Neoliberal Morality in Singapore

How family policies make state and society

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Routledge Contemporary Southeast Asia Series

First published 2011
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Teo, Youyenn.
Neoliberal morality in Singapore: how family policies make state and society / Youyenn Teo.
p. cm.—(Routledge contemporary Southeast Asia series; 37)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Family policy—Singapore. 2. Social engineering—Singapore.
3. Singapore—Social policy. I. Title.
HQ675.T46 2011
306.850973—dc22

2011001226

ISBN: 978-0-415-59397-7 (hbk)
ISBN: 978-0-203-80882-5 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman
by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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1 Let's apply for a flat

The state and family in Singapore

In the year 2000, Lyn Na *really* married. Three years after she and her partner formalized their relationship at the Registry of Marriages (ROM), and four years after they applied to buy a flat from the Housing and Development Board (HDB), they held a "customary" wedding, renovated their new flat, and moved into their new home. In the years between what she refers to as their "ROM" and "customary," Lyn Na lived with her husband—in separate bedrooms—in her widowed mother-in-law's flat.

She explains that their decision to apply for a flat in 1996 was prompted by several factors: she and her boyfriend had been dating for close to two years; they had heard from friends that the queue for these highly subsidized public flats was getting to be very long; she had already been working for a few years since she left school after her "O" levels (high school) and so had some money in her Central Provident Fund (CPF) account, and people around her were telling her the time was ripe to make plans toward securing a place to live. She cheerfully declared to me that, at the time of flat application, she and her boyfriend did not really talk about marriage, even though they were taking steps that implied it.

Soon after they put in their flat application, the deposit required for co-applicants who applied under the Fiancé-Fiancée Scheme went from S$200 (US$150) to S$5,000 (US$3,800).[1] That year, given three months to decide if they wanted to legalize their relationship or pay the extra money, she recalls thinking that 21 was probably too young to be "really" married but "okay" for ROM. She had little doubt that she and her partner would stay together, but felt that their finances were not in good enough shape to be *fully* married.

Three years later, anticipating that their flat would be ready, the couple held a customary wedding, collected their keys, did some renovations on their new flat, picked an auspicious day, and moved in. When I spoke to Lyn Na in 2004, she recounted this process and also told me that she and her husband still live very close to her mother-in-law and have dinner with her every day. They had recently started to think about having kids—two or three but definitely not four since the Baby Bonus[2] (at the time of our conversation) was not granted to the fourth child. She felt that living together with her mother-in-law was difficult but that living close by was "more convenient," especially when they have kids and require childcare help.

Lyn Na's story has its idiosyncrasies, but it also captures a pattern that Singaporeans alternately complain about and embrace. At a recent wedding I attended, the groom joked that he proposed by suggesting to his bride: "let's go apply for a flat." In the two years that I did my fieldwork and the subsequent years when I continued to live in Singapore, I could scarcely escape this "joke" whenever I described my project to people.

This sort of narrative informs one dominant understanding of the Singapore case: that the state is heavily involved in "social engineering."[3] Indeed, people I interviewed for this project often lamented that the state plays too big a role in Singaporeans' lives and that it tries too hard to "control everything." This interpretation of the Singapore state also implies the relative lack of autonomy for Singaporeans.

This claim is not entirely inaccurate but it is incomplete. It is the sort of interpretation that discourages deeper analyses of state-society relations insofar as it presumes that there is an immensely powerful state controlling its correspondingly powerless citizens. The idea of "relations"—implying as it does interactions, negotiations, and political processes—becomes almost irrelevant. If, after all, the state is an overpowering social engineer, what is there to negotiate?

This book starts from a slightly different place. It begins with highlighting the significant contradictions and incoherencies embedded in the state's approach toward the familial. I draw attention to the fact that rather than being a successful social engineer, the state has largely failed to achieve its *ostensible* goals of reversing demographic trends toward later marriage and lower fertility. That its policies continue to seem highly influential *despite* this is interesting and worth further scrutiny. Suspending the presumption that the case represents straightforward social engineering forces a closer examination of how the policies actually work through their targeted citizens, and thereby a reconceptualization of the full range of their effects.

Family policies in Singapore generate important "latent effects"—effects that lie beneath the surface of obvious outcomes and which go beyond the parameters of specific policies and transcend the state's explicitly stated goals.[4] One important effect: in the process of negotiating the various rules and regulations, Singaporeans develop collective practices, habits, norms, ideals, and beliefs. These give content to the ties that bind Singaporeans to the state. They also link Singaporeans to one another and define the very boundaries and meanings of "Singaporean-ness."

An important aspect of this Singaporean-ness is nationalistic and indeed in keeping with certain neoliberal[5] ideals: people see themselves as part of a nation where the capitalist economy is paramount, where markets have logics of their own, and where the state is doing the best it can to *both* produce economic growth and "protect" valued "traditions" in the face of an imagined global (and therefore externally imposed) economic logic.

The institutional as well as discursive framework that results from people's negotiations of family policies is significant for accounting for the reproduction of state power; they produce concrete structures as well as imaginations of state-society relations, and corresponding ideas about legitimate and illegitimate

politics. I thus examine the production of what I call "neoliberal morality"—a set of institutionalized *relationships* and ethical *meanings* that link citizens to each other and to the state. These relationships and meanings render the paradoxes embedded within state pursuits of neoliberalism inevitable, natural, and indeed *good*.

The chapters to follow tell a story that complicates the stereotypical version of Singapore—wherein the state stands unusually dominant and strong, and the citizenry silent and docile. I first highlight the paradoxes embedded within family policies and show that given these, the policies are, unsurprisingly, rather ineffective. And it is in the practices and accompanying discourses of Singaporeans that we see that they have a set of effects that far transcend the state's explicit goals. In this way, the relationships between state and society have to be understood through a more processual and dynamic lens—with attention to how people's negotiations of the policies give content to state rule and state-society relations, and sensitive toward both the limitations and possibilities of governance. One important dimension of these involves the production of a political culture that blunts dissent. The inequalities embedded within family policies—particularly along gender and ethno-racial lines—which one would expect to be sites of contention, turn out to be where the valorization of family/culture serves as constraint. The naturalization of gender and ethnic differences as "cultural," as integral to the so-called traditional family and thus to be protected, sets limits to people's critiques of the state and blunts the potential for organized dissent. Later in this chapter, I elaborate on how this puzzle sets up the rest of the book.

