

## *What's in a name?*

### *Understanding the 'Global City' through Global Justice*



**1**

---

<sup>1</sup> Image from cover of SPUR 68-71, the second and final issue published by a group of counter-establishment architects and urban planners in Singapore's early independence period. Author's collection (cropped, colourised with AI). With thanks to Z.

By 2000, discourse surrounding justice looked remarkably different from talk five decades earlier.<sup>2</sup> Talk of radical alternatives, from socialist challenges to radical anticolonialism, or from North to South, existed – if at all – as largely neutered discourses. My essay draws on recent methodological shifts in historical and political thought towards thinking globally, and a strand of analysis surrounding ideologies of neoliberalism. I suggest that understanding the evolving story of justice must be understood as an outcome of increasing transnational connections, alongside an insulation of markets and economies from popular and democratic pressure<sup>3</sup> - but spatially too, as a story of cities and how its inhabitants think of them.

As urban theorists have well understood, justice is never a fully disembodied, abstracted good, despite some political theorists' framing of them in the universalist language of rights and subjects. They are “spatial form of social life within the Westphalian state ... also a vital component of global networks of finance, trade, and human movements and cultural exchange”.<sup>4</sup> Calls for sufficiency, equality, fairness<sup>5</sup> are realised as claims to being, or depend on forms of inclusion in physical, social communities. Historians have been sensitive to the contested, evolving nature of concepts like justice, and my brief, interdisciplinary foray here takes the idea of a ‘global city’ to ask what was lost with this concept – and what its excavation might produce.

---

<sup>2</sup> This essay grew out of my thesis, which investigated the international and bureaucratic histories of architecture in Asia. I found intriguing Lee Kuan Yew's emphasis on creating “property-owning democracy” in Singapore, a decade before the term became a key component of Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971), and hence Anglophone political philosophy. Beyond the unexpected genealogy of such terms, the spatial dimensions to protest and resistance in cities and vastly different imaginations of the postcolonial period sat uncomfortably with the abstract, disembodied method of political theorising within Oxford's politics syllabus.

<sup>3</sup> My understanding of neoliberalism here is informed by Susan Watkins, ‘Paradigm Shifts’, *New Left Review*, 128, 2021, and Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Harvard University Press, 2018). Other prominent theorists of neoliberalism like David Harvey (who I briefly discuss later in this essay), Wendy Brown may define the term differently.

<sup>4</sup> Loren King and Michael Blake, ‘Global Cities, Global Justice?’, *Journal of Global Ethics*, 14.3 (2018), p.333.

<sup>5</sup> These terms are not synonymous with justice; their relationship is complicated, and my essay will specify these dynamics.

Nowhere more evident is the city as a locus for justice than in city-states, where boundaries of the metropolis and nation, municipal and central, shift. Something is thus significant about the development of Singapore, a paradigmatic city-state. Founded in 1819 as a British colony, enlightened policymaking, entrepot trade development, and then stabilising, technocratic policy of a postcolonial party elite has assured the city of plenty. Order, shelter, and wealth, enshrined in a landscape of well-painted (a sure sign of commitment) public housing towers, gleaming skyscrapers, manicured treescapes in boulevards. Or so the story goes, reaching its apotheosis in the celebratory spectacle of its 'bicentennial'.

## Etymologies

*“This year marks 200 years since Sir Stamford Raffles landed in Singapore.*

*1819 was a key turning point in Singapore's development. The British decision to declare Singapore a free port plugged us into an emerging network of global trade. This, and subsequent developments, transformed Singapore into a global node.*

*In our bicentennial year, let us reflect on the twists and turns in our history ...”<sup>6</sup>*

The periodisation here, compressing hundreds of years of history in the Malay archipelago is revealing; the context, the opening words of the Finance Minister's Budget speech that year, is surprising. Two observations: cities were never organic entities, blooming under favourable geographical ('climatic', as modernization theorists had it), but part of an extractive colonial network. In most cases, these cities still bear scars, but Singapore's ruling party amicably received the right to rule from colonial elites, and fiercely defended this right. How politics, populace and the idea of justice was disciplined through the city is central to this essay.

