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Book Reviews

Barr, Michael and Zlatko Skrbiš (2008), *Constructing Singapore. Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press

One of the central tasks of postcolonial states was to build a nation where previously only subordinated colonies and subjects instead of sovereign states and citizens had existed. After gaining independence from colonial domination, new states had to undertake efforts to establish a new national imagination. It was necessary for them to make sense of a territorial entity that in most cases was formed purely by the interests of colonialism and that very often cut across existing ethnic, political and cultural boundaries. These colonies often threw societies together that had previously hardly been aware of each other. Such processes of imagining, inventing, and constructing a nation and its citizens with a common history, common traditions, and common identities were highly divergent. They may have been based upon a long and sometimes bloody popular movement for independence against ruling colonial and local elites, or they could have been the outcome of negotiations between local elites and the colonial power which aimed to ensure a smooth transition of power without too much change for those in power and those without it. Regardless, almost all newly independent states were faced with the multiple challenges of nation-building.

For many reasons, the city-state of Singapore is an extraordinary example of nation-building – not only because of its exceptional history but also because of its remarkable mode of governance. This is profoundly demonstrated by Michael D. Barr, a historian at Flinders University, and Zlatko Skrbiš, a sociologist at the University of Queensland, in their book *Constructing Singapore. Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project*. The authors argue that elitism and ethnicity have been at the core of Singapore's nation-building project, although both elements have undergone significant changes over the decades. Elitism relates to the role of elites and the idea of meritocracy, encompassing "a colorful fusion of romantic, primordialist, and technocratic elements". Ethnicity refers to the tensions between the ethnic and civic elements of identity engaged in the process of nation-building as well as the predominance of ethnic Chinese in the upper strata of the political and economic fields.

Within the context of Southeast Asian nationalisms, Singapore is often regarded as demonstrating a clear example of "civic" nationalism as contrasted to "ethnocultural" nationalism, such as that of Thailand or Burma.

But, as the authors point out, this is a misleading conceptualization as nation-building projects can be modern and secular at the same time as they are "working through agendas defined through the prisms of race and ethnicity". The authors argue that since the early 1980s Singapore's mode of nation-building has been moving away from a civic model towards an more "ethnic-cum-racial form". At the core of this nationalism is the Singaporean notion of *"Chinese ethnicity"*. To substantiate this argument, the book examines in the changing construction of Singapore and Singaporeans and the selection and formation of Singapore's political and administrative elite in and through the education system.

The first chapters introduce the history of Singapore's nation-building project and the Singaporean version of elitism and ethnicity. This introduction is followed by two chapters on the current elite governance in Singapore and the shift from multiracialism to Chinese ethnonationalism as the dominant ideology. Four chapters deal with elite selection and elite formation in the education system, from nursery to junior college. This discussion is succeeded by a chapter on elite formation in the National Service (military and civilian), which is mandatory for all male Singaporeans but at the same time highly segmented, racially biased, and elite oriented.

Singapore is well known for its highly elaborate system of state control and its "pragmatic" micromanagement of everyday life. Identifying Singapore as a technocratic system of government is somewhat of a truism. The term "technocracy" in the context of Singapore implies not just bureaucratization but the nearly complete hegemony of "the modernist project" at the level of the state. The concepts of "pragmatism" and modernity function as the legitimating ideology: the myth that the government operates in a purely rational, scientific, and problem-solving manner, free of ideological considerations as well as the personal interests of those in control. Anything that does not comply with the ideals of functionality and cleanliness in the "air-conditioned nation" is seen as an aberration that must disappear from discourse and everyday life. Part and parcel of this ideology is the centrality of the concept of "the elite", which is to a large degree the product of former prime minister and father figure Lee Kuan Yew. Elitism was an important element of many nationalist movements all over the world but vanished in most nationalisms in the course of modernization or democratization. It rarely became a part of the political agenda of nation-building. "As an overt foundational idea of national leadership, it was seldom evoked, with one notable exception: Singapore" (43).

In Chapter 4, the authors explore the current culture of elite governance in Singapore and the ideology of meritocracy that emerged under Lee Kuan Yew, viewing the latter as the most important ideology of the

Singaporean state and crucial to its specific mode of elite formation. This ideology is linked to a paternalistic conception of constant social transformation and progress from above. The state, in Lee's eyes, had to manage the reproduction of "talent" in society, and "talent" became a central precondition for access to the elite. Elitism, the authors point out, was an effective tool of nation-building only because it coincided with conceptions of hierarchy in society indigenous to the Singaporean Chinese community.

