

Ho Rui An

# Technocratic Magic in the Contagion Economy

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Something extraordinary happened in Singapore in March this year as the country fought against a new surge of Covid-19 infections. In the middle of a speech addressed to the parliament, Lawrence Wong, the minister cochairing the taskforce responding to the outbreak, began weeping. His emotions had taken over as he paid tribute to essential workers, and he paused to collect himself. After two minutes, the minister continued, his voice still trembling, by acknowledging the growing fear and anxiety that Singaporeans were facing. In speaking about fear and anxiety while showing the very same fear and anxiety, speech in that moment became a mimicry of that which was spoken. In a country where leaders are known for having the emotional range of an instruction manual, such an oral performance was remarkable. Indeed, it can be said that politicians in Singapore do not speak as much as they communicate. The less oratorical flair, the less speechifying, the clearer the message.

In the early days of this second wave of infections, coming mostly from returnees from Europe as that continent became the new epicenter of the pandemic, the calm and unaffected manner with which the taskforce representatives provided their periodic updates comforted residents rattled by the prospect of community spread. Social media gushed over the soothing effect the minister's briefings had on their nerves, with some going as far as to nominate his voice as their desired pandemic soundtrack, something they claimed they could listen to all day. Suddenly, the technocrat's stylistic deficit became desirable, even sexy. It was not uncommon to hear foreigners in Singapore wondering aloud if the government could export its hard-nosed, nonhysterical crisis management to other governments clearly in need of more levelheadedness.

Populist demagogues have most often been held up as the inverse image of technocrats. While the former thrive on immediacy, whether through the fantasy that the virus will, like a miracle, disappear overnight, or through the ability to speak extemporaneously without the filter of propriety or scientific reason, the latter make it their task to emphasize the limits of their representational role. Even as technocrats address the people in real time and present models charting the progress of the spread, they take every opportunity to stress that models can only tell us so much.

While much has been said about how the macho tough talk of populist demagogues from Trump to Bolsonaro to Duterte is built on the rejection of science or even reality itself, it is more specifically this representational logic of contingency-based decision-making that such



Lawrence Wong, the minister cochairing the multi-ministry taskforce on Covid-19 in Singapore, tears up midway through his speech. Source [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wHDTY55\\_8I](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4wHDTY55_8I).

figures disdain. Rather than persist in the tasks of observation and representation, they short-circuit them by the sheer force of their personality. The populist demagogue does not need to read the figures as *he is the figure*. He can only react by declaring, as Duterte did in February, that he had been looking for the coronavirus, because he wanted “to slap the idiot.”<sup>1</sup> Even when they are finally moved to act, such leaders make it a point to ensure that every measure undertaken by the state is experienced as an extension of their presence, as Trump did when he printed his signature on the stimulus checks doled out to Americans. Any handout must be construed by the people as a personal gift from an exceptional figure to be repaid by their votes in a time to come.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, the technocrat exemplifies everything the populist demagogue resents about the state. This is not because the technocrat embodies the state in any figural sense, but quite the opposite: they *literally* perform the state by refusing the body. Often mocked for sounding like they are reading off a script, technocrats model their orality after the written. This is insofar as writing is the precondition of administration: it replaces the singularity of face-to-face encounters with their inscription as files, translating the particular into the general.<sup>3</sup> So even when the technocrat turns to the oral, speech is to be received not as an effect of the live body but as a transmission of the written.

This logic is anathema to the populist demagogue who not only seeks to inflate his live presence, but also perceives the state to be a moribund body constraining the awesome power of his own body.<sup>4</sup> In the case of Trump, his rambling, incendiary, and sometimes inchoate speech in itself expresses a contempt for institutions that extends to the foundational institution that is language itself.<sup>5</sup> If populism of the republican variety is contingent upon the monumentalization of the Rousseauian Great Legislator as the incarnation of the law, on the basis of which the “general will” of the people is enunciated through a singular body, the populist demagogue appropriates the monument as a stage for an always ongoing performance of pure expressivity. His centripetal force does not project the “timeless and statuesque” presence that Rafael Sánchez observes in the Bolivarian monument, but enacts the rambunctious call-and-response of the political rally.<sup>6</sup> He demands not the passive contemplation of the immobilized masses but their horizontal remobilization along new and reactivated tribal lines. He unleashes the technocrat’s ultimate nightmare: the unruly crowds.