Economic development – and the social goods that flow forth – were never 'manna from heaven' (to put a spin on libertarian critiques of distributive justice), but tied to their historical conditions of production. A second observation: cities are situated in a broad, transnational network, while maintaining political sovereignty and hosting shifting ideological and material conflicts. State prerogatives to control policy, to nudge, shift, tinker may be assumed: their outcomes, however, were never determined. Twin drivers of uncertainty and opportunity persisted, synthesised in a trenchant declaration of cities'

---

<sup>6</sup> Straits Times, 'Taking Singapore Forward in a Fast-Changing World', 19 February 2019.

place in the postcolonial sun by S. Rajaratnam, the closest the People's Action Party had to its white-shirted intellectual.

Singapore was:

*“transforming itself into a new kind of city – the Global City. It is a new form of human organisation and settlement that has, as the historian Arnold Toynbee says, no precedent in mankind's past history. People have become aware of this new type of city only very recently. They have found a name for this distinctive type of city. They call it Ecumenopolis - the world embracing city.”*<sup>7</sup>  
(Rajaratnam, 1972)

Moving back in time presents an unusual, periodic challenge. Here, Rajaratnam was speaking of global cities, in a time way before Saskia Sassen's influential formulation in her 1991 book sent sociological ripples into countless academic disciplines, think-tank reports and political parlance.<sup>8</sup> Of course, the term was not plucked out of thin air, and Rajaratnam's conception appears to follow the thinking of PAP colleague Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's first Finance Minister (again, history rhymes). In an address in April 1967 on 'Cities as Modernisers', Goh argued that it was “the role of the cities in Asian countries, established and developed as beach-heads of Western imperialism, to transform themselves under their independent national governments into beachheads of a dynamic modernization process to transform the countryside”.<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> S. Rajaratnam, *Singapore: Global City* (Ministry of Culture Singapore, 1972), p. 3.

<sup>8</sup> “Global cities around the world are the terrain where a multiplicity of globalization processes assume concrete, localized forms” – the increasingly complex processes she discusses are information and capital, whose flows are facilitated by specialized businesses and are no longer tightly constrained by national boundaries or regulations. See Saskia Sassen, ‘The Global City: Introducing a Concept’, *Brown J. World Aff.*, 11 (2004).

<sup>9</sup> quoted in Kwa Chong Guan and others, *Seven Hundred Years: A History of Singapore* (Marshall Cavendish International Asia Pte Ltd, 2019), p. 97.

In other words, the decolonized city was to create their hinterland, not be bound by them: Malaysia, which Singapore had gained independence with in 1963 and separated just two years later was financed “by Singapore capital and nurtured by Singapore management skills”. Goh’s speech drew on Peter Hall’s idea of the world city, published just one year prior in 1966, and Rajaratnam’s framing of the global city thus echoes Hall, in anchoring the term to economic, capital, business movement and developments in urban centres of industrialised economies. Modernization theory, especially in vogue amongst a regime looking to the US for inspiration, implanted.<sup>10</sup> Anticolonial and postcolonial thought – spirited, even revolutionary languages in neighbouring countries like Indonesia – was conspicuously absent. The incredible distance between Rajaratnam’s speech and questions of justice, that I frame this essay around, in part stem from the question he is instead concerned with: “an inexplicable mystery... Why has not an independent Singapore as yet collapsed?”<sup>11</sup> His answer: Singapore’s orientation as a Global City means “the world is its hinterland”, and to deny this is “for a small Singapore, certain death”.

Sassen’s use of the term global city was deliberate, in avoiding the historical baggage of the world city and to capture the “specificity of the global as it [got] structured” in the 1990s.<sup>12</sup> Her detailed accounts of globalized firms, communication, economic specialisation, all various “networked cross-border dynamics” embedded in cities and comprising the “de-facto world system”, might have implied the unique historicity of a phenomenon originating only in the decades after Rajaratnam’s speech. If so, the ‘Global City’ appearing in a Singaporean minister’s speech might be no more than a terminological quirk, requiring little

---

<sup>10</sup> I cannot confidently ascertain if Rajaratnam had ever read Hall, but latter’s well-circulated text as indicative of the period’s thinking. In turn, the two are indebted to Toynbee, whose writing on ‘world cities’ was evocative less of political economy and more of a historical *longue dureé*. Declining civilizations were transformed into universal states, but “mechanised cities” were “dynamically on the move”: these themes were consistently present in Toynbee’s impressive, 12-volume *Study of History* and his 1970 book *Cities on the Move*.

