Singapore ideas

ideas from and about Singapore

Let there be light: Casting away the shadow of the asymptote

These three have robb'd me, and this demi-devil —
For he's a bastard one— had plotted with them
To take my life. Two of these fellows you
Must know and own; this thing of darkness I
Acknowledge mine. – *The Tempest*, Shakespeare

The latest scandal in Singapore, this time involving the sale of computer systems in town councils to a firm which apparently was set-up with a paid-up capital of $2 enforces the claims by some about our Potemkin village status — that many still take as somehow reflecting that all is well in the country.

Background to this kerfuffle can be read here: link 1, link 2, link 3, link 4.

What diehard supporters of the Establishment, apart from other concerned citizens, should realize is that this situation bears some genuine thought. If this strange issue involving a single tender being won by a firm composing three former Members of Parliament of the ruling party does not smack of conflict of interest, then the term 'conflict of interest' has lost all meaning.

But there are more disturbing questions that must be raised: If the top echelon in Singapore is unaware or cannot quite prevent situations like this from arising, then they are evidently losing their grip on important things. If they are aware and perhaps even sanctioned this, then it behooves them to come clean on the matter. It will do them and all concerned, not to mention the country, a lot of good.

These are but a couple of basic questions for the ruling party and government to answer to start the New Year with the right resolutions:

1. How did a situation arise where the only bid made and accepted involved a company with former MPs of the ruling party? This bid should not even have been made.

2. What was the amount collected by this firm that got the contract and what has been done with the money?

There are still good men and women in the Establishment and they should stand up to not only wield their influence within it for pragmatic reasons, but do so out of a sense of rectitude. No one is asking them to take the high road for some great and divine principle of righteousness: That may be too much to ask.

But they can do the right thing to set the record straight. For when there is a final reckoning, and this will come to pass in some form or another, they would have cleared their names. They should speak the truth and bring about some positive change while they can for the sake of their families and children. One day their kids can stand tall and say with justified pride: My father/mother helped bring into light an area that was shrouded in obfuscation. They will not have to go through the trouble of changing their names or the spelling of their surnames to hide from generations of negativity they may face for simply familial links to those who did not stand up and speak the truth; or led lives of darkness.

The mainstream media is losing further credibility in not playing a role openly to help clarify the truth of the matter. They too are tools for perpetrating lack of clarity than anything else. When a proper study is done of the Singapore media in the 21st century, it will be apparent that we had arguably the most Orwellian mainstream media on earth. That too would be another first for us.

While not quite comparing the fiasco in Singapore to that of the Watergate break-in, the situation begs *some* comparison in that what was seen as a small affair initially turned into something else. When we finally got the goods on Nixon, the man practically said that this is something that is part of politics as usual; it's just that in his case – when he was caught – he was scapegoated. Perhaps there is more truth in this than most care to admit.

We also certainly have 'Tricky Dick' to thank for perhaps being the only American politician in the twentieth century to have rivaled many of Kennedy's iconic lines and speeches by just one phrase: "I'm not a crook." What a guy.

The impeach Nixon cries and protests did have some results: They threw the bum out. But let us take a look at the phenomena of peoples' uprisings around the world today, something that just will not go away: This standing up of people to a collapsing world capitalist paradigm, the questioning by alternative media websites, the spread and force of the social media in connecting people everywhere which is a sign of the asymptotes of power being reached.

The idea of the asymptotes of power, adapted from Bichler and Nitzan (a link is provided in the "Reference" below) implies the reaching of the limits and bounds of power, beyond which any exertion of control by the powerful/capitalists may result in a backlash beyond any of their further control. (In fact, this seems to have happened). Their earlier ideas of capital as an expression of power are developed further in "The asymptotes of power" in which the duo state –

…we have set aside the liberal-democratic façade that economists label 'the economy' and instead concentrated on the enfolded hierarchies of organized power. The nominal quantity of capital, we have argued, represents not material consumption and production, but commodified power. In modern capitalism, the quantities of capitalist power are expressed distributionally, as differential ratios of nominal dollar magnitudes. And the key to understanding capital *as* power is to decipher the connection between the qualitative processes of power on the one hand, and the nominal distributional quantities that these processes engender on the other (Bichler and Nitzan 31).

