SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

SOG110 DECONSTRUCTING SINGAPORE SOCIETY

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Semester: Term I, AY2013/2014
Seminar Venue: TBA
Seminar Sessions: TBA
Prerequisite: SOCG001 Understanding Societies

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Singapore is a fascinating subject of sociological inquiry. Constructing a history of Singapore till today remains a struggle against competing notions of the city-state as a tool of British colonialism, an adjunct of Malaysia before racial discord saw its untimely expulsion, a port of call for immigrants and Lee Kuan Yew’s political success. Since independence, Singapore’s lacking natural resources is lamented by its leaders to justify the “pragmatic” micro-management of the everyday lives of Singaporeans, including their speech, educational structure and environment, morality, gender roles, sexuality, religious expressions, ethnic identity and political culture, at the expense of citizens’ rights. Populated dominantly by ethnic Chinese with Malays and Indians as minorities, yet geographically surrounded by Muslim-majority nations have created a dilemma where Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party is reluctant to observe multiracialism in governance, defence and security policies, although such a strategy has compromised the nation-building project. Presently, the monopoly over political space and ideologies that the state has exercised through criminalisation is waning in the current wave of globalisation.

This module is mounted for students interested in gaining and developing a critical appreciation of the socio-economic and political contexts in which the everyday lives of Singaporeans are structured, by suspending their taken-for-granted assumptions of Singapore society in order to see things anew. It highlights critical historical circumstances that shape Singapore’s post-independent governance policies, political discourses and contemporary development as a nation-state. It also aims to sharpen students’ sociological imagination as they deconstruct political ideologies to grasp alternative interpretations of the development of Singapore society and make sense of contemporary issues of importance in Singapore and to Singaporeans.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- To sharpen students’ foundational grasp of the sociological imagination;
- To systematically contextualise the immediacy of personal circumstances against Singapore’s social, economic and political policies and vice versa;
To learn to ask questions about Singapore and to answer those questions by using sociological concepts and perspectives to understand Singapore ‘society’, its ‘people’ and their ‘culture’;
- To formulate intellectual opinions on contemporary issues of importance in Singapore and to Singaporeans;

**COURSE ASSESSMENT**

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<th>Assessment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
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<td>News Analysis</td>
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<td>Term Paper</td>
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<td>Final Examination</td>
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- **Class Attendance & Participation** (10% of total grade)
  Students are expected to read the required readings before class to participate in the discussion. Class participation will be assessed based on the quality of participation in the class, with higher marks given to students who relate inputs to the course readings and express individual ideas articulately and succinctly. Throughout the course, a classroom environment of acceptance, respect and tolerance for diversity of views is expected and will be reinforced.

- **News Analysis** (10% of total grade)
  News analysis requires students to select and sociologically analyse a newspaper article on Singapore that relates to a particular seminar topic. This assignment is designed to be a preliminary assessment of students’ grasp of the concept of sociological imagination as an analytical tool. It precedes the term paper to highlight students’ strengths and weaknesses in sociologically analysing a particular phenomenon.

- **Term Paper** (30% of total grade)
  For the term paper, students are expected to follow the following basic steps:
  1) Identify a topic of interest from a prepared list provided by the lecturer or through their own selection,
  2) Draft a research question and prepare a 1-2 page outline to identify their analytical approach, data resources, and available academic literature,
  3) Get approval of the research question, approach and outline from the course lecturer,
  4) Proceed with primary data collection or secondary data analysis, and
  5) Prepare a 2000 word essay detailing the findings and sociological analysis of the findings.

Students have the option of working either individually or in groups of 4-5 people each. Each student or group can do either primary or secondary research on one of the seminar topics taught in the course. A list of possible research questions will be provided by the lecturer but students are given the opportunity to self-select a topic of interest to them. Students interested in doing primary research and talking to human subjects can undertake quantitative survey or qualitative interviews with their informants. Secondary research (also known as desk
research) on the other hand involves the summary, collation and/or synthesis of existing research. Following their research, students will write and submit a 2000 word essay (excluding footnotes, graphs, figures and charts) with full bibliographic citations. In the beginning of term, the lecturer will review different guidelines for research and help familiarise students with the techniques needed for research paper preparation.

- **Final Examination** (60% of total grade)
  Students will be required to sit for a final two-hour, closed book examination at the end of term. The final exam will consist of two sections. In Section A, all students must attempt the compulsory question given. In Section B, students will choose to answer two short answer questions from a list of five possible questions.