<sup>11</sup> Rajaratnam, ‘Global City’, p.1, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Saskia Sassen, ‘Introducing a Concept’, p. 28. She mentions Braudel, which Rajaratnam did not engage with substantially.

interest beyond correcting an etymological footnote somewhere or another. However, it is noteworthy that a newly-independent government would place the entirety of their society (or at least its urban synecdoche, Global City-Singapore) at the vagaries of the world system so early on and in starkly existential terms.

There Is No Alternative found an Asian articulation well before the injustices of 'globalization' and the excesses of deliberately cultivating an international economic dependence were highlighted by European and American intellectuals. While allowing that ideological conditions fertile for neoliberalism's political dominance existed long before the usual candidates – the 1979 Volcker Shock, elections of Thatcher and Reagan for example – confidently pinpointing one origin story in an Asian city-state seems too teleological. Historicising the increasing hegemony of 'global city' thought in Singapore is therefore important not just to avoid overdetermining the rise of any complex historical phenomenon, but understanding what other ideas and possibilities were displaced in turn. I contend that it was one vision of justice that was lost.

## Exit

In May 1976, the PAP broke from the Socialist International with a dramatic flurry.<sup>13</sup> In an open letter to the entire organisation, Singapore's strongman Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew accused it of "becoming a vehicle to further the communist cause in Singapore", with the Dutch Labour Party in particular acting on the agitation of a "communist front group in Singapore".<sup>14</sup> The PAP's labour head, Devan Nair, opined that commentaries tabled by the British Labour Party contained "downright falsehoods", the PAP's labour head charged. Quoting Lee's cautionary words at a Commonwealth meeting a few years earlier Nair declared, "I know myself. And I know my enemy. What I did not bargain for was the weakness and soft-headedness of my friends."

The Socialist International and the transnational political movement it represented created many strange bedfellows. The acrimonious departure of the PAP was not altogether unexpected: an organisation dominated by Western European parties, governing in a manner compatible with the postwar 'liberal international' project generated significant ideological differences. Yet, the language of "democratic socialism" had been commonplace throughout state publications. An issue of the Singapore Police's official journal published in early 1972 opened with an editorial forcefully defending "our own brand of democratic socialism which is never dogmatic but pragmatic in approach", "tailored to meet the needs of the people and to suit local conditions".<sup>15</sup> This democratic socialism was "non-communist internally and externally" and upheld "non-alignment but not neutrality in foreign policy".

---

<sup>13</sup> This event was reported even in the New York Times. Within the same year, the PAP would publish a defensive volume containing rebuttals and testimonials from various public servants of Singapore's efficiency and development. See CV Devan Nair, *Socialism That Works ... the Singapore Way* (Singapore: Federal Publications, 1976).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Francis T. Seow, *The Media Enthralled: Singapore Revisited* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), p. 110.

<sup>15</sup> 'Editorial', *Singapore Police Journal*, 5.2 (1972), 1-7.



The spectre of communism haunting Singapore would be conjured time and time again. In their final speech to the Socialist International, the PAP held that the “growing threat of guerrilla insurgencies” from communism was the ultimate preoccupation of the party, and by extension, the country.<sup>16</sup> Associations communism tainted European parties, whose accusations of authoritarianism within Singapore’s ruling party “share[d] everything in common with the propaganda ploy of the communist united front in Singapore”.<sup>17</sup> Although the historiography surrounding Singapore’s anti-communist detentions and the reality of the communist ‘threat’ in Singapore, there is no question that party elites saw the neutering of left-wing activism and politicians as crucial to their consolidation of power immediately after independence.<sup>18</sup>