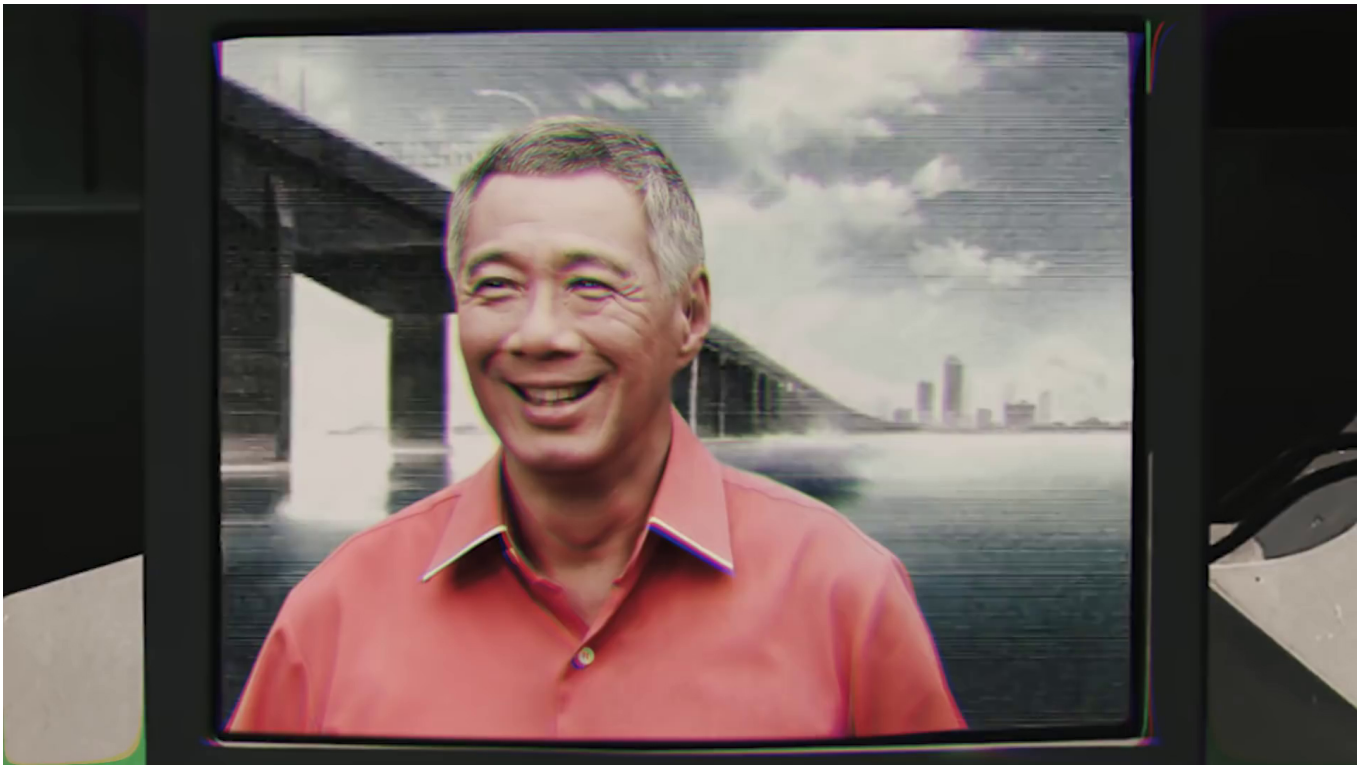
This specter of the unruly crowds has

haunted the technocratic imaginary of Singapore since its successful late-sixties industrialization. Ever so often, images of the strikes and riots that defined the “turbulent fifties and early sixties” are broadcast on television to remind us not to take our current peace and stability for granted.<sup>7</sup> Amidst a pandemic, unruly crowds are not just an index of social disorder, but a public health hazard. Given this, the last thing the technocrat wishes to cause is panic, not least the kind of panic that leads to crowds pouring into the grocery store. In fact, before the outbreak took a severe turn in early April, it’s telling that what the technocrat communicated to the people was not immediacy, but constraint. Don’t run out to buy your groceries now. Don’t hoard toilet paper. Don’t wear a mask out unless you are ill. It is as if the technocrat, in speaking, fears the response they might elicit from the people. For all their anti-monumentality, they remain wary of the centripetal tendency of their presence, so much so that they might very well desire the complete recession of their figure into the background, leaving their words in the air to be passively absorbed without any theatricalized moment of disclosure.

Instantiating this impossible desire is a video of a recent speech by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong remixed with lo-fi beats, riffing off the genre of infinitely looped videos set to relaxing, slightly scratchy downtempo music that have gained popularity online in the last two years. Released by a local digital media company just as tensions on the ground began simmering, it expresses the technocratic dream of nonfiguration as a dissolution into ambience. Words are spoken and heard, albeit in a manner that demands little response or even attentiveness from the listener. Everything, as we were told, is under control.

But then came the tears of the technocrat. Appearing in the middle of his speech, they mark a communicative breach. It is a breach that results from the failure to constrain oneself – not as catastrophic as a cough that would cause the nation to collectively skip a heartbeat, but a failure of the technocratic will no less. With the knowledge of what was to come in the following weeks, this irruptive return of the body now appears prophetic. Indeed, if the recognition and performance of constraint are internal to technocracy, these capacities would be tested not just by the worsening of the outbreak but also by its ramifications upon the center of the technocratic imaginary: the economy. Such a predicament demands a turn to immediacy, if only to secure the spatial coherence of the economy as such. One might call it technocratic magic.