The book also challenges the state's own version of the story—in which the nation is led by a vanguard party continually mindful of its historic mission of bringing wealth to the people while ensuring that they are able to continue embodying important traditions; in direct contrast to industrialization processes of the West, it emphasizes its worldview as being more community-oriented than individually oriented. When translated into practice, however, what results is in effect a privileging of the quest for a particular, teleological path toward modernization and a rather truncated version of tradition. The community orientation is itself limited in important ways: while the family as an institution is valorized and institutionally reinforced as *the* central unit in Singapore society, the relationships established through family policies are primarily between the state and *individual* family units, often at the cost of lateral relationships between Singaporeans. I will argue at the end of this chapter that this sets up conditions for the state to pursue policies and a form of citizenship far better characterized as neoliberal than as communitarian.

The "failures" of family policies

The Singapore state's demands on the family are complex and filled with paradoxes. To begin with, the form the demands take is a contradiction in terms: claims about the primordial status of culture and the desirability of independent and self-reliant families are accompanied by sustained and explicit state policy

interventions. Moreover, the definitions of tradition embedded within policies sit uncomfortably with state-led aggressive pursuits of modernity qua economic growth. Finally, while explicitly positioned as oriented to the nation as a whole, many family policies have obviously differential ideals and expectations and the divisions fall blatantly along gender and, to a lesser extent, ethno-racial lines.

It is not surprising, given these contradictions and incoherencies, that the policies have had limited effect in turning the tide away from delayed marriage and low fertility. Like their East Asian counterparts, Singaporeans are marrying later or not at all and having fewer babies, and there is no tidal shift in sight.[6] The state, while maintaining its overall stance regarding the desirability of particular family forms—formed through age-appropriate heterosexual marriage and focused on close intergenerational mutual care—has turned its attention toward immigration as a more viable solution to the ageing population problem.[7]

These "failures" are important for jarring the analyst out of taking for granted the state's "social engineering" capacities. Comparative and survey data suggest that conflicting gender expectations and systematic gender discrimination are key explanations for why fertility declines are greater in some countries compared with others. Countries that have seen the greatest rates of fertility decline are places where women have had expanded opportunities in education on one hand but where "traditional" gendered divisions of labor, particularly within families, prevail (Castles 2002; McDonald 2000a, 2000b). The trends in Singapore certainly suggest that women—particularly the highly educated—are more likely to retreat from family formation in response to demands on them to take primary responsibility for familial life while being fully employed. In the haste to comment on the Singapore state's somewhat unusual pronatalism, this rather typical demographic trend is, oddly, often noted and yet not seen as evidence of the limits of state power. Instead, the attention continues to fall on the intensity and capacity of the Singapore state.

It follows that few have gone on to tease out the implications of the "failures." The broad demographic trends—so intuitive given the contradictory demands placed on Singaporeans—in fact throw up a further, more interesting puzzle. If indeed the turn away from marriage and childbearing are predictable responses to contradictory conditions, it is surprising that people's responses do not take *more* dramatic form. Although there is seeming "flight from marriage," as Gavin Jones (2002) puts it, there appears to be no corresponding rejection of marriage and family as institutions *nor* strong negative responses to these institutions in their current forms. Survey data show that Singaporeans continue to express great desire for marriage and childbearing (Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports 2008; Pereira 2006; Quah 1994); my interview data reveal that these are perceived not only as desirable behaviors but also largely taken for granted as natural life paths. The demographic trends, then, cannot be immediately interpreted as rejection of state positions, inevitable "failures" to be expected when misguided states—what James Scott (1998) has called "high modernist" states[8]—concoct spectacular schemes fundamentally at odds with social realities.

This is apparent when one spends time around Singaporeans: national matchmaking agencies and Baby Bonuses may be the bases of mockery and complaints, but their very ubiquity in conversations suggests they are not ignored. Family policies are not "failures" in the sense that people disregard them. Moreover, while people's discussions of family policies are far from ambivalent or free from critique, they rarely take the form of outright repugnance or rejection. Given that family policies embed the Singapore state's explicit claim to being a protector of tradition *and* spearheader of development, and given that the state's definitions of tradition and modernity are polyvalent as well as differential across gender and ethno-racial categories, it is surprising that trends in marriage and fertility are not also accompanied by *stronger* negative responses to the state.

This is particularly true of the emergent middle class, the focus of this book. Here is a group whose formation scholars have predicted would begin to challenge the state's particular style of rule (Chua 1995; Rodan 1997) and a group whose emergence *has* imposed pressure on states elsewhere in the region—Taiwan and South Korea, for instance—to take more democratic forms. On the other hand, failure to nurture an emerging middle class in other development contexts has meant increasing alienation of an important segment of society from the nation-building project. Shana Cohen's account of the middle class in Morocco, for example, stands in stark contrast to what I found in the case of Singapore. Where I uncover an emergent middle class strongly aligned to the state's development project and highly convinced of its importance in nation-building, Cohen describes a class that finds itself increasingly alienated from their country in the context of rising neoliberalism (Cohen 2004).

I explore Singaporeans' negotiations of family policies in their lives in order to account for why family policies that have largely failed in significantly altering demographic trends, *and* which embed within them important paradoxes, do not inspire stronger negative responses from their targets. I argue that family policies may have failed in achieving their ostensible goals but that they have had an important set of latent effects.

Family policies are a *productive* site—a space where society and state come to take on particular form and content. They provide a shared context through which people collectively generate norms and ideals about family forms, familial practices, and the very significance of family to the definitions of Singaporeanness. The institutions through which particular visions of family are channeled, moreover, establish regular relationships between individual Singaporeans and the state. The process unfolds sometimes in ways that suppress the salience and relevance of ideology, and other times in ways that reaffirm the state's image as a sincere if imperfect defender of tradition.

Singaporeans—through collective negotiation of the policies—develop shared scripts about their private conduct, and interpret their own decisions through lenses that are remarkably sociological. Ironically, however, this sociological thinking has important limits. The process also results in a naturalization of gender and ethno-racial differences; this reinforces the myth that individual Singaporean

families ought to take care of their own because it is "in their culture," and thereby suppresses the potential for more progressive political sensibilities and critical orientations toward the state. As they navigate policy rules and regulations, and thereby make sense of the state's rather large role in their lives, Singaporeans reify conservative familial forms and a relatively narrow definition of "tradition." In the following section, I elaborate on these themes and begin to draw out their theoretical implications.