Democratic socialism was therefore a transitional rhetoric at best, undoubtedly so after the harsh suppression of bona fide socialism in Singapore. Early in PAP governance, the “social” had come to eclipse “democracy” in “putting democratic socialism in action”, as a 1963 Ministry of Culture described of its housing policy.<sup>19</sup> By 1972, democratic socialism signified a “forward-looking developmental nationalism – ceasing to be anti-colonial”, because “anti-colonialism, in the words of Foreign Minister S. Rajaratnam, is now sterile and unproductive”. In its place was democratic socialism as “sustained work, self-denial and sacrifice”, to be reified as a programme implementing rapid industrialisation and public order.<sup>20</sup> I argue Rajaratnam’s role within these ideological manoeuvres was to present a narrative of global cities as a party rejoinder to whatever vestiges of democratic socialism the PAP decisively shed.<sup>21</sup> One international narrative – of congresses,

---

<sup>16</sup> CV Devan Nair, ‘Statement on Behalf of the People’s Action Party of Singapore Made at the Meeting of the Bureau of the Socialist International Held in London on 28-29 May 1976’, p. 69.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 40.

<sup>18</sup> Pingtjin Thum, “‘The Fundamental Issue Is Anti-Colonialism, Not Merger’: Singapore’s “Progressive Left”, Operation Coldstore, and the Creation of Malaysia’, *Asia Research Institute, Working Paper Series*, 211, 2013, and Michael D. Barr, *Singapore: A Modern History* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), p. 101-107.

<sup>19</sup> Ministry of Culture, Singapore, *Democratic Socialism in Action* (1963).

<sup>20</sup> ‘Editorial’, *Singapore Police Journal*, 5.2 (1972).

<sup>21</sup> Amongst the PAP leaders, Rajaratnam’s continued engagement with ideas from the humanities (often emanating from European, in particular Anglophone cores)

transnational exchange, and learning – was discarded for the early ascent of globalization, even if it was never described in such terms.<sup>22</sup>

It was little wonder, then, that the global city concept converged with neoliberalism's ascent. The role of global centres, frequently conceived as conduits of highly-mobile, unaccountable capital, precarious labour, and financialised insulation of popular pressures even amidst paradigmatic democracies – London, Zurich, New York – also applies to Singapore, but I stress the post-imperial amnesia, imagined colonial lineage, and rationalising, modernisation framework that might be equally formative of neoliberalism outside its traditional centres. Neoliberalism and the global city, like any other historical concept, is frequently discussed in terms of analytical 'ideal-types', or uncritically embraced or lambasted; the task is to unravel its genealogy to better grasp its past, possibilities, and normative dimensions.

---

was unparalleled. Despite the hard-nosed insistence by later PAP members of 'non-ideological' governance, overlooking the significance of these ideas and frames to its early leadership obscures their formative role in party identity and Singapore's policy orientation. Benedict Anderson's lament that "unlike most other isms, nationalism has never produced its own grand thinkers: no Hobbeses, Tocquevilles, Marxes or Webers" may be *almost* true, but downplays the significance of nationalist thinking in some places to exaggerate the dearth elsewhere.

<sup>22</sup> Democratic socialism featured in the constitution of the early PAP, and remains there as a pale shadow of its former ideological self. Socialism, broadly understood, provides an interesting what-if? for many histories of Southeast Asia – a few months before Singapore's independence, the Japanese Socialist Party proposed a meeting of similar parties in East Asia. Sonny Liew's graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* (2015) is a thought-provoking exploration of such themes.

## Envisaging

Understanding the global city through this turn to world history warns us of the dangers of adopting certain analytical frames. “Connectivity talk” even in academia – the evocation of networks, connections, and instantaneous communication as a feature of past and present – is not just analytical concept but “an ideological formation”, whose uncritical academic reproduction “risks making itself the mouthpiece of an ideology that portends to merely describe a networked globe but more often seeks to remake the world in its highly normative mold.”<sup>23</sup> Despite the competitive, cosmopolitan connotations of ‘global cities’ talk, these cities existed, and continue to exist, in a hierarchical world configured by colonial, capital, and political power. To be interconnected was not to be equal.

