrictions on the individual's liberty that they must internalize in accordance with the society they are part of.

But hold on, how does this argument differ from the social contract? You give up some of your freedoms as being part of a society, to allow the government to govern over you and the rest of society. True, but the social contract is still based on an *individualistic* view of persons in a contract with each other. Here we are explaining the ties that exist among the constituents of society themselves on a more basic level, even prior to a discussion of fundamental rights qua persons. This proposal is asking to reconsider the conception of an individual's relationship with the other members of that society.

Central to communitarianism is the idea that collective interests are placed above individual ones. Sure, perhaps this way of thinking is more subconscious and less explicit in some societies more than others. Logically, what constitutes the "collective interest" should be based on some form of "consensus." But how would such aggregation be achieved if the society, like Singapore, lacked a certain threshold of Sen's political freedoms? Perhaps an understanding of what these common interests are could stem from

some socially entrenched national identity or values. Singapore's national ideology was articulated in a list of "five shared values" that the PAP proclaimed in 1991¹⁴⁶:

1. Nation before community and society above self;
2. Family as the basic unit of society;
3. Community support and respect for the individual;
4. Consensus not conflict;
5. Racial and religious harmony

While I recognise there are some problematic implications of each of these values listed, the list in itself is sufficient to indicate the undercurrents of the Singaporean attitude toward social relations. In the US where individualism takes front-and-center stage, almost like herding cats. Singapore, on the other hand, is more like an ant colony: each member understands the general principles guiding their community and are thus able to move more cohesively, and the ability to maintain order in society. This prioritization of communal values also lends insight into the "trustee" form of governance that Singaporeans have come around to accept.

THE "TRUSTEE" MODEL OF GOOD GOVERNANCE

For this section, whenever I refer to "Singapore", I am referring to the cabinet of government specifically the one headed by Founding Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew and his successor. I am not claiming that these views are entirely accepted by every citizen of Singaporean society.

Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, successor to PM LKY who served from 1990 to 2004, explained how in Singapore, the government acts more like a "trustee" of the country: "as a custodian of the people's welfare, it exercises independent judgement on what is in the long-term interests of the people and acts on that basis."¹⁴⁷ Singapore's

¹⁴⁶ Government of Singapore, *The Next Lap* (Singapore: Times Editions, 1991)

¹⁴⁷ During a "famous dictum in Williamstown"

understanding of “good governance,” he articulated, is built on three main pillars: democratic accountability, long-term orientation and social justice.¹⁴⁸

Lee’s Singapore does not disagree with Sen’s vision that “development” is the desired end goal of society¹⁴⁹. In fact, their understanding of a good government echoes those of Sen’s view, stating that a government must perform well along three dimensions:

1. Political dimension: establishing objectives and the just exercise of leadership based on high standards of integrity. The existence of a clearly formulated and transparent process for establishing the legitimacy of government.
2. Institutional dimension: pertains to the “managerial capacity” of the government. Specifically referring to the role played by responsive and competent public authorities in establishing the economic environment through growth-promoting policies and determining the distribution of assets and benefits among society. This also includes the establishment of systems or organisations of problem solving and conflict resolution, which requires sustainable institutional channels and an effective framework for [relevant groups] to pursue viable solution options.
3. Functional dimension: pertains to the linkage between elements of good governance and “economic growth,” which really refers to other substantive goods in society. This includes clear laws that are predictably enforced in order to ensure the safety and security of our citizens, as well as the provision of social and infrastructure services both for socio-economic development and for industrial capacity.¹⁵⁰

Although different in categorisation and terminology, these three dimensions somewhat resemble Sen’s concept of instrumental freedoms. So what is Singapore’s rationale for adopting this “guardian state” (trusteeship) philosophy and what is their justification that it sufficiently functions the roles that democratic political freedom supposedly secures?