Of ostensible failures and latent effects

Singaporean-ness in production

For someone like Lyn Na, whose trajectory I described at the beginning of this chapter, the road to marriage cannot be separated from the quest for public housing. About 80 per cent of Singaporeans own and live in public housing, an indication that most Singaporeans are subject to the Housing and Development Board's criterion of "family nucleus" formation.[9] Because payment for public housing is linked to the national mandatory savings scheme—the Central Provident Fund (CPF)—regularities are established that link employment, consumption, capital accumulation, and family formation. I elaborate on this process in Chapter 3. For now, I want to point out that family policies go well beyond rhetoric; the rules and regulations governing purchase of public housing and the use of CPF funds sets up a context—institutionalized, and somewhat coercive insofar as there are few alternatives for securing housing—that most Singaporeans *have to* negotiate.

One intriguing feature of this process is that, beyond becoming institutionalized and by extension, somewhat naturalized, its "naturalization" is accompanied by enthusiastic commentary and reflection on the part of Singaporeans.[10] In the years leading up to my fieldwork, I was astonished by the regularity and frequency of conversations around the marriage-housing pairing. People talked knowledgeably about "queuing up" for public flats with their fiancés or fiancées; traded strategies on how to time marriage to coincide with the collection of keys (to their flats), and advised each other on how to plan their finances in ways that make the most of CPF regulations.

An important and apparent dimension of the process lies in a certain instrumentality on the part of actors—a quest to "play the game" and maximize individual benefits. It is easy for us, then, to see Singaporeans as pragmatic—sensitive to monetary incentives and oriented toward material gains. Two other aspects of this process, however, suggest that a more nuanced reading is in order: first, strategies and knowledge *vis-à-vis* policies are *socially* generated—in conversations with friends, family members, and colleagues; through observations of what others do and do not do, and via some assessment of where one should stand with reference to one's peers. In this process, second, certain actions and practices are rendered meaningful and others less so. This complicates what is or is not in one's "interest."

I show in this book, then, that family policies and people's negotiations of them give form and content to Singapore society. In form, the shared context of state institutions and policies generate solidarities within particular social settings that compel people to communicate and evaluate where they stand relative to others. In particular, the frequency with which social goods are channeled to people as wives, husbands, mothers, etc., and the symbolic value given to family as an institution, compels the interdependence of members within a specific constellation of family.

Two (content) outcomes follow from this process: first, the social significance of normalcy (and the corresponding implications of difference); and related to this, the centrality of particular norms and ideals to the very idea of being Singaporean. For Lyn Na and others, family formation plans were shaped by their observations of their peers (and often by their mothers' observing *their* peers' children). While Lyn Na's approach was to try to do what other "normal" people do, others I spoke with explicitly articulated their desires to be *less* typical by, for example, insisting on a marriage proposal rather than implying to their partners their interest in marriage through flat application.

To point out the social significance of normalcy *per se* is not terribly interesting; what is intriguing here is the *explicitness* of articulations of normalcy—the visibility of norms, the clarity with which they are described, and the self-conscious stance people take in evaluating their actions against these norms. Even more illuminating is the accompanying articulations of these norms as uniquely *Singaporean* and somehow different from norms in other countries. In describing their family formation plans and practices, as well as what they think of the state, people repeatedly referred to the oddness of Singapore compared with other countries. Their ambivalence about the value of this supposed national difference is ultimately inconsequential in solidifying their sense that they are intricately embedded within schemas of being Singaporean. Family policies, in other words, generate for Singaporeans the experience and understanding of themselves *as normal Singaporeans*.

Producing the state

An important corollary to the production of Singaporean-ness is the production of the Singapore state. Indeed, although separated analytically here, the empirical specificities of this case show that state and society are very much mutually constitutive.

Timothy Mitchell (1999) has argued that the state has to be rendered real, coherent, with limited parameters *and* distinct from society, through elaborate mechanisms that are simultaneously practical and ideological. The strength of a state's effects depends at least partially on this process. The Singapore "gahmen" (government), perhaps more so than many other states, looms large in Singaporeans' imaginations; the explicit presence of the state in numerous realms compels Singaporeans to constantly think of and talk about the state. This process of the state "becoming real" has two analytical dimensions.

Through family policies, the state attains concrete *institutional-disciplinary* and *ideological-nationalist* forms. The institutional-disciplinary dimension of state production is implied in the earlier section. Family policies—in spite of their failures—set the parameters and conditions that shape Singaporeans' lives. The very entrance into adulthood via independent living is facilitated or hindered by HDB rules; steady employment and savings leading to marriage-housing are naturalized, while any lack in preconditions marks individuals as irresponsible;[11] the combination of maternity leave policies, foreign female domestic worker programs and tax reliefs for working women, entrench the work of caregiving within the household and compel women to take primary responsibility for the family even as they work outside the home. To the average Singaporean, then, the state is ubiquitous, nearby, and palpable. Family policies may be clumsy and achieve uneven results, but they establish the state's place solidly in the everyday lives of Singaporeans. The rules and regulations, incentives and disincentives, extend the disciplinary reach of the state into Singaporeans' employment choices, residential decisions, marriage plans, social interactions—often in ways that transcend any explicit goals embedded in the policies. The state's institutional-disciplinary face puts in place patterns and pathways, shaping the possibilities and limits of Singaporeans' lives.

Separating this from the ideological-nationalist character of the state, I mean to suggest that this second part of the state's effects ought to be distinguished analytically. The state's explicit positions and proclamations—what we might loosely call "ideology"—have provided much fodder for scholarly analysis.[12] The Singapore state has been labeled "communitarian," "pragmatic," and "moralistic," among other things. Each of these categories suggests a broad and somewhat coherent ideological orientation—implying that the state's actions can *ultimately* be interpreted as originating from an ideological core, and that this core can be effectively determined through analyses of state rhetoric and practices. Here, I build on but go beyond current scholarship: in tracing the *process* of policy negotiation, I aim to illuminate the dynamic and often less explicitly ideological dimensions of state practice and, as I argued earlier, the importance of social interactions and institutionalization of practices. Relatedly, the book takes a different approach toward uncovering the "ideological": it looks at the extent to which and how imaginations of the state are formed *by people* as they deal with the state in the concrete realm of family policies. In other words, this project expands on the study of ideology by looking beyond the producers, to the intended audiences, and it does so by examining people's articulations within specific contexts of practice.