It must therefore be possible to imagine alternative global cities, which begins with valuing alternative global goods. There are certainly many who charge that being embedded in the global city (and networks of global cities) had never benefitted them, but the discourse of globality, even after developmental states undertook a neoliberal turn, is akin to hegemonic.<sup>24</sup> The triteness of Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ thesis retains an unsettling edge, in suggesting it is difficult to imagine anything but the teleology of liberal globalisation.<sup>25</sup> Despite the exceptionalist rhetoric of Singaporean leaders echoed through the years, even the tropes of ‘East Asian developmental capitalism’ enmeshed in port and factory centres, networked city-state, or duplicitous cosmopolitanism across financial and cultural capitals, serve as reminders that frustration with the injustice of cities are real.

---

<sup>23</sup> Vanessa Ogle, *The Global Transformation of Time: 1870–1950* (Harvard University Press, 2015), p.204.

<sup>24</sup> See Bae-Gyoon Park, Richard Child Hill, and Asato Saito, *Locating Neoliberalism in East Asia: Neoliberalizing Spaces in Developmental States* (John Wiley & Sons, 2012), Kenneth Paul Tan, *Governing Global-City Singapore: Legacies and Futures after Lee Kuan Yew* (Taylor & Francis, 2016).

<sup>25</sup> Or maybe it was about the capture of our psyches: “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism”, so it goes.

Neither are cities wholly extractive, aggregative or imagined entities to legitimise unbridled neoliberalism. They are distinct, physical landscapes, facilitating a range of associations. As Loren King and Michael Blake point out, cities facilitate a distinct “spatial form of social life within the Westphalian state” and are “a vital component of global networks of finance, trade, and human movements and cultural exchange”.<sup>26</sup> Mainstream political theory, operating in the ‘shadow of John Rawls’ have understood justice largely through a distributive paradigm, consisting mostly of distributable, fungible goods.<sup>27</sup> Yet, cities also produce various identities and associations, and open up problems like land use, migration, or labour rights. Liberal theories of justice have taken society as a cooperative venture for mutual advantage, but *what* social goods a city produces are also sensitive to various dynamics of agglomeration that call for attention to different cities’ unique situations across different regions.

Yet, the counter-literature on the justice of cities do not fully escape the liberal paradigm they critique.<sup>28</sup> Thinking in economic “agglomeration externalities”, like the “cultural production” of Hollywood does not take us far beyond the orbit of the “creative city”, itself beholden to ideas of ‘human capital’ that ruthlessly assimilate academic, artistic and other practices into the framework of economic value.<sup>29</sup> Thinking about value in this sense leads to an uncanny convergence with the very paradigms critiqued here – after all, the ‘world cities’ literature Rajaratnam read treated cities largely as sites of

---

<sup>26</sup> King and Blake, ‘Global Cities, Global Justice?’.

<sup>27</sup> Katrina Forrester, *In the Shadow of Justice: Postwar Liberalism and the Remaking of Political Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2019). These goods are not necessarily *material*, but the crucial assumption of these debates are that they can be re-allocated (e.g. through Rawls’ famous ‘difference principle’).

<sup>28</sup> Although David Harvey’s *Social Justice and the City* (1973) suggests his interest in this project as a geographer, he does not develop a comprehensive account beyond the potential of the working class.

<sup>29</sup> Singapore dabbled with creative cities – but blithely ignored matters of equality and justice. Significant contradictions were generated: relaxation on stringent media laws or new recreational areas meant to attract progressive professionals could never massage away the non-recognition of a broad variety of pluralistic – especially non-heteronormative – values and relationships. See Natalie Oswin, *Global City Futures: Desire and Development in Singapore* (University of Georgia Press, 2019).

concentration, production, exchange, rather than on its own terms of urban environments and communities.

Moving past liberalism's heavy imprint on theorising justice places us on the path towards thinking about the city more expansively. Susan Fainstein's idea of the "just city" argues justice should be "the first evaluative criterion used in policy making", and engages considerably with various theorists of justice like Rawls, Iris Marion Young, correctly identifying the pitfalls of thinking "a more open, more democratic process" to planning suffices to uphold justice in the city.<sup>30</sup> Idealising open communication elides questions over whether citizens' judgment of their interests or public good may be distorted by structural inequalities, power hierarchies, and historical interactions. Yet, Fainstein's talk of "enhanced capabilities", and her model of "nonreformist reforms" do little to challenge the status quo.<sup>31</sup> For all her use of history to condemn inequitable, undemocratic planning, there is little sense of the possibilities of just planning.