Sebastian, Leonard. “THE LOGIC OF THE GUARDIAN STATE: Governance in Singapore's Development Experience.” *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1997, pp. 278–298., doi:10.1355/9789812306876-018. , pg 282

¹⁴⁸ Sebastian, pg 279

¹⁴⁹ Ibid

¹⁵⁰ Sebastian, pg 280

The sense of “trusteeship” is further reinforced and justified on the principle that a guardian state best ensures the political stability necessary for development and modernization.¹⁵¹ The PAP set forth a set of six principles of leadership to “develop the type of functional political society and system which would allow good leaders to emerge, function and implement sound policy.”¹⁵² The six principles are:

1. The need to institute an exemplary and competent government supported by an effective civil service
2. The need for unity in the core group of leaders
3. The need to enhance the leadership cohort through the nurturing of talent
4. The integrity of leadership must be unquestionable with complete accountability, transparency, openness and separateness between personal assets and public funds.
5. The need for leadership self-renewal, which is not enough to ensure the adequate replacement of old leaders but also to introduce new generations of leaders who are in touch with the issues facing a new generation of voters.
6. The need to go for results and not political correctness¹⁵³

These principles, taken together, boil down to two main development goals for the Singaporean people: education and civil society. Education in Singapore not only emphasises skill acquisition for gainful future employment, but also a cultural and moral development of the self.¹⁵⁴ Leaders need to identify with the needs and aspirations of the population, Lee said. Under the trusteeship model, since the ministers are guardians of the state, they are expected to make decisions that are intended to advance the public’s interest¹⁵⁵.

In theory, the promotion of government accountability and transparency is well and good. But the looming question is how to ensure that this “trusteeship model” would not degenerate into authoritarianism? Since elections and free speech seem to only be

¹⁵¹ Sebastian, pg 282

¹⁵² Ibid

¹⁵³ Sebastian, pg 282-285

¹⁵⁴ Sebastian, pg 291

¹⁵⁵ Sebastian, pg 283

“freedoms” *de jure* (it’s not really an open competitive election if there are no other viable alternative candidates because the government seems to stifle political discourse and prevent opposition political parties from developing and challenging them), can Singapore really claim that they have a functioning accountability mechanism?

Singapore believes that beyond legal political mechanisms, their layer of accountability measures lie in the socially-entrenched norms that come with this trusteeship model. There is a strong emphasis on the belief that “the government must govern and the leaders must lead from the front with a premium placed on personal ability and integrity.”¹⁵⁶ This communitarian-based value system engenders a high regard of trust and expectations of the government by the people.¹⁵⁷

Singapore’s story sheds light on how an informal social accountability system plays out in place of a formal legal procedure. Although empirical evidence (as we explored in the checklist of Singapore’s Central Human Capabilities) raises questions on these justifications, this trusteeship model remains a compelling model to consider as an alternative avenue to democratic political freedoms.

ADDRESSING CRITICISMS AGAINST SINGAPORE

As I have pointed out previously, Singapore is not by any means a perfect model of governance. The principles the PAP touts in theory may not actually be executed as promised, and there still remains overlooked loopholes in the system they promote.

Critics of Singapore see it as the sacrifice of civil liberties or the encroachment of several basic human rights. Singapore’s 2017 presidential elections evinces these claims. Former Speaker of Parliament Halimah Yacob has emerged victorious by default since

¹⁵⁶ Sebastian, pg 282

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

she was the only candidate running.¹⁵⁸ Singaporeans were upset that “meritocracy and electoral fairness have been eroded to fulfill perceived political goals.”¹⁵⁹ This happened because Singapore’s election department had decreed the presidency would be reserved for candidates from the Malay community this time. Halimah’s experience as house speaker automatically qualified her under the nomination rules. Of the four other applicants, two were not Malays and two were not given certificates of eligibility,¹⁶⁰ thus preventing them from running in the election.