Everyone in Singapore has an opinion about the government; they trace all good and bad things about Singapore back to the state. Stereotypes of Singaporeans—both from within and without—refer to them as apathetic and apolitical. On one level, the stereotype obviously captures something about their behavior in the public sphere. Yet, to say that Singaporeans are apolitical ignores the rich and complex ways in which they think and talk about the state in everyday life. It overlooks the way in which their senses of who they are are often consciously articulated in terms of what the country is.

To argue that the state is produced as an ideological-nationalist entity is to highlight that Singaporeans see and relate to the state as more than an administrator of rules and regulations. They recognize and interpret the state's truth-claims about its very existential purpose, particularly as a protector of "the nation." This in turn shapes their evaluations of the state's performance and their imaginations of their own roles in the schema. In Chapter 4, I elaborate on an idea of "dissent-consent"; in tandem, the two features of people's responses to the state illuminate how a seemingly contradictory set of state practices and ideologies can "make sense." For many of the people I interviewed, the state is imperfect—pesky, meddlesome, sometimes unfair and elitist, and often outright misguided. The state's claims of protecting culture is turned on its head and becomes discursive weaponry for citizen critics: monetary incentives are seen as undermining good values, and the very act of state intervention renders "traditions" inauthentic. When it came to talking about the government, my respondents, like most Singaporeans, had plenty to complain about.

Yet, few of these critiques translated into proclamations that the state should stop in its efforts to promote a particular view of family. Even more surprising, the critiques were accompanied by elaborate explanations for why the state is doing what it is doing, how it is limited as an agent, and the ultimate importance of the goals—simultaneously familial and economic—pursued on behalf of the nation.

Scholars have commented on the discursive effects of "the economy" and "globalization" (Mitchell 2005; Olds and Kelly 1999). The fetishism around the concepts—rendering them real, agentless, and inexorable—have implications for how development projects are structured, how states and corporations behave, and the nature and limits of responses to their actions (Hart 2001; Hart 2004). Gillian Hart (2002: 7), in fact, argues that there is something deeply "disabling" about the way "globalization" is invoked "to legitimize a retreat from promises of redistributive social change." We see such rhetorical power at work in the Singapore case. Though people saw family policies as imperfect, they ended up pointing out that they were nonetheless necessary. The necessity is justified thus: the existence of Singapore as an entity is predicated upon its economic success; good values, as embedded in and produced through family, are integral to both building this success and an important institution to "protect" as economic success inevitably leads to value erosion. The discourse invoked by Singaporeans has significant resonance to the Singapore state's, and can quite easily be read as an outcome of state propaganda. Yet, it is important to recognize that this sort of anxiety around social change is not unique to the Singapore case. The politics around family and values takes specific forms in different contexts, but this anxiety over the economy as both fundamental and yet somehow potentially conflictual with more "cultural" aspects of social life is something that obviously goes beyond this case.

The mechanisms for the production of such a discursive framework transcends state boundaries: people referred to the contrasts between theirs and their parents' lives and life chances; they were sometimes nostalgic—for an imagined simpler

time when people worked less and interacted more[13]—but as is often the case with nostalgia, also recognized that those were difficult times that they would not want to return to. Notably, then, the national story of Singapore transforming very quickly from a colonial port with a relatively small population into a country with one of the highest per capita income in the world finds its parallel stories within individual families. Most contemporary Singaporean families have a founding story of their own that coincides with this extraordinary and compressed history[14] of upward mobility and vast changes in daily life. With these very real experiences of being caught up in changes beyond the individual's control—in ways both positive and negative—comes the view that "the economy" is an inexorable force. In this view, "the nation" needs to keep striving to ensure it does not fall off the gravy train; this depends partially on the strength of families, but the family itself is under threat in the process.

What place does the state have in this schema? One of the more surprising findings of this project is the discourse of a strong state that is also a *limited* agent. On the whole, Singaporeans do seem to think of the state as being responsible for and accountable toward most things. Yet, the strength of the discourse of "the economy" and "globalization" as inexorable forces lets the state off the hook in important ways: the family is taken seriously as an important cornerstone of continued economic success, and also that which can be destroyed in the very process, and the state's imperfect interventions are perceived as necessary for curbing *what is beyond the state's control*. Rather than evidence that the state is a hypocritical defender of tradition, family policies become evidence that the state is an imperfect but sincere and necessary agent with limits, operating in a global context beyond its control. Within this discursive framework, the state's *intentions* are aimed at an undisputable "greater good" on behalf of the nation.

The Singapore state's reality as an ideological-nationalist entity ought not to be taken for granted. It produces constant interpretations and justifications of itself—material that can and is often used to track and describe its ideological positions. These are obviously necessary analyses, but have important methodological limits: in taking the state's terms of engagement as starting point, it is easy to end up assuming that the state means everything it says and that its ideologies are in perfect alignment with people's beliefs; or, alternatively, dismissing ideology as representing the narrow interests of the state and therefore necessarily duplicitous. Both conclusions would give insufficient credence to how Singaporeans negotiate the state, how the very imaginations and boundaries of what the state is is produced through practice and experiences—in ways that resonate with the state but also through mechanisms that transcend its explicit actions. Just as the state tries to make society in its image, society gives shape to the state.

In the following section, I turn to discussing how these claims draw on and depart from the scholarship on governmentality, before winding down the chapter with discussions of the implications of what I have argued about the production of society and state.