All figures on profit made and earning indicators for various segments of society, particularly that of the infamous money-grubbing 1%, is an expression of qualitative and quantitative power relationships and activities. Bichler and Nitzan in their own way enlarge and enrich the Marxian perspective of what is political-economy by showing that capitalists' pursuit of wealth accumulation is done in a manner that allows them to hone their activities as a form of sabotage (that some may see only as profit maximization). There is greater calculation, manipulation and ordering ('creordering' is the term they use) of things by capitalists/power-brokers than current delusional neoclassical economic theories imagine.

But coming back to the idea of capitalists reaching the limits of their exploitative capacities, Bichler and Nitzan then go on to say:

This asymptotic situation, we believe, explains why leading capitalists have been struck by systemic fear. Peering into the future, they realize that the only way to further increase their distributional power is to apply an even greater dose of violence. Yet, given the high level of force already being exerted, and given that the exertion of even greater force may bring about heightened resistance, capitalists are increasingly fearful of the backlash they are about to unleash. The closer they get to the asymptote, the bleaker the future they see (Bichler and Nitzan 31).

The above lines are almost a perfect fit for placing into context the fiscal cliff the US was at the brink of and only just seems to have averted: This situation of potentially leading to what are supposedly recessional conditions is largely due to the excessive exploitation of human beings/labour and debt- ridden ruination of the American economy thanks to the corporate takeover of America (not forgetting a history of international violence).

But this time, a point of no-return seems to have been reached as a type of maximal asymptotic mark. This means that we are reaching a threshold which can only be safely navigated through only by making changes and taking actions that reflect a post-capitalist mode of thinking. This asymptotic point cannot be worked through using the usual pathetic neoclassical economic approach of just juggling around with monetary and fiscal issues in the political backroom which are then re-sold (yet again) to the public as 'sustaining growth' and 'saving jobs', etc. This is no longer going to work. The game is up.

If the capitalist ultras in America believe that they can still keep the fort going without answering for the fallout from severe social costs and aggravated public unhappiness through squeezing the well-nigh living-dead middle classes and assuaging the wealthy — and then crushing everyone else, they will have another thing coming to them. For indeed the power-mongers need to ask, "How much more force and violence are needed to keep the current capitalist regime going? … In order to have reached the peak level of power it currently enjoys, the ruling class has had to inflict growing threats, sabotage and pain on the underlying population" (Bichler and Nitzan 32).

In case there is any doubt as to how bad the situation is for the world's number one capitalist state we are informed how the paradigm of hiving-off the majority to their own devices so as to allow the elites to wallow in their comfort zones — has resulted in more people impoverished and turning to crime. In discussing the correctional population in the US which –

…includes the number of adults in prison, in jail, on probation and on parole… we can see, since the 1940s this ratio has been tightly and positively correlated with the distributional power of the ruling class: the greater the power indicated by the income share of the top 10 per cent of the population, the larger the dose of violence proxied by the correctional population. Presently, the number of 'corrected' adults is equivalent to nearly 5 per cent of the U.S. labour force. This is the largest proportion in the world, as well as in the history of the United States. Although there are no hard and fast rules here, it is doubtful that this massive punishment can be increased much further without highly destabilizing consequences. With the underlying magma visibly shifting, the shadow of the asymptote cannot be clearer (Bichler and Nitzan 33).

This is really about a political and economic system that thrives on the waste and expenditure of human beings as that much surplus meant to be sacrificed on the altars of expediency and Capital. And the Occupy movement and the protests taking place in the Middle East, Europe and elsewhere are signs of the asymptote being reached, if not actually being breached, and people showing that they are starting to see through the global scam of capitalist exploitation lorded over them. These ideas are examined further in recent pieces by Henry A. Giroux and an essay of mine, "The economy of violence."

Coming back to the problematic situation in Singapore's town council set-up: This too is indicative of the asymptotes of power being reached in that after decades of one-party rule and domination of almost every aspect of human life, the nodal points of 'enough is enough' are reaching activation. In the 2011 general elections there was a further fall in votes for the ruling party, including the loss for the first time of a mega-constituency (Group Representation Constituency) to the opposition. This also resulted in the government losing its then foreign minister who anchored the GRC. In addition to this, the rulers faced a further unpleasantness when they also re-lost to the opposition a single member seat in a by-election in 2012.