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Speech by prime minister of Singapore Lee Hsien Loong remixed with lo-fi beats. Source <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1FbCtAhXx6I>.

### A Group of Men Sitting in Little Rooms

The first case of Covid-19 in Singapore was confirmed on January 23. Over the next few weeks, more cases were reported to the point where, for a brief period, Singapore had the highest number of confirmed infections of any country outside of China. But through strict quarantine enforcement and rigorous testing and contact tracing, the country kept the total number of confirmed infections low.

International plaudits poured in, praising the Singapore's response as the "gold standard."<sup>8</sup> By March, as the pandemic became global and countries across the world went into lockdown, the city-state still saw public gatherings of up to 250 people, before the permitted limit was gradually revised downwards as more infections were confirmed. Calls from nervous members of the public for a lockdown were met with indifference from the taskforce, with Wong explaining that there was "no such magic solution."<sup>9</sup> However, as the number of unlinked cases continued to rise, the government eventually announced a set of "circuit breaking" measures that included closing schools and nonessential workplaces for a full month.

The use of the electrical metaphor allowed the government to avoid calling by name what was, for all intents and purposes, a partial lockdown. When asked whether the country was going into lockdown, Wong walked back on his earlier remarks by questioning not the efficacy of a lockdown but that of the term "lockdown" itself. He suggested that the term "means different things to different people" and that the focus should be on the specific measures being introduced.<sup>10</sup> But for all the taskforce's command of the discourse of complexity, they appeared insouciant to an alarming trend that the available data then already made visible: a large proportion of daily confirmed cases were migrant workers on short-term work permits. Over the next few weeks, as numbers spiked to a daily high of 1426 cases, it became clear that massive outbreaks were happening in the cramped and sometimes unsanitary dormitories where over three hundred thousand low-wage migrant workers were housed. Affected dormitories across the island were declared isolation areas, while the circuit breaker was extended for another month.

Across the world, the pandemic has tested not only healthcare systems but also public perception of their governments. Eager commentators have even held up the epidemiological data of each country as a score sheet attesting to the relative effectiveness of political systems hastily clustered along the liberal-authoritarian divide. While apologists for authoritarian regimes have interpreted the data

as a vindication of the coercive power of the state, liberals read the same data as underscoring the importance of openness and transparency. This is despite the fact that countries that have successfully contained the virus have adopted measures that do not fall squarely on any one side of this divide.<sup>11</sup> Nonetheless, in Singapore, critics of the government did not hesitate to take up the terms of this debate when challenging its initial gradualist approach by questioning how a state equipped with an arsenal of legislative tools to whip its citizens into compliance proved so meek in the face of a real public emergency.<sup>12</sup> One could almost smell the critics' disappointment that we couldn't even do authoritarianism right.

At the same time, pandemic responses are never politically neutral, even in times when it appears like political partisanship has been suspended for "doing what works." It is unfortunate then that the dominant assessment of Singapore's recent setback is that it had simply "dropped the ball."<sup>13</sup> For all its critical posture, such a view is an indictment less of Singapore's technocratic approach in itself than of the technocrats whose decisions or lapses resulted in the country failing to live up to the promise of its own model. As it turns out, Singapore isn't technocratic *enough*.

But what defines the technocratic approach to governance? Together, narratives of the ascent of the technocratic class broadly describe how in developmental states across the world in the late seventies and eighties, elite cohorts of mostly Western-trained policymakers were catapulted into positions of power on the basis of their purported ability to set aside narrow ideological and political interests in favor of rational calculation and technical expertise in resolving economic deadlocks.<sup>14</sup> Yet, what exactly is set aside and what is construed as "rational" and "technical" in each context is highly variable.

One common tendency conflates technocracy with free-marketization – not inaccurate insofar as many technocrats of that time were indeed advocates of market liberalization. However, this conflation cannot fully account for the technocratic reply to the late-capitalist turn, not least the dramatic Keynesian responses to the pandemic we've been seeing and that will only continue in the years to come. It follows that to understand technocratic governance in Singapore and what it might mean beyond the city-state, we should approach it historically, beginning with this especially vivid picture provided by Lee Kuan Yew himself in praising the accomplishments of his government:

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All these things happen only because there is a hard framework which holds the whole thing together. There is a group of men sitting in little rooms, planning, thinking, analysing, watching figures, watching trends. And, all the time, we are two, three steps ahead of the problem. And the problems are becoming more and more manageable.<sup>15</sup>