Of governmentality and methodology

Beginning from historical studies of democratic-liberal Europe,[15] and broadening to scholarship of a range of contemporary "developing" societies—from China to Egypt, Malaysia to India[16]—"governmentality" has become an increasingly influential framework for conceptualizing the state, and particularly the interpretation of social policies.[17] Broadly speaking, the literature represents a radically different way of conceptualizing power *vis-à-vis* that presented by the Marxist/Weberian approaches that have dominated scholarship on states and political economy.[18] Instead of power originating in the body of a state that stands above society, this Foucauldian approach conceptualizes "government" in its broader definition—as the regulation of a wide range of individual conduct in multiple realms of society.[19]

Two aspects of rule are the focus of analyses: the logic and assumptions embedded in the approach toward subjects that might be termed "political rationalities," and the arsenal of "technologies" that are developed to fulfill these rationalities. Social policies become the empirical sites where analysts trace the techniques that have arisen in the modern world that govern through subjects. The technologies of government ultimately produce self-regulating—autonomous and self-fulfilling—subjects. These are subjects whose subjection is not merely about obeying or accepting the rule of those with power over them, but who are effectively ruling themselves and each other. This is a very different way of conceptualizing power as involving, for example, the Marxist/Gramscian notion of "consent."

This Foucauldian analytic has found its way into this project in at least three ways: first, I look to social policies in general and family policies in particular not to understand the rules, regulations, or even ideologies *per se*, but *how they represent a broader system of the exercise of power*. That is, the claim in this book is that particular relationships between state and society, specific forms of discipline, and ways of conceptualizing the world, are produced through the practices that come about with the family policies. This is an approach that stands in stark contrast to the bulk of the political economy literature on East and Southeast Asia, which take such policies seriously primarily insofar as they are deemed necessary conditions for the accumulation of capital or for the redistribution of social goods.

The Singapore state is easily read as all-powerful, all-knowing, and all-purpose. The temptation to take the functionalist route is strong: one can quite easily read the outcome (of a highly disciplined populace) as the natural and *intended* consequence of state actions, and this encourages a particular type of empirical work that takes the state's word at face value. The social scientist, in this way, contributes to the very imaginary and myth of an all-knowing state, reifying its timelessness and contributing to its dominance in the public imagination. Second, then, a Foucauldian sensibility forces *analytic detachment of effects from aims and actors*. One must pay serious attention to unintended consequences, or what I call latent effects. The phrase signifies that there exist

things to be *uncovered*, that lie dormant, beneath the surface, and which have to be excavated.

A key effect, from a governmentality perspective, is in shaping what is and is not thinkable, and in generating this through the production of *normal* subjects (Foucault 1972; Rose 1999b: 8–9). It is therefore important to discipline the majority rather than punish (minority) deviance *per se*. My conceptualization of the production of "normal" Singaporean-ness—*in practice and in imagination*—thus draws heavily from the governmentality approach.

Yet, there are important points of departure. One of the most obvious is my use of in-depth interviews as the mode of investigation. This has two implications: first, it implies heavier weight given to subjective interpretations than that generally taken in the governmentality approach; second, it signals my interest in the presence of both state "failures" and "successes." Although these departures are not theoretically antagonistic to a Foucauldian conception of power, they represent elements that most scholars drawing from Foucault, and particularly those who work within the governmentality framework, are not terribly interested in. In the following, I elaborate on each of these points and why these are important departures.

While "the subject" is central to the Foucauldian analytic, subjects' subjectivities—*their* interpretations of the state—are largely irrelevant. As I argue earlier, one of the major pitfalls of scholarship or observations of the Singapore case is the tendency to presume the coherence and effectiveness of the state, and a corresponding tendency to obscure the complex nature of people's responses to the state. This critique, articulated on a more general level, has also been made about the governmentality scholarship (O'Malley *et al.* 1997). One of the aims of this book is simply to suggest that there is value to looking more closely at how people negotiate, think, and talk about the state, and that this leads to a richer view of Singapore state and society. The contradictions I began with in this chapter suggest that this is in fact *necessary* if we are to understand how paradoxical and sometimes outright unfair demands can seem so natural, and why the ostensible failures in family policies are not *more* dramatic.

I make the distinction in this book between ostensible failures and latent effects. For Foucault, failure is, theoretically, integral to the operation of power. Yet, in invoking Foucault, it is far more intuitive to track the production of disciplinary mechanisms that work than to analyze those that *do not*. In the Singapore case, failure and success live in stark co-existence, and arguably render mutual significance. It is through taking subjects' subjectivities seriously that we can see that the state's failures and successes dovetail in counterintuitive ways. Failures are interesting not only because they represent subjects' resistances to discipline and the limits of disciplinary mechanisms, as a Foucauldian approach suggests, but insofar as they become the very basis for a larger discourse about the limits of state power and the significance of state sincerity.

"Family" and "culture" as constraint

At the beginning of the chapter, I point out that it is surprising the "failures" of state policies around the family have not been *more* dramatic—that the trends toward later marriage and lower fertility have not been accompanied by more dramatic rejections of either the state or the particular rendition of "family values" it insists upon. I then turn to describing the latent effects of family policies and argue that it is through the production of state, society, and specific relationships between the two that family policies come to "make sense."

I now turn more squarely to the larger questions of political implications: why does it matter that particular types of Singaporean subjects and specific discursive politics are generated through family policies? What is the significance of Singaporeans thinking about economic development as central to the existence of the nation, and the state as a sincere but limited defender of tradition? I argue that the production of particular subjects shape counterpolitics and its limits, and sheds light on the parameters around contemporary state-society relations. The significance of the realm of the familial lies ultimately in its influence on the constitution of legitimate and illegitimate politics, and the possibilities and limitations of socio-political change in contemporary Singapore.

The meanings attached to family and culture act as constraining forces in Singapore. The social significance of these two intertwined imaginaries are continually (re)produced through state policies; they, in turn, shape people's orientations toward and expectations of the state. The idea that family and culture are primordial and that they should anchor Singapore society shapes the legitimacy and illegitimacy around the *purposes* and *processes* of politics. I demonstrate this in two parts—first highlighting the limits of Singaporeans' sociological imagination, and then describing the naturalization of differences.

The limits of sociological imagination

Singaporeans think sociologically in important ways: in interviews, I was struck by their sophistication in situating themselves in the broader social context, their capacity for accounting for their circumstances through narrations of structural constraints. Yet, there was an important limit to their sociological thinking. For most of the people I spoke with, critiques of the state concluded with insistence on the limits of its influence, and the proclamation that people should take ultimate responsibility for their own families. Although people think of their actions as oriented toward society, and informed by society, they see their own "problems" through the lens of their individual families—as problems that ought to be resolved through the gumption, skills, and resources of *individual* families, rather than through some broader social action. In other words, their broad orientation dovetailed with the Singapore state's insistence on dangers of a more comprehensive welfare system.