Chapter 5 makes the argument that Singapore's proclaimed multiracialism has been transformed into Chinese ethnoculturalism over recent decades. Elitism and multiculturalism today "enjoy a truly symbiotic relationship in Singapore's nation-building project" (87). According to David Brown (David Brown (1994), *The State and Ethnic Politics in Southeast Asia*, London/New York), the formative years of Singapore were marked by attempts to downplay ethnicity in favour of national unity (53ff.). From the mid-1960s to 1980 a discourse of "race-blind" meritocracy dominated. As of the late 1970s this was transformed into an "inclusionary corporatism", where ethnicity was increasingly managed by the state. In the early 1980s Lee referred to Singapore as a "Confucian society", thereby fostering the growing "Sinification" of Singapore's political and cultural field. This led to deteriorating conditions for minorities. Since the early 1980s multiracialism in Singapore "has not been applied as a tool to protect minority races, as it had been in the 1960s and 1970s, but as an instrument of ethnic assimilation into a peculiarly Singaporean Chinese-dominated society" (108).

The authors draw most of the empirical evidence to substantiate these theses from the educational system and the National Service. In Chapter 6 the authors undertake a detailed examination of the educational system and highlight its increasing focus on racialized elite selection and formation. No single institution has such an impact on the lives of Singaporeans as the education system; it affects all Singaporeans and is thus a prime institution for the construction and dissemination of national myths and national identities. The current education system has been shaped by the introduction of streaming in the late 1970s, the emergence of bilingualism and the privileging of elite education, all of which have led to a mechanistic and rigorous system which has generated massive pressure and escalated the expectations of students and parents.

The result has been the transformation of the education system into a "factory for producing 'new' Singaporeans and a new elite" (123) that, according to the authors, produces conformity at the top and constrains any questioning of the current political and societal order. This process starts in preschool, as is illustrated in the chapter "Catching Them Young: Afraid to Fail in Kindergarten". The authors argue that kindergarten has since the late

1970s increasingly become a tool of assimilation and for exerting pressure on ethnic minorities instead of levelling the playing field. In further chapters the authors examine national mythmaking in history textbooks, in primary school and in secondary school to illustrate the Singaporean mode of "government directed socialisation". They highlight questions of language politics and "mother-tongue" and of ethnic stereotyping in textbooks. As a primary tool of nation-building since the 1980s, the authors conclude, the educational system has aimed to produce a new type of Singaporean, "radically different to that inhabiting Singapore in the 1940s and 1960s". Chapter 11 then explores elite formation in parts of the civil service and the Armed Forces. Having dealt with elite selection and formation in the educational system in most of the previous chapters, the authors now turn to a central field in "the real formation" of the elite.

While many claim that the Singaporean education system is meritocratic, in reality it is highly biased. As the authors make clear, this is true not only in terms of ethnic and personalistic segmentation, but also with regard to gender and class discrimination in elite selection. In short, the Singaporean elite is overwhelmingly male and Chinese dominated. This is illustrated by the distribution of top scholarships such as the President's Scholarships. While gender inequality in the educational system diminished from the 1960s to the 1990s, racial division has been increasing ever since the 1960s.

The authors conclude by making the argument that "Singapore's two main national myths – multiracialism and meritocracy – are chimeras whose main purpose is to facilitate and legitimise rule by a self-appointed elite, dominated by middle-class Chinese in general, and by the Lee family in particular". But, the authors argue, the success of the regime's elite- and nation-building project remains precarious because of intrinsic tensions between the ideology of elitism, meritocracy and pragmatism on the one hand and a much more worldly everyday life, where the idea of the talented and selfless elite is often contradicted, on the other. Another threat derives from the very close identification of regime, nation state and national community with one another. On the one hand, this is one of the keys to the success of this project; on the other hand, shortcomings in one field impair all the others.

In *Constructing Singapore* the authors convincingly demonstrate the eminent role of the education system in nation-building. While this may be true for most nation-building projects, Barr and Skrbiš demonstrate the uniqueness of the Singaporean model. What makes Singapore unique, or at least an extreme example, in Southeast Asia is the explicit elitism of its nation-building and government agenda. Despite this uniqueness, the Singapore's nation-building and elite government model seems to be attractive to policy

makers beyond the borders of the city state. For those studying nationalism in Southeast Asia, Barr's and Skrbiš's work is a very fruitful starting point for further research on state-led nation-building projects and their inter-relation to questions of race, class, and gender.

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