Excerpted from a speech in 1966, a year after Singapore became an independent republic upon its unceremonious expulsion from Malaysia, these words recently made the rounds online as netizens criticized the lack of foresight demonstrated by the current leadership in their handling of the outbreak.<sup>16</sup> In his time, Lee estimated this “group of men” (and they were almost exclusively male) to number no more than 150, making up a “very thin crust of leadership” that had to be greatly expanded to avert societal collapse.<sup>17</sup> But just as important as the existence of these men were the “little rooms” they sat in. The significance of this spatial organization becomes clear later in the same speech when the prime minister directly addresses the audience: “When I first came here nearly three-and-a-half years ago, you were unable to articulate yourself. It was amorphous, inchoate, unorganised, disorganised ... The society must organise itself. And to do that, you must understand that this is yours. This microphone is yours.”<sup>18</sup>

In speaking of the masses as “amorphous, inchoate, unorganised, disorganised,” Lee was recalling the numerous strikes and riots that broke out along political and communal lines in the years leading up to the country’s independence. This changed after the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), led by Lee, outmaneuvered their left-wing opponents by imprisoning or forcing them into exile along with communists and their sympathizers, leaving the PAP with a virtual monopoly on power to secure the transition of the spatially unbounded crowds into the “tough, rugged society” of the postindependence years.<sup>19</sup> But despite the prime minister’s call for discipline and self-reliance, this society still required a “hard framework” to hold it together. Having the microphone to oneself means not self-articulation but submitting one’s voice to the representational apparatus of the state that culminates in the little rooms where a group of men sit isolated from the masses.

This separation of the group of men from the masses is not instrumental but structural. This is because the government understood the danger posed by the masses to be their tendency to succumb to the fantasies of immediacy that

were exemplified, in their view, by the strategies of mass action pursued by their left-wing adversaries and former allies. In their estimation, while both parties shared a broadly socialist, anti-imperial agenda, the left-wing penetration of trade unions and other mass organizations to incite direct action (that sometimes spilled into violence) made it more difficult to resolve the main problem of mass unemployment created by the British colonial administration, for the instability that resulted from such actions discouraged investment.

This logic is explicated in the book *Socialism that Works ... the Singapore Way*, published in 1976 to refute the allegations of “totalitarian policies and methods” made by member parties of the Socialist International against the PAP, which eventually led to its resignation from the organization.<sup>20</sup> In an essay, then-deputy prime minister Goh Keng Swee explicitly positions his “socialist economy that works” against the “magic” of his “communist” counterparts. The latter’s skill in manipulating mass organizations, he recounts, relegated Goh and his moderate colleagues to being mere “apprentices to the magician” whose “virtuosic performances” never failed to draw “thunderous rounds of applause” from the masses.<sup>21</sup> In those days, Goh recognized the infectious power of the crowds but also believed that in order for the government to operate, it was essential that the unsalaried masses first be decisively contained. This was eventually achieved by the government through two related strategies: first, the herding of the masses into high-modernist public housing provided on the condition of one’s participation in the wage economy; second, an unflinching crackdown on the labor movement in the name of its “enlightened long-term self-interest.”<sup>22</sup>

It might take a leap of imagination to speculate on the continuities between Goh’s invocation of communist magic and Wong’s dismissal of lockdown magic. For one, a population in lockdown is exactly the opposite of the unruly crowds that so haunt the technocratic imaginary. But a close reading of Wong’s comments reveals that underwriting his discourse is a figuration of the economy not dissimilar to that which informed Goh’s calculations. This is not the economy that is casually spoken of these days as that which needs to be “traded off” for public health amidst the pandemic, but the economy conceived as a complex whole with moveable and interdependent parts that cannot be shut down with a single lever. That essential services and key supply chains will have to maintain operations even in a lockdown means that parts of the economy will always remain open, and



Composite of the hand gestures of the then-deputy prime minister of Singapore, Tharman Shanmugaratnam, during an election rally speech in 2015. Source <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vrcRB3C72rk>.

these parts influence other parts. A lockdown of any magnitude would therefore not be a single gesture but would involve numerous policy decisions across all parts of the whole.<sup>23</sup>

To this end, the fantasy of the magical lockdown shares the same premise as herd immunity in that they both turn the task of resolving the crisis over to the laws of nature within a given set of spatial parameters. Hunkering down or heading out, let the virus solve itself! In reducing the role of the state to deciding whether or not to lock down, these fantasies further mirror an ontology of the free market wherein the apparent recession of the state serves as a premise for assuming that rules actively shaped by a whole array of government interventions occur naturally. Perhaps, then, it's better to trust the men in their little rooms.

Except that Singapore did eventually go into partial lockdown, even if by another name. In a sign that this shift is more substantive than formal, the men are leaving their little rooms to join the masses. Ministers have taken it upon themselves to patrol public spaces. The technocrat's discourse has taken on an actual liveness as Facebook livestreams supplement staid press conferences. Meanwhile, enforcement officers are issuing fines to those defying social-distancing rules. For residents keen on joining the effort, they can report their neighbors using a government-produced app.<sup>24</sup> No longer are the technocrats and the people constrained from directly contacting each other; every demand for immediacy must be met.