PM Lee Hsien Loong said this was an opportunity for the government to “answer to social cohesion lay in creating a culture of meritocracy, rather than adopting policies of positive discrimination to boost the chances of advancement for Singapore’s Malay and Indian minorities.”¹⁶¹ A government report published in 2013 found Malays felt they were sometimes discriminated against and had limited prospects in some institutions, such as the armed forces. Although having a Malay president by itself is unlikely to resolve concerns over under-representation of minority groups in Singapore, analysts and advocates say it could help foster trust among communities.¹⁶² This attempt at managing ethnic conflict exemplifies a moment where Singaporean leaders restricted civil liberties in favour of promoting social cohesion and harmony. Sen may disagree with the Singaporean government’s actions, but it seemed that most Singaporeans seemed to resolve their disappointment rather quickly. Ultimately, this event did not really detract from their standard level of freedoms in the other aspects—the office of president is

¹⁵⁸ Han, Kirsten. “How Singapore Elected a President without a Vote.” *CNN*, Cable News Network, 12 Sept. 2017, www.cnn.com/2017/09/11/asia/singapore-race-presidential-election/index.html.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid*

¹⁶⁰ Ungku, Fathin, and Karishma Singh. “Malay Woman to Be Singapore President, Puts Minority Representation on Agenda.” *Reuters*, Thomson Reuters, 11 Sept. 2017, www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-election/malay-woman-to-be-singapore-president-puts-minority-representation-on-agenda-idUSKCN1BM0Y9.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid*.

¹⁶² *Ibid*

largely a ceremonial role in Singapore (although they still had power to veto some of the government's decisions, like fiscal matters relating to the country's reserves).

Additionally, even though Singapore does still have elections, there has not been a strong rivaling political party able to overtake the PAP's popularity. Can we really say that Singaporeans have a substantive freedom to determine who governs them, if there are no other viable parties/candidates? We've talked extensively about this particular facet of political freedoms being lacking in the country, but let us consider the alternative avenues available for Singaporeans to voice change, if not through direct political participation in the traditional notion of political freedoms? How exactly does the Singaporean government stay in tune with the evolving public interest if they suppress political participation? It is true that during the first two decades since independence, the Singapore government's engagement with its citizens largely consisted of disseminating information on development and policies.¹⁶³ In this initial phase, leadership from the government was strong, decisions about how to develop the nation were made and implemented swiftly, and social change was primarily driven through a top-down approach.¹⁶⁴ In order to achieve national agendas, the government needed to initiate mass social campaigns seeking cooperation from the people. As the country began to develop, the early 1990s saw the development of a "collective consciousness" amongst Singaporeans regarding social issues and the developmental trajectory of the nation.¹⁶⁵ Moreover, as the 21st century saw an increased interest in liberal ideas and "a global trend of consultative governance", the Singaporean public desired to play a more active role in the development of their nation.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ Nguyen, Hoa, and Julienne Chen. "Towards More Participatory Governance in Singapore." *Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities*, lkycic.sutd.edu.sg/blog/towards-participative-governance-singapore/.

¹⁶⁴ Teo, S E. "Planning Principles in Pre- and Post-Independence Singapore." *The Town Planning Review*, vol. 62, 1992, pp. 163–185.

¹⁶⁵ Nguyen, "Towards More Participatory Governance in Singapore."

¹⁶⁶ Paul, K., & Tan, A. S. S. "Democracy and the grassroots sector in Singapore". *Space and Polity*, vol 7(1), 2003, pp.3-20

The Singaporean government thus instituted avenues for groups and individuals to share their ideas and input on policies, social issues and the current state of development in the country. These initiatives include: REACH Singapore (a consultation platform that collects input from Singaporeans on policy and programmatic issues raised by governmental agencies, as well as enables civil servants to publicly respond to feedback); eCitizen Ideas! (an idea-generation platform for residents to contribute to questions and challenges posed by government agencies); Our Singapore Conversation (an engagement exercise in August 2012 that hosted various focus group discussions through a collaboration among different government agencies regarding topics that cut across all population segments).¹⁶⁷ But despite these various initiatives, there is often no clear understanding of how such voices will be given weight or factored into decision-making processes.¹⁶⁸ It still remains to be seen how the public input will be effectively incorporated into government planning and policymaking.