**WEEKLY SEMINAR SCHEDULE**

**WEEK 1**

**SEMINAR SESSION 1:**

**SOCIOLGY OF SINGAPORE SOCIETY**

This seminar provides students with a foundational understanding of the concept of *sociological imagination*. The sociological imagination outlines and distinguishes what it means to think sociologically. A proper understanding of the sociological imagination serves as the foundation for critically analysing substantive issues of significance in Singapore and to Singaporeans in subsequent seminars.

**COMPULSORY READING LIST:**


**SUPPLEMENTARY READING LIST:**


**WEEK 2**

**SEMINAR SESSION 2:**

**WHEN A HISTORY OF SINGAPORE IS NOT NECESSARILY SINGAPORE’S HISTORY**

History is one of the many instruments available for the persuasive construction of a nation. This seminar contextualises the challenges faced by Singapore’s political leaders in discursively constructing a history of Singapore, against the complex socio-economic and political circumstances that forced independence upon the city-state. Sociological analysis of the competing constructions of a history of Singapore relates to the construction a nation.
Film Screening: Invisible City directed by Tan Pin Pin

**Compulsory Reading List:**


**Supplementary Reading List:**


**Week 3 Seminar Session 3:**
** Governing Singapore by Managing Race and Ethnic Relations**
In Singapore, multiculturalism is integral to its corporatist form of governance. The state is exclusively responsible for legitimating and enfranchising racial groups and their participation in public affairs, while also being responsible for managing the harmonious interaction among these groups. This seminar discusses the way “governing through racial difference” is a means by which Singaporean citizens can be divided in order to discipline the manner in which the political and social landscape is understood and managed by political elites.

**Compulsory Reading List:**


**Newspaper Articles:**
2005 – ‘Third Singapore racist blogger pleads guilty to sedition’
2012 – ‘Angry Facebook post puts union official in hot water’

**Supplementary Reading List:**


**Week 4**

**Seminar Session 4:**

**Critiquing Singapore’s Cookie-Cutter Education System**

What is the state’s definition of a good education? How has education shaped the beliefs and conduct of Singaporeans? Why is the Singapore educational system designed the way it is? This seminar analyses how a government, through a pragmatic structuring of the school system, has tried to resolve, within the framework of a number of unchanging parameters, some of the problems posed by constant social change and a rapidly changing national and global economy.

**Compulsory Reading List:**


**Newspaper Articles:**

2004 – ‘Bilingual policy to stay but will be adjusted’
2007 – ‘Singapore’s failing bid for brainpower’
2010 – ‘Cookie cutter school system not enough for future’
2011- ‘Lee Kuan Yew proposes S$100m bilingualism fund’

**Supplementary Reading List:**


**WEEK 5**  
**SEMINAR SESSION 5:**  
**SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN SINGAPORE**
Stratification is a fundamental dimension of social life. It is deeply involved in many of the most vital questions of modern politics and social policy. A good grasp of the character of social stratification in Singapore can therefore facilitate our understanding of the key social and political issues confronting Singaporeans. This seminar maps out the class structure in Singapore, examine the relationship between class position and social orientations towards opportunity, political culture, ethnic relations and identify problem areas, economic and social consequences associated with class position.

**COMPULSORY READING LIST:**


♦  
**Film Screening: Life Story by MediaCorp TV**

**Newspaper Articles:**
2006 – ‘Meritocracy, Singapore Style’
2012 – ‘Singapore income inequality here seen as one of the region’s highest’

**SUPPLEMENTARY READING LIST:**


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**WEEK 6**  
**SEMINAR SESSION 6:**  
**PRACTICING RELIGION IN SINGAPORE**
With its diverse religious communities, the question of how to ensure the peaceful coexistence of various religions is an important challenge for Singapore. This seminar discusses how Singapore actively delineates the “proper” domain for religion in society, and to harness religious forces for nation-building purposes. The state’s regulation of religious affairs is often rationalised in terms of maintaining ethnic and religious harmony. The active responses of religious groups in terms of their adaptive strategies in negotiating, accommodating or resisting the state’s efforts in surveillance and regulation will be addressed.

**COMPULSORY READING LIST:**


♦ Film Screening: Sharing the Faith by Channel News Asia

Newspaper Articles:
2008 – ‘Tackling religious taboo’
2010 – ‘Govt stresses need to maintain clear line between politics & religion’
2011 – ‘Singapore's Lee denies calling Islam ‘venomous’”

SUPPLEMENTARY READING LIST:

WEEK 7  SEMINAR SESSION 7: GOVERNING GENDER ROLES IN SINGAPORE
Understanding gender provides a foundation to analyse Singapore’s social structures (power and inequality), social institutions (family, kinship, education, economy, the state, health) and cultural issues (science, food, emotions, popular culture). The meaning of gender categories is examined in relation to difference, exchange, reproduction, knowledge and social change. A blend of sociological and ethnographic analysis of gender issues provides students with an exercise in interdisciplinary thinking.