The only problem is that technocrats strain when they resort to immediacy. They are seen as plugging holes after having lost the plot. Given this, every extension of immediacy demands an equivalent effort in stepping back from the masses to reexamine the situation as a whole from their little rooms. This pertains not just to the current public health crisis, but also, more crucially, to the economic crisis that is already unfolding. But in the face of the pressure to respond immediately to an uncertainty that no amount of modelling can make calculable, this aspiration to totality can only begin by first redrawing the borders.

### **In the Short Run We Are All Keynesians**

The formidable size of Singapore's reserves has loomed over every discussion of the economy since the country entered an era of slow growth in the second half of the 2010s. The exact figure has never been disclosed, but what is known reveals a staggering sum in excess of US\$600 billion. Initially derived from budget surpluses and the private savings of every wage earner through a compulsory savings scheme, the reserves have ballooned in the past two decades

through the investment activities of the country's sovereign wealth funds, namely Temasek Holdings and the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC), which have themselves become major players in global capital markets.<sup>25</sup> Guided by the inviolable principle of fiscal prudence, existing rules stipulate that the current government can use no more than half of the expected investment returns from the country's reserves, and while it can draw on past reserves for emergency budgets, subject to the president's approval, this option was never exercised until 2009.

As the disparity widens between the country's ever-expanding reserves and the stagnant wages of its lower-income groups, discontent has mounted over the government's intransigence over the reserves. Despite this, each election year, propositions made by opposition parties for drawing upon past reserves to expand social spending have only become fodder for the ruling party to rehearse its nightmare scenario of a rogue government depleting the national coffers within a single election cycle. In the 2015 general election, proposals to give direct cash assistance to segments of the population gained so much traction that then-deputy prime minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam came out to rebuff their shaky economic premises. While defending the current levels of government spending, he explained that monies in the reserves were invested long-term and exposed to significant risk in order to earn higher returns. Every draw on the reserves today thus sacrifices future gains.<sup>26</sup>

Tharman's compelling speeches were widely shared on social media – a sign of the level of popular support for the ruling party, which has never lost an election since the country's independence. But more remarkable than the rare display of technocratic charisma was how the speaker was, throughout his speeches, effectively performing the distributional logic behind the policy decisions he has made. As he spoke about how any government in the world can only give with one hand by taking with other hand, the miming of his speech by the movement of his highly visible hands made for most uncanny viewing, enchanting even as it appeared to confirm a most profane reality: the “invisible hand” of the free market had lost its magic. No longer can we wait for the market to miraculously correct itself and deliver the social optimum. Instead, cue the technocrat who can tell us all about the economy.

But what is “the economy” really? The responses given by the technocrats so far evoke something like the sum total of all the monetary exchanges within a defined space carried out in the manner of Tharman's hand movements. But