What are the mechanisms shaping this individualistic closure to their sociological thinking? First, we need to recognize that family policies render the

interdependence between particular constellations of family members very real, tangible, and consequential. In other words, people see certain family members as the first resort when needs arise because there are indeed structural mechanisms that render them the most logical choice. The meaning of family is strong precisely because people's concrete material well-being are predicated upon their membership in families. Second, that people reject the idea that there ought to be more public solutions is in some situations a *reaction* to the particular Singapore state that they know—one that they see as already overinterventionist. There is in essence a conflation, in their imaginations, of public solutions and state solutions; all coordinated solutions outside the realm of individual families are assumed to imply increased *state* regulation.[20] Finally, the salience of the ideas and ideals around family, tradition, and culture are not to be underestimated. Specifically, these are valued as having primordial importance, and as being situated in a particular and difficult constellation between the past and the present. The point I made earlier—that Singaporeans see the state as a *sincere* defender of tradition in the face of globalization—needs to be taken seriously as hindering people's desire and ability to push the state to act on their behalf, in ways that depart from current policies.

What are the consequences of this limit to sociological thinking? For the individual, there are the rising costs and burdens of being the ideal family member, and the accompanying sense of individualized failure when one is unable to live up to ideals. More interesting for my purposes, however, are the implications for conceptualizations of politics. The strange combination of seeing the state as desirable and yet undesirable, as having the capacity for ameliorative action and yet important limits; and the view of the individual, "traditional" family as the "true" solution to problems, produce an outcome wherein sociologically inflected complaints rarely translate into strong desires for significant, socially driven change.[21] Despite their displeasures with particular rules or regulations, there is strong belief in the value of maintaining the status quo and the dangers of departing from it. And the status quo revolves strongly around a limited definition of family seen as central to Singaporean life. This orientation prevents the formation of imaginations of significant alternatives. There is thus, for example, a strong disdain for suggestions of "welfare" in a broader sense—where citizens have rights to directly access public resources, and where familial membership becomes irrelevant.

The limits of sociological thinking must also be considered as a factor in shaping people's understandings and expectations of political *process*. Scholars have garnered a great deal of evidence that point to structural limitations to broad-based political participation in Singapore. There are laws against mass assembly, tight controls over mass media, and numerous other structural barriers that make it difficult for opposition political parties to mobilize a wider public around particular causes (B.H. Chua 2004b; Rodan 2004). I argue here that there are also the constraints of family/culture to consider: because of the institutionalized importance of certain familial forms, and the symbolic weight of family and culture as needing to be autonomous from the public/state, my respondents framed

resolutions to their problems in individualized ways, and viewed collective and concerted efforts with suspicion and skepticism. Despite their insistence that the state needs to craft "pro-family" policies for the good of the nation, they were reluctant to point to the state as possibly having a bigger role to play in their *own* families, and also reticent in calling on it to do more in terms of providing direct support to families.

This issue of the favoring of the family over broader social groupings *vis-à-vis* the state becomes even more interesting when we turn our attention more squarely to how differences are produced and experienced within the context of family policies, and the consequences of this for limiting progressive political orientations as well as "disarming" the potential for organized dissent.

The articulation of differences and its consequences for politics

Family policies produce ideals and norms, and in the process, ideas about deviations and differences. Policies render salient divisions between the married and (chronically) unmarried, those with children from those without, and more recently, those who are heterosexual from those who are homosexual.[22] Family policies also presuppose and reproduce differences along gender lines. And they are a site where the state's multicultural schema of "Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other" are applied, and a site where specific differences between "Chinese" and "Malay" are accentuated. These demarcations of differences shape people's perceptions of the purpose and process of politics and political change.

Significantly, gender and ethno-racial differences are marked as those principles of division which are natural, but also problematic in the context of development. It is precisely the need to somehow balance "modern" pressures with "traditional" status quo along gender and ethno-racial lines that renders family policies so necessary. Family policies thus solidify the sense that Singaporeans are caught primarily by the necessity of "protecting" traditions in the face of inexorable change; consequently, there is a strong rejection of suggestions of changes which would alter the definitions or significance of the idealized family. In essence, progressive politics is rendered a rather fearsome concept. Moreover, somewhat counterintuitively, the naturalization of gender and ethno-racial differences "disarms" potentially counterstate dissent.

The production of normative ideals requires the constant presence of deviance. In the logic of family policies, it is precisely deviations—from marriage, from childbearing, from filial piety—that require intervention. The state claims this to be the limits to *Singaporean* modernization: although economic pursuits and "globalization" are paramount, there are beliefs, values, habits, "lifestyles" that are incongruent with some essence of Singapore society. This way of framing the world—with a view of development as both teleological and inevitable; invoking particular connotations of economic wealth and cultural poverty associated with "the West"; and ultimately, urgently calling for "protecting" family and culture if a *uniquely* Singaporean development is to persist—is continually reified through family policies. This shapes interpretations of the past, the conditions of the

present, and the possibilities for the future. Change that implies fundamental shifts in values and practices is, through this lens, very threatening indeed. This is not to say that the "cultural values" that are treasured are truly historically deep and immutable; indeed, I will highlight later in the book that many of the so-called traditions are historically shallow and are often "thinly" articulated. But perhaps this is precisely why both state and Singaporeans feel insecure in its claims and feel the need to continually invoke its presence.

The production and reproduction of differences, using various principles of division—marriage, childful/lessness, sexuality, gender, ethnicity—that happens via family policies have consequences not only on the limits and possibilities of people's imaginations of alternative outcomes, but also on the very process of being political actors. Here, the implications are particularly surprising and counterintuitive.

In a variety of other contexts, gender and ethnicity as principles of division often become galvanizing forces, identities around which people gather to demand the fulfillment of collective interests.[23] The Singapore case is an odd exception. In the realm of family policies, the differential roles and symbolic value designated to men versus women, and to the different ethnic groups, particular Chinese versus Malay, are highly salient, but this salience does not inspire collective dissent.