In fact, 2012 will be seen as the year a trend was established, that is, the start of a stream of setbacks for the ruling elite: For we had the surfacing of apparent corruption charges and indiscretions by members of the Establishment. Furthermore, the government's drive for relentless GDP expansion and intention to have a population of at least 6 million or so on a small island republic is pushing Singapore to its asymptotic mark; already some think that we are breaching the parameters of our much touted social stability. This may be evinced, some claim, by the increasing online vitriol that brought to the fore suppressed racist issues that took many – who saw the country as a haven from such attitudes — by genuine surprise. This seems to underscore at times the growing resentment against foreigners in Singapore. But these are also danger signs of the ruling party having taken the country to the edge of its capitalist paradigm and thereby seeming to push social stress over the ledge. The time has come for a change of the game plan and we need to be creative in enacting a post-capitalist paradigm.

The problem with the latter for the ruling elite is that this will entail curtailing their domination of the country in every sense of the term. So a serious dilemma is emerging for the elites in general, as it inevitably does, when asymptotic points of power are reached. We and many other capitalistically shaped states are reaching a point of no-return, but the situation if handled properly — with courage, integrity, vision and moral ballast — can be transformed into something positive.

It may also be of interest to readers that *TR Emeritus* — regarded by some as Singapore's most prominent socio-political blog — has been subject to DDoS attacks since its inception just over a year ago. Coincidentally, whenever *TRE* seems on the verge, or in the process, of breaking important but politically sensitive news/write-ups, the site is attacked. In the last instance, when the Speaker of Parliament was about to resign due to his personal indiscretions, *TRE* was one of the sites that was under attack for a few days. The news was then broken by the ruling party through the traditionally

subservient mainstream media. While some may interpret this as some form of effective damage control, it could also be a further manifestation of asymptotic points of power being reached: In any case, the online world cannot be kept mum for long.

To some of us these continued attacks on *TRE*, if anything, support the thesis that it is primarily a platform for truth-telling, and that those who lurk in the shadows and are trying to prolong their collapsing service-to-self paradigm and power-over-others obsession are facing their end of times: This is what the end of the Mayan Long Count is about.

To those who doubted the Mayan prophecies that the end of 2012 will be the jumpstart to a New Age the recent coming to light of so much that is decayed and morally decrepit about the world and the country is a sign of more positive things to come. Let the people stand up and let those who are still in vestiges of darkness in corporate and governmental Establishments everywhere reclaim their human sanctity and speak up and reveal all that needs to be brought out into the open for healing.

In the last scene of Murnau's *Nosferatu*, the vampiric Count Orlok is vaporized as he is blasted by the fresh God-given sunlight that floods the room of his latest iniquity. He is too busy sucking the blood of his victim to notice that he has overstayed his presence. After revelling in a night of darkness he is trapped into succumbing to his much feared destruction that he avoided through centuries – with the rise of a new dawn. He too had reached a point of no- return and had no exit plan other than to continue feeding-off the life force of others to sustain his viciously exploitative existence.

And so too the asymptotic points of power/darkness have also been reached and we are breaching into erstwhile strongholds as there are increasing revelations of what has been hidden away from the public gaze for the benefit of the elites.

Let 2013 be the year that people everywhere stand in their truth, and cast their light with the force of the sun to clear their countries of the shadow of the vampire whose reign of terror is finally coming to an end as it is burned to Light.

[**Note:** A shorter version of this essay was published on *TR Emeritus* as "Let there be light" on 27th December 2012.]

Update: The ruling party's response to the computer system tender fracas, which raises more troubling questions than it answers, can be found here: link]

Reference:

1. Bichler, Shimshon and Nitzan, Jonathan."The Asymptotes of Power", *real-world economics review*, issue no. 60, 20 June 2012, pp. 18-53,

http://www.paecon.net/PAEReview/issue60/BichlerNitzan60.pdf

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