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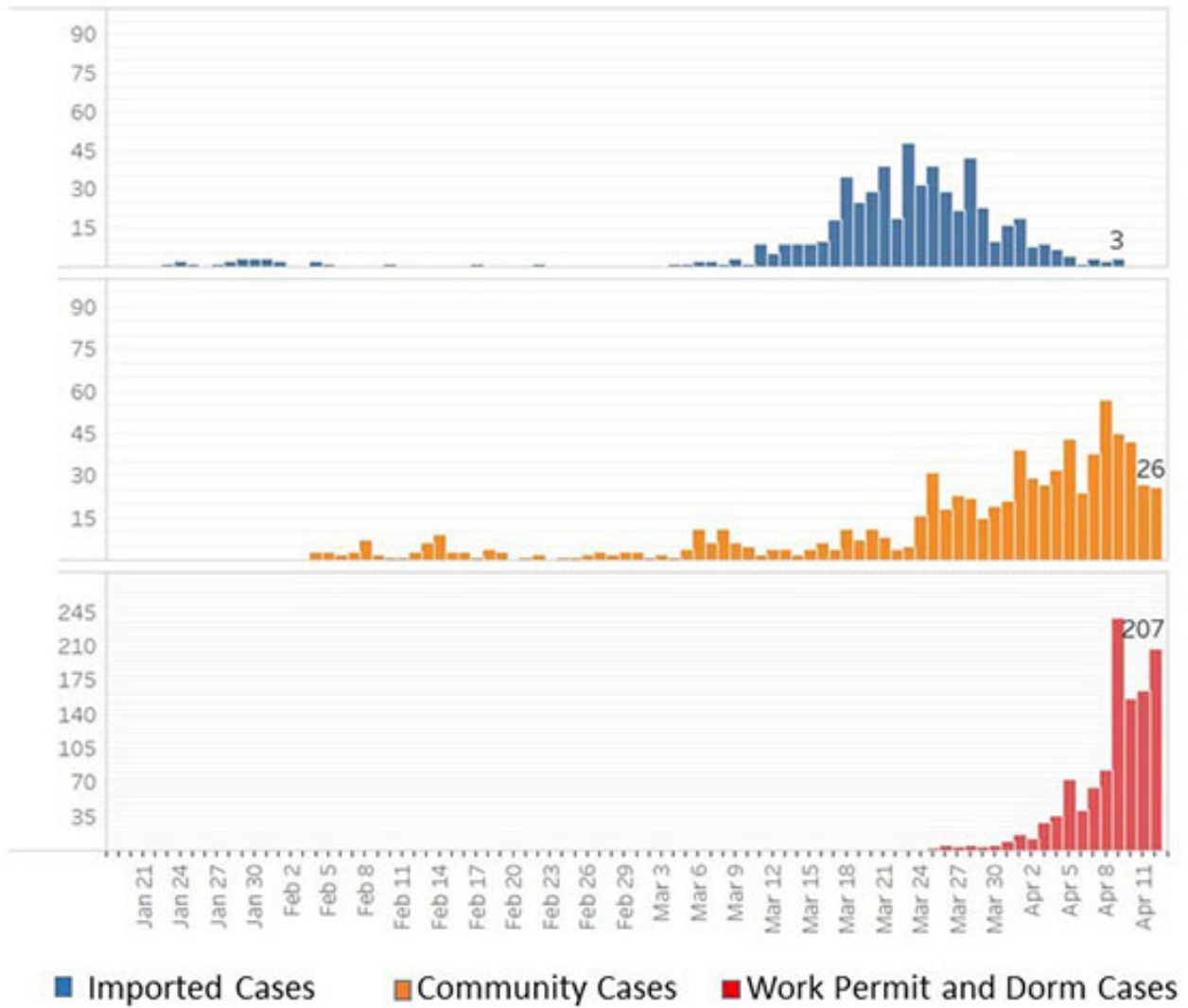
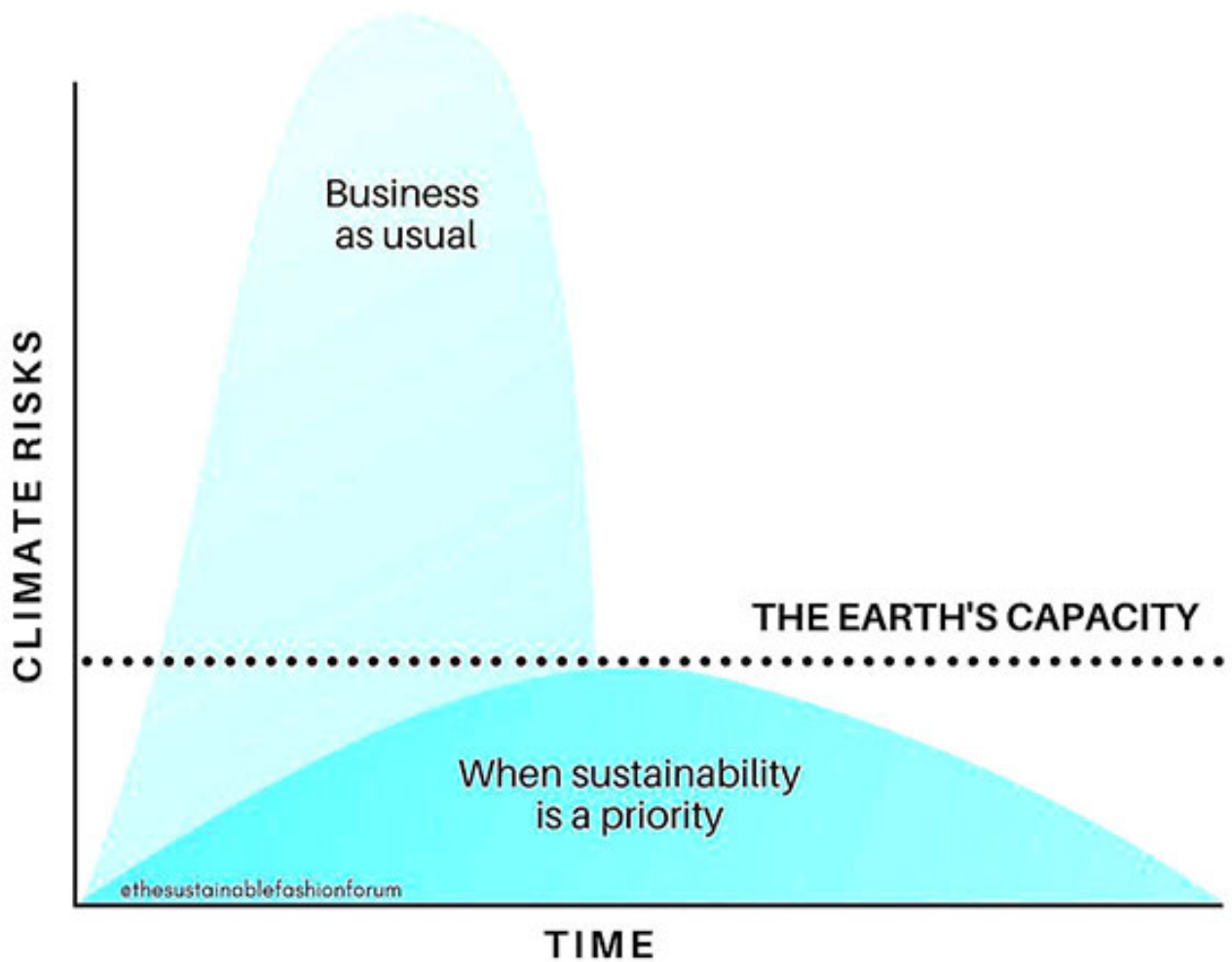