Gender and ethnicity matter. They matter in the types of public goods one is entitled to, and they shape one's place in the idealized Singaporean family. I elaborate on these in Chapters 3 and 5. For now, two brief examples: women and men's responsibilities as parents are highly differentiated through the time off women are entitled to when they have babies (16 weeks) compared with men (three days), among other things. Additionally, it is no secret to most people that the call to pronatalism has historically been aimed primarily at the ethnic Chinese population; Malay families, in fact, have often been cast as having opposing problems—too many out-of-wedlock births and early marriages. The idealized family, then, positions Chinese as "too modern" and Malays as "too traditional."

Yet, these (re)productions of differences seem to clarify for people the *inevitability* and *naturalness* of difference. That is, differential policies are seen as *responses* to differences that naturally exist, and that hence, common-sensically, require intervention. Here, again, I must emphasize people's strong and positive orientations toward the notions of "culture" and "tradition" and their views of the state as sincere defender of these. Gender and ethno-racial differences, insofar as they are experienced as having traditional, cultural origins, become facts. They are not devoid of contradictory demands and drives, but that is precisely the apparent purpose of state policies—to act as ameliorative agent given that the inexorable forces of the economy and globalization make living in traditional ways difficult. In this view of the world, the state is not being unfair. Instead, it is simply realistic and problem-oriented.

The significance of family policies, thus, far transcends the institution of the family. Insofar as their effects lie in the production of particular Singaporean subjects with specific orientations toward the state, the full significance of family

policies lie in its shaping people's conceptions of the purpose and process of politics and political change. In the above, I have examined how particular meanings around "family" and "culture"—given meaning through family policies—limits sociological thinking and renders certain social divisions natural. In the process, I argue, the limits of counterpolitics are demarcated. "Family"/"culture" are constraining forces insofar as they render changes from the status quo fearsome, and insofar as they limit imaginations of how changes can be effected, and perhaps most ironically, the full capacity of the Singapore state.

What do we know, now that we know about Singapore?

The Singapore state has often been categorized together with other states as a developmentalist state. Scholars have commented extensively on its rapid economic development in conjunction with its East and Southeast Asian counterparts. There is general consensus that this outcome has been dependent on a set of factors shared across these cases: control over elites, repression of labor, favorable geopolitical conditions, and strategies oriented toward foreign investments.[24] There are also often references toward its investments in infrastructure and education, implying that its emphasis on "human capital" has seen great returns.

It is precisely on the question of its people and the state's relationship to them that the story starts to feel unique, especially over time, when in other developmentalist states such as Taiwan (Rigger 1996) and South Korea (Dalton and Cotton 1996), political opposition becomes a force the state has to reckon with, and pressures for democratization intensify. For those scholars and citizens who believe in the importance of democratization, the persistence of a strong state with a limited vision of democracy and a weak civil society is problematic. These conditions render the Singapore case one that no other country can nor should emulate. The Singapore state's self-conception in fact dovetails with this: it too sees itself as being different and unique, as being not *just* economically successful but also having achieved something *more*.

What does this "more" look like? The Singapore case resists the teleological assumptions embedded within liberal political economy that development and liberal democracy—with its attendant connotations about individual freedoms—go together.[25] For its part, the Singapore state has no qualms about explicitly challenging this teleology, and it challenges it on the grounds of "Culture"—that Western development may have unfolded in a certain way, but that the "Asian way" is a different route.

This sort of response to criticism was at its height in the early 1990s, with the so-called Asian values debate. Energized by their countries' economic successes, Asian leaders, from Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore to Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, made bold rhetorical gestures implying the cultural bases of their countries' successes and simultaneously used the rationale to deflect criticisms about the lack of democracy.[26] Though the sails of that ship were somewhat deflated with the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, it has found a renewed

sort of energy post-crisis. The claim that Singapore is more community-oriented, more family-oriented, less respectful of individual rights *because* the needs of society as a whole have to be honored has certain political currency. Besides having direct appeal among Singaporeans, it dovetails with the communitarian thinking, with similar tendencies toward valorizing "community" and "family values," that has found its way into American politics.[27] No self-respecting liberal critic would point to Singapore as a case to emulate, but the point here is that regardless of valence, critiques of the Singapore state and the Singapore state's self-conception ironically coalesce in the claim that the state undervalues the individual in favor of the group.

This is a powerful claim, and a misleading one. The state's valorization of the family, its insistence on "protecting tradition," may be communitarian in rhetoric, but as we have seen, one of its effects has been to individualize problems. The morality—the norms, values, habits, and practices—that results is in fact entirely consistent with the demands of *neo*liberal capitalist political economies: the production of subjects who are highly socialized and connected and yet with very individualized relationships to the state, and an underdeveloped sense of collective welfare. These are subjects with an almost religious focus on the centrality of a particular definition of "the economy."

A morality in the service of neoliberalism

In sociology as well as in other social science disciplines, neoliberalism has come under strong criticism. Critics have argued that the low corporate taxes, fiscal austerity, reduced social spending, and privatization of industries that are the hallmark of neoliberal policies are practices that favor elite groups (Hadiz 2006; Harvey 2005), and which in the corresponding lowering of wages and social protections, and the use of force/violence, have devastating effects on the masses (Hart 2002; Harvey 2005; Prasad 2006; Rodan and Hewison 2006). In its individualistic view of the world, epitomized by Margaret Thatcher's famous declaration that there is no such thing as society[28] (Harvey 2005: 23), critics contend that neoliberalism threatens social life as we know it. Particularly on the issue of democratic citizenship, neoliberalism has, as Somers (2008) puts it, led to a "contractualization of citizenship," a perversion of citizenship's meaning: instead of "reciprocal but nonequivalent" rights and obligations between *equal* citizens, citizenship in the context of neoliberal hegemony has come to narrowly reward those who are able to produce certain forms of economic worth. For those who cannot adequately produce, there is social exclusion and degraded worth.

In many ways, neoliberalism is Durkheim's nightmare: the cult of the individual is so completely misrecognized that solidarity is undermined. It is a totalitarian (in the sense of encompassing all of social life) system which connects individuals inextricably to one another, where the individual takes on a heightened prominence as *the* unit that matters, but where the fact of interdependence and the fact of the *social* production of the individual is obscured. The state—that agent which Durkheim saw as holding immense ameliorative potential—fails to protect society

by ceding autonomous power to "the market," by shrinking from its role as coordinator of normative consensus, practices and values—"morals"—which are the glue that bind people together and which hence form the basis of social order (Durkheim and Halls 1984).