COMPULSORY READING LIST:


Newspaper Articles:
2012 – ‘The Changing Profile of Singaporean Women: Charter’s Role to Protect Marriage has Weakened’

WEEK 8  SEMINAR SESSION 8: POLITICS OF SEXUALITY IN SINGAPORE
In Singapore, there is an official discourse of sexuality that similarly essentialises West versus East (Asian), and this discourse has long served as the rationale or alibi for repressive sexual policies. In particular, these official constructions present “Asians” as sexually conservative. This seminar deconstructs the meaning of “Asian sexuality” as used in the
Singapore context and shows the contradictions inherent in official policies that adopt Western colonial laws to proscribe certain sexual practices—albeit in the name of “Asian values”.

**Compulsory Reading List:**


**Online Readings:**

http://pleinelune.wordpress.com/2007/10/24/thioliann/


**Newspaper Articles:**
2012 – ‘Pink Dot in Singapore Highlights Changing Gay Rights Debate’
2013 – ‘AGC intervenes in 377A debate’

**Supplementary Reading List:**


**Seminar Session 9:**
**Low Crime, No Crime or Refusing to Acknowledge Crime?**
The literature on crime in Singapore society is very underdeveloped. Research on crime and deviance in post-independent Singapore are dominated by the law enforcement or social control perspective. The law enforcement perspective asserts that improvements in the police force have made social disorder in Singapore a thing of the past. This seminar challenges the ideological discourse that the tough legislation in post-independent Singapore has enabled the state to keep the crime situation under control.

**Compulsory Reading List:**


**Newspaper Articles:**
- 2009 – ‘Singapore inmates punished for 'sadistic' jail abuse’
- 2009 – ‘Why S'pore enjoys a low crime rate’
- 2012 – ‘Censorship cuts both ways’
- 2012 – ‘Two Mothers Struggle With Consequences of Deadly Singapore Gang Fight’

**WEEK 10**

**SEMINAR SESSION 10:**

**DARE TO DEVIATE: CHANGING POLITICAL CULTURE AMONG SINGAPOREANS**

This seminar addresses the major transformations occurring in Singapore’s political culture as it is affected by global economics, politics, culture, and ecology. It will introduce you to various tools assisting in the interpretation and assessment of these transformations. Starting from this theoretical basis, you will discuss real situations of political conflicts in Singapore.

**COMPULSORY READING LIST:**


**Newspaper Articles:**
- 2012 – ‘A year of greater engagement’
- 2013 – ‘Netizens to protest against MDA rule’
- 2013 – ‘Clampdown? Yes: Netizens No: MDA’

**SUPPLEMENTARY READING LIST:**


WEEK 11  SEMINAR SESSION 11:
POPULAR CULTURE
This seminar examines the spread of consumption and its link to popular culture in the context of global capitalism. Emphasis will be given on the relationship between mass production and mass consumption, and the role of mass media in creating and widening the sphere of popular culture. Relationship between class and popular culture will also be explored. Issues such as changing leisure patterns, fashions, consumerism, role of advertisements and symbolic protests will also be examined.

COMPULSORY READING LIST:
♦ Film Screening: Skinheads in Singapore / Tattoos and body piercings are cool by Channel News Asia

SUPPLEMENTARY READING LIST:

WEEK 12  SEMINAR SESSION 12:
NATIONALISM: ONE PEOPLE? ONE NATION? ONE SINGAPORE?
Singaporeans’ lacking sense of nationalism has systematically been a topic of concern among members of the ruling party. The exponential increase in the population of foreigners in Singapore, to mediate the effects of an ageing population, has further compromised Singaporeans’ sense of nationalism. This seminar addresses the impact of socio-economic policies on Singaporeans’ sense of nationalism.

COMPULSORY READING LIST:

Newspaper Articles:
2013 – ‘The difference between nationalism and a Singapore identity’

WEEK 13  SEMINAR SESSION 13:
CONCLUSION
This seminar recaps the sociological concepts that have served as the foundation in analysing Singapore’s socio-economic and political structure and culture. Students’ research papers will be reviewed for general strengths and weaknesses. Students are also expected to seek clarification on any aspect of the course.