Diagram shared by Wong on Facebook separating infection cases into three epidemiological charts.

# LET'S FLATTEN THIS CURVE TOO



A play on the original "flatten the curve" graph calling for mitigation measures to slow down the spread of SARS-CoV-2.

as intuitive as this provisional sketch might seem, the concept of the economy as a distinct, self-contained, and internally dynamic social sphere is a relatively recent invention. In the genealogy drawn by Timothy Mitchell, the emergence of this concept can be situated between the 1930s and '40s amidst the turbulent events of the period that included the Great Depression and the collapse of the international financial system.<sup>27</sup> Pivotal to this moment was John Maynard Keynes, whose writings focusing on economic aggregates at a national level marked a clear departure from the spatially unbounded, laissez-faire imaginary of the neoclassical tradition. In the decades that followed the so-called Keynesian revolution, the prescriptions made by Keynes in response to the economic malaise of his time – most famously, deficit spending in a recession – would wax and wane, yet this concept of the economy that was understood by default as a national space has remained to this present day. Furthermore, crucial to understanding this space is grasping the relationship between geography and demography. This demands setting the boundaries of the space and rendering its constituent elements calculable, from which numbers are produced that allow us to refer to the economy as a “finite and mappable” object.<sup>28</sup>

While Singapore's economy is often understood through its population density – small space, many people – the relatively unrestricted movement of goods, labor, and capital that keeps this wealthy city-state running presents a test to this figuration. Technocrats who conduct the mapping and calculation of the national economy in earnest are acutely aware of the country's vulnerability to external shocks that would undo all efforts at apprehending the economy as an enclosed totality. It is on this basis that the country's vast reserves are construed as a hedge against the failure of the map, allowing the restructuring of uncertainty as risk to be redistributed so as to ensure the long-term survival of the nation-state. By this token, risk sustains the technocrats' aspiration to totality while allowing them to reckon with the gap internal to their representational task. But what exactly is the most equitable way of redistributing risk remains contentious. While the government flatly rejects using past reserves to finance a broader social safety net on the grounds that it exposes future generations to higher risks, critics contend that it is inherently regressive to transfer the surplus generated by poorer earlier generations to future generations expected to be better off.<sup>29</sup>

When the unprecedented step of dipping into the reserves was eventually taken in 2009 amidst the Great Recession, it was not because

the government decided that the risks of not doing so would be too much to bear or that it had revised its calculus for risk allocation, but because it was facing an uncertainty that could not be rendered calculable as risk.<sup>30</sup> There's nothing like the dread and gloom of a global recession to confirm the Keynesian witticism that in the long run, we are all dead. These words have never resonated more in a time where the future is so uncertain that the only rational choice is to act now to save the present instead of hedging for a future that might not even arrive.

Indeed, the economic wisdom of the day feels uncannily like a *déjà vu* of the post-2008 Keynesian “return.” In the shadow of the global meltdown of financial markets, a phalanx of self-identified New Keynesians across the world had come forth to make their case for a variety of stimulus policies. Many were validated when most countries that pursued expansionary budgets, including Singapore, which drew S\$4.9 billion from its reserves, saw relatively quick recoveries. Today, the battering of economies across the world as a result of the pandemic has seen some of the same governments go into a Keynesian overdrive, approving emergency spending of historic proportions that include extensive wage subsidies and direct cash assistance for large segments of the population. Since February, the Singapore government has unveiled four budgets totaling S\$92.9 billion that cover virtually every sector of the economy, with S\$52 billion drawn from the reserves to finance the deficit. Suddenly, the government pathologically averse to unemployment insurance was disbursing unconditional handouts.