Another example that relates more on the individual level: in Singapore, there is a law that empowers the police to test a person's urine for drugs if he or she behaves in a suspicious manner. A positive result would subject them to rehabilitative treatment.¹⁶⁹ The West might see this as a paternalistic and unjustifiable violation of the right to privacy. But for Asians this may be considered the restriction imposed by this law as a legitimate trade-off for the value of individual health and public safety. One could say that the West has a more reactive approach to upholding rights—you have the right to do whatever you want until proven that you are a significant danger to yourself, or a danger to others, then that right will be taken away. But the East takes a more proactive attitude towards rights—your rights may be restricted on the grounds of preventing the possibility of harm to others when the state determines that it's warranted.

¹⁶⁷ Nguyen, "Towards More Participatory Governance in Singapore."

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Chan, Joseph "Asian Values and Human Rights: An Alternative View." *Democracy in East Asia*, The John Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 28–41., pg 32

A critical point of contention is the placement of the “family unit as the basic unit of society”. Such a perspective limits the power and autonomy of women. Families as an institution can be very oppressive and problematic since it has a traditional hierarchy that puts other members of the family in subordination to the breadwinner in the family. Typically, the breadwinners are the husbands and thus women are financially dependent on men. If this characteristic is part of what is supposed to be an alternative mechanism to achieve ordering of substantive freedoms in society, what kind of “consensus” are being made in society in the first place?

But another aspect for Sen to reconsider is that, perhaps there are cases when having a lack of democratic political freedoms can actually better secure other substantive freedoms in society. A very recent example is how different governments were able to manage the COVID-19 pandemic in their respective countries. Governments that were able to issue “authoritarian lockdowns” were better able to issue public health mandates that were more effective (ex: Singapore, China, Australia, Taiwan).

In closing, Singapore’s “trustee government model” is an alternative way to securing capabilities and achieving the instrumental and constructive role that Sen assigns to democratic political freedoms. It is obviously not a perfect model, as seen from the criticisms above, especially with regards to the very traditional sense of gender roles and hierarchies it subscribes to. But nevertheless, this model, done well, might just secure the very things Sen proposes. In fact, there might be something to be said about how the trustee model incorporates non-formal accountability mechanisms in building a cohesive society, that just might be stronger, and more effective than formal laws.

Future Work

One of the biggest criticisms against using Singapore as a counterexample of a successful Asian country is its country size. Any dot on a map of any average scale is larger than the entirety of Singapore. One could literally walk from traverse the country by foot, within 12-13 hours across the island (around 50 km)¹⁷⁰. Managing such a small country will undeniably be much easier than managing any other country in discussion (be it the USA, the UK, any country in the European continent or other East/Southeast Asian countries). Moreover, Singapore is such a young, small and multiracial country. It is difficult to trace their history of national culture and formulate a coherent intellectual tradition.¹⁷¹

Further lines of inquiry on this topic of development and governance would need to include exploring other case studies such as: a comparison of the development of an Asian country that is considered a democracy (like Japan) vs the development of a “Western democracy”; we would also have to delve into Singapore’s ideological trajectory from its soft authoritarianism history to communitarianism as well as the process of their cultural construction and national identity. A more arduous challenge might be a case study investigation of societies that are labelled as democracies or that have secured political freedoms but may still “fail” to secure other substantive freedoms. Of course, there are a number of confounding variables that contribute to why different countries prosper more holistically than others. Maybe we might do well to look beyond existing bodies of literature in the field of political philosophy (that has repeatedly talked about institutions, culture and values) and study alternative factors like geography and material resources, as touched upon by Acemoglu et al.

On a more interdisciplinary front, social science research might benefit from considering the Central Human Capabilities as a more holistic framing of the “quality of

¹⁷⁰ Anecdotal experience

¹⁷¹ Chan, pg 36

life” measures in countries. Currently I find that surveys and research surrounding these topics are either very narrow and vague (like a “happiness index”¹⁷²) or very broad and vague (like the ones presented by organisations like the United Nations).