With the limited words remaining, I suggest that these theories of justice might be better served through an understanding of access – access to the complex, overlapping worlds that cities are constituted by and represent. Their concrete, physical spaces are essential to the lives of those dwelling between, and traditional claims to justice and authority – revolving around relative social and economic contributions, or legalistic obligations of institutional respect, overlook this crucial fact of justice. Moreover, the distributive account of justice overlooks a dramatically different understanding produced in history: the most ambitious, wide-reaching upheavals often gestated and unfolded through cities, their logic of birth inseparable from its streets and centres.

---

<sup>30</sup> Susan S. Fainstein, *The Just City* (Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 6, 23.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17, 54. She explicitly connects her capabilities approach to the writing of Martha Nussbaum and Amartya Sen, that understands citizens' judgments through their compatibility with democratic norms, whether distributions enhance the 'capabilities' of the relatively disadvantaged, and its effects on recognition. The end result is a model of justice that seems extremely minimal.

The time of Toynbee was an era of ‘anti-imperial metropolis’. European capitals were the ultimate beneficiary of their colonial ventures overseas, with these racialised, hierarchical dynamics reproduced within their space. Yet, Paris or London in the interwar years were also capitals for “the men without a country”, a pole for dissidents spanning linguistic groups, continents and even ideologies; within the colonies, networks of Malay intellectuals across British ports or pan-Africanists in hubs like Accra envisaged a vastly different world.<sup>32</sup> Talk of justice, inflected with anti-colonial, nationalist and often Marxist thought point to both cities *and* the ideologies developed within them as global. In some ways, even these nationalist impulses were contained in the aftermath of independence, where nation-building projects under a high-modernist framework sought to sustain a particular vision of community, often giving way to single-party dominance. These moments of political change – often, of ossifying injustice and domination – coalesced around issues of access. In Singapore, “by the time the left took to the streets for one last bid for power in the 1960s, ‘the street’ was already in the process of disappearing”.<sup>33</sup> Power shaped space, because it was understood by all that space shaped power.

Theorising justice therefore not just about timeless distributive principles, but focusing on particular moments of change, upheaval or alienation as connected to the city’s form, while understanding what distinctive relationships, goods and identities are produced through the city. Even as an undergraduate in Oxford, I sense I inhabit two worlds. One is an incredibly cosmopolitan, affluent centre for learning, steeped in international influences and sociopolitical obligations as much as it has been insulated from them. The other – literally relegated to the fringes, in some instances – with its own past of industrial action and

---

<sup>32</sup> Michael Goebel, *Anti-Imperial Metropolis: Interwar Paris and the Seeds of Third World Nationalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 2. See Ai-Lin Chua, ‘Imperial Subjects, Straits Citizens: Anglophone Asians and the Struggle for Political Rights in Inter-War Singapore’, in *Paths Not Taken: Political Pluralism in Post-War Singapore* (NUS Press, 2008), and Meredith Terretta, ‘Cameroonian Nationalists Go Global: From Forest “Maquis” to a Pan-African Accra’, *The Journal of African History*, 2010, 189–212.

<sup>33</sup> Gregory Clancey, ‘Toward a Spatial History of Emergency: Notes from Singapore’, in *Beyond Description* (Routledge, 2004), pp. 45.

negotiation.<sup>34</sup> This essay has been a call to jettison the capital-G global city, right as global history and global political justice has become major paradigms within their disciplines. If that seems curious, Thomas Nagel provides a good reminder. “We do not live in a just world. This may be the least controversial claim one could make in political theory”.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> I don't mean to suggest there is an 'actual' Oxford to be nostalgically imagined, that “working” Oxford is deeply provincial instead of worldly, nor that these two words are hermetically sealed. Rather, ‘town vs. gown’ dynamics have evolved remarkably with increasingly-mobile students, growing endowments, the changing role of higher education across societies, and more scrutiny towards elitism and the ‘ivory tower’.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Nagel, ‘The Problem of Global Justice’, *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 33.2 (2005), 113.