Reading neoliberal critiques through a Durkheimian lens, contemporary states have retreated from their moral obligations, or at least are under increasing pressure to do so. That is, states are turning away from efforts to strengthen moral consensus, or at least undermining the structural conditions—redistributive welfare, for example—that form the basis of shared citizenship-based ethics and norms.

The use of the term "neoliberal" should be qualified here: the Singapore state has by no means embraced neoliberalist practices fully. It is some way away from the ideal-typical neoliberal states such as the U.S. It cannot be accused of embracing the sorts of large-scale deregulation of industries and abandonment of redistribution mechanisms typical of such cases. Yet, neoliberalism has been embraced, both ideologically and in practice. As a small city-state highly dependent on global capital, the logic of low taxation (particularly corporate taxes), and "corporatization" of national industries *has* been embraced as a sort of survivalist common sense. At the same time, as critics of neoliberalism point out, the move toward neoliberalism is generally not so much a story of a receding state as it is of a state championing "free markets" and prioritizing the interests of some groups of people over others. The family policies which are the focus of this book illuminate the centrality of economic productivity as prerequisite to citizenship, both practical/material and symbolic. Another place where this is clear in Singapore is in its aggressive immigration policies, where the birfurcation of high-end "foreign talent" on the one hand and the low-end "foreign worker" on the other, point to a worldview where the market will decide on who is rewarded, what their rewards entail, and the state can be directly involved in producing exploitative conditions without being tainted.[29] Although its form of neoliberalism has not meant a wholesale abandonment of public welfare, there are key elements of the Singapore case that approximate what Somers has referred to as quid pro quo state-citizen relations, wherein "citizens are converted into quantities and qualities of human capital … their worth, value and inclusion … determined by contractual successes or failures in relationship to utility" (ibid: 41).

Yet, it is important to recognize that the Singapore state's responses to neoliberal pressures have not been devoid of production of moral consensus. The Singapore story is not *a*moral—instead, it is arguably moral in a way utterly consistent with neoliberalism. The family policies that are the focus of this book are emblematic of this. The Singaporean subject, produced in large part through the institutional conditions and discursive environment generated by the state, is moral in two (Durkheimian) senses of the word: it is moral insofar as it is inextricably linked to other Singaporean subjects, and, second, the linkage has an explicit ethical component—wherein subjects share consensus about appropriate norms, values, customs, and, indeed, a sense that there ought to be a "greater good" that binds Singaporeans.

Does this mean that the Singapore state is, as it claims, communitarian—group-oriented more than individual-oriented? Not so fast. If we look closely, what is fundamental to this Singaporean morality is not the valuing of group interests over individual interests *per se*. Instead, the family as the key unit through which the government governs functions more or less as an *individualized* unit. People are compelled to relate to the state as individualized familial members, with interests defined narrowly in time and space.

Insofar as "family" is equalized with "society," it is ironically (from a feminist perspective) a society that has shattered the public-private divide in important ways, but also in ways that have depoliticized the very thing which feminists have insisted is political.

"Family" as a representative of "society" is also in a very weak position *vis-à-vis* the state. Its dominance in social life weakens the formation of associations that Gramsci and Durkheim—albeit from somewhat different perspectives—saw as central components of "civil society."

In content as well as in form, the encapsulation of "morality" in "the family" has serious implications. It tames the parameters of moral-ethical debates: insofar as the moral questions that arise from development are framed as being solely about the protection of traditions and cultures of familial lives, and insofar as these challenges are juxtaposed against an inexorable force that is "global" and to do with "natural" market forces, then the family is the only sphere in which moral issues can live; the balance of "the moral" with "the economic" is, moreover, always tilted toward prioritizing the latter. The morality underlying assumptions about markets and economies—the (im)morality of poverty or inequality, for example—have no public space in which to live. Indeed, as I have also alluded to, the logic of difference and inequality is embedded and mapped strongly onto differences demarcated by "culture," and hence rendered as almost *necessary* for the particular development of the nation.

It is on this final point that the Singapore case's "neoliberal morality" is particularly troubling: for, if scholars such as Hart (2002), Burawoy (2003, 2007) and Evans (2008), drawing on Gramsci and Polanyi, are right in their guarded optimism that the devastating consequences of neoliberal movements around the world will bring about responses in the rise of countermovements, movements against neoliberalism, and toward greater "social protection," a case such as Singapore's suggests that there has been an underestimation of the outcomes of neoliberalism on the political sensibilities of ordinary citizens. Neoliberal morality—which describes state-society relations (ties that bind the two) and societal orientations (ties that bind Singaporeans to each other)—suggests that the difficulties of challenging neoliberalism lie partially in the depth with which ordinary citizens have embraced its logic.

The book

I began this chapter with a story about Lyn Na and the bureaucratic scenic route she took on the way to marriage. Her story is telling and compelling in that, at first

glance, it suggests the presence of a crude and overt social engineering state. Yet, it is even more intriguing in what it does not immediately reveal: a broader context of state failures; a more nuanced set of mechanisms—often transcending the state's explicit goals and intentions—that shape her sensibilities and orientations. These are ultimately sensibilities and orientations that have to do with her broader conceptualization of and relationship to state and society.

The rest of this book is aimed at telling and interpreting this story fully. In Chapter 2, I provide the historical context that sheds light on just how paradoxical the state's approach toward the family really is, and why we might expect Singaporeans to react more strongly and negatively to these paradoxes than they do. This is the puzzle that frames the next chapters. Chapters 3 and 4 draw on interview data to explore how people negotiate the policies in their lives and how the process shapes their thinking about the state. Together, the two chapters point to an important and surprising effect of family policies: the production of a set of norms, values, and beliefs around the interconnections between family, economy, and the nation. What is produced through family policies are institutionalized relationships and ethical meanings that link citizens to each other, and state to society. These linkages and norms—which I call neoliberal morality—are ultimately what render the state's particular form of neoliberalism natural. Chapters 5 and 6 turn to addressing squarely the political implications of this. Chapter 5 focuses on how the reification of "family/culture" leads to conservative political orientations as well as a certain inability and reluctance to oppose the state. In the concluding chapter, I return to the issues raised in the previous section to consider the limits and possibilities of sociopolitical change. Finally, issues of methodology are addressed in two appendices.