Singapore’s “trustee” form of “democracy” may well just be a model that only suits Singapore—their unique development from the conditions of post-colonial soft authoritarianism legacies, the combined influences of traditions and cultures, and the particular ordering of values the nation chose are all specific to Singapore. The “litmus test” of all governments everywhere should not be adherence to a particular political theory or ideal, but whether they can govern effectively, fairly, and in a way that increases the general welfare of their society. Singapore is indeed a non-liberal, non-democratic example that secures Sen’s substantive freedoms. Despite her critics, the Singaporean model *is* justifiable on the communitarian values upon which their society fundamentally rests upon.

¹⁷² *The World Happiness Report*, worldhappiness.report/.

Conclusion

The exercise of philosophical inquiry is meant to deepen our thinking on existing literature and encourage the birth of multiple potential solutions to issues in society. Sometimes, to do so requires us to uproot certain long-standing assumptions to make way for novel considerations. In his book, Sen concluded by saying that “development is indeed a momentous engagement with freedom’s possibilities.”¹⁷³ Perhaps the possibilities include reorganising how we think about the relationship between the different ingredients of development.

This paper sought to contribute to the discussion of government systems and development by challenging existing individualistic assumptions about the role of political freedoms. I first laid out a view of development as authored by Amartya Sen. Under his conceptualisation of “democracy as freedom,” he explained why freedom is not only the primary ends of development, but also the principal means of achieving development. We characterised the goals of development (Sen’s substantive freedoms) as Martha Nussbaum’s 10 Central Human Capabilities. In order to achieve these capabilities, Sen introduced a list of five instrumental freedoms, among which he places special emphasis on political freedoms, which he claims as preeminent and absolutely foundational to securing all the other substantive freedoms. I took issue with this particular facet of his framework and then proceeded to explore rebuttals to the constructive and instrumental roles of democratic political freedoms.

I then argued that Sen’s conception of political freedoms has an “individualist assumption” that treats individuality as prior to any other communal relationship with other beings. Using Anderson’s work on identity formation, I show how the individual identity is more complex and requires communal interaction prior to the development of a sense of self. Complementing her work is that of the narrative conception of identity and Marx’s suspicion that the notion of the “individual” is an ideological construct that

¹⁷³ Sen, pg 298

prevents one from fully achieving liberation. This de-emphasis of the individual renders Sen's claims of necessity for the political freedoms less convincing than he claims.

After that, we addressed Sen's claim that democratic political freedom is actually intrinsically a universal value, which took us through a deliberation over the relationship between cultural values and democracy. Having explored Sen's counterclaims to the cultural critique, we find that his defense is lacking a comprehensive view of the factors involved in tracing the development of culture and values. After investigating colonial legacies and its continuing effects on different countries (including differences in geopolitical powers and material resources) as well as the trans-temporal evolution of cultures, it seems that the cultural debate is rather inconclusive and may not be a productive conversation to analyse further. However, this discussion about "culture" does link to the above arguments regarding a communal view of identity formation. Rather than distinguishing countries based on geographical east vs west cultural stereotypes, it is worth thinking about this sense of community spirit in different societies as giving reason to allow for alternative models of political governance and government accountability.

As such, we turn to Singapore, a case study of a country that does not have political freedoms but appears to have a high threshold of most other substantive freedom capabilities. We charted out empirical evidence of the country's fulfillment of Nussbaum's checklist to validate the above statement. Then we examined Singapore's philosophical justification behind their trustee model of governance. Their ethos of leadership accountability and transparency is rooted in socially-entrenched values rather than on formal, legal infrastructure. Although imperfect, there are useful aspects of Singapore's development experience that serve as a viable alternative model to Sen's model.

Development should be seen as a neutral term that does not prescribe a specific step-by-step guideline of one specific form of model. As we have seen throughout the discussion, the viability of transposing a model of governance depends on the differences

in geography, historical and cultural progression, as well as a country's contextual positionality in the world. Ultimately, the challenge of achieving "development" is not only for each country to wrestle with separately. Societies and political systems thus need to respond accordingly to address growing challenges arising from this very dynamic international landscape we are all a part of. And different countries, faced with their own unique mix of characteristics, may very well require different institutional arrangements to achieve their state of "development".

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