Detractors who see Singapore as governed by a Thatcherite neoliberal state might dismiss this as an exception, yet the reality is that even prior to the pandemic, the last decade has seen a marked expansion in social spending in the country that has funded everything from one-time packages to a compulsory health insurance scheme.<sup>31</sup> Some have read this as a sign of the party shifting left in response to electoral pressures, but it is more accurate to think of it as part of a broader technocratic turn to immediacy set in motion by the crisis of late capitalism that has found its culmination in the government's current response to the looming recession.<sup>32</sup> This turn is also, as blasphemous as it sounds, characteristically Keynesian. But to understand how a political establishment that has long defined itself against the so-called Keynesian welfare state might exemplify some of its key tendencies, we must first situate Keynesianism within a longer historical trajectory that accounts for the conditions specific to capitalist modernity.

In Geoff Mann's magisterial study of Keynesianism, this trajectory runs from Hegel to Piketty. As he argues, contemporary receptions of Keynesianism that run the gamut from progressive cheerleading ("Keynes is back") to conservative disdain ("magical thinking") to leftist cynicism ("save capitalism from itself") simplify what is, "at its core, a reluctantly radical but immanent critique of liberalism."<sup>33</sup> Keynesians recognize the presumption of scarcity that underlines neoclassical economics as a liberal capitalist creation, and that poverty therefore "has no proper place," but are afraid of the society that might come after capitalism.<sup>34</sup> Mann suggests that this is not because Keynesianism has any particular affinity for the distributional mechanisms of capitalism, but because its primary mission has always been the preservation of civilization that Keynesians can only trust bourgeois liberal society (and not the revolutionary masses) to deliver.<sup>35</sup>

To this end, Keynesians share the same fear of the spatially unbounded crowds as Singapore's technocrats. But if Singapore managed to contain the unruly crowds of its pre-independence years through a brutal crackdown on labor, such an "extra-economic" option is not available to Keynesians for it would not differ much from the barbarism that is civilization's other. Instead, Keynesians seek to defer the unruly crowds through the internal mechanisms of the economy itself, but doing so would first require a radical reconfiguration of economics for the "short run" where necessity – that something *must* be done – is the preeminent principle. Unlike Singapore's first-generation leaders who had the luxury of contemplating the long run of the economy, for Keynesians, it is only the short run that matters in the face of a future where civilization as we know it might not even exist anymore.

But to save civilization, as important as a turn to immediacy is the ability to grasp the whole that brackets it. This is where the "general" of Keynes's *General Theory*, along with the focus on national aggregates, comes in. However, even here, there is a divergence between the conventional understanding of the national economy as a wholly mappable space and how Keynes himself conceives of it, for Keynes believed that the human decisions that drive the economy are never made based on strict mathematical expectation to begin with.<sup>36</sup> Instead, the national economy here is a totality that is expressed, in the final analysis, in staunchly qualitative terms, as the "actually existing" capitalism driven by incalculable expectations that inevitably lead to suboptimal markets.<sup>37</sup> Where fascism seeks to overcome this by conflating the economy with a transhistorical

national essence, Keynesianism does so by addressing the needs upon which the short-run legitimacy of the system is staked. It is pointless, indeed dangerous, for governments to speculate on what's "natural" for the market or the nation; instead, they should concern themselves only with what Mann calls the "appropriate organization of legitimation": What is the acceptable level of unemployment, poverty, and inequality and how can that level be made acceptable?<sup>38</sup>

This concern is precisely articulated by Tharman in his rally speech when he asked pointedly: "Who pays and who benefits? Is it fair?" Debunking calls for more social spending, the technocrat followed a line of argument that can only be described as classically Keynesian, first naming the crisis (poverty and inequality), then explaining what has already been done (increased expenditure), and finally legitimizing his decisions on the basis of what Keynes describes as "the kind of economy in which we actually live."<sup>39</sup> The adjacency of the two questions posed reveals that fairness here is based not on a principle of universal access to basic services, but on the legitimation of suffering endogenous to the capitalist system. A fair system, in this sense, is not one that seeks to eradicate absolute poverty but one where the poor should be content to give only a fraction in taxes of what they are taking from the state in subsidies. Even if in the years to come the government did inch closer to the Keynesian welfare state it so despises, welfare here has to be understood in the (properly) Keynesian sense: as a means to an end that is the preservation of the totality as it is.<sup>40</sup>

It is against this context that we should understand the Keynesian interventions now being implemented across the world as a response to not simply the "external" shock of SARS-CoV-2 but also the astounding levels of inequality and precarization of labor internal to capitalism that the virus has exposed and exacerbated. If pandemics once served as referents for metaphors of contagion during financial crises, it seems that today referent and metaphor have swapped places. But the pandemic is also more than just an allegory of late capitalism; it is its symptomatology. It reveals that no analysis of inter-temporal risk redistribution can legitimize the continued denial of the social surplus to the poor whose suffering in the coming recession, if left unchecked, would threaten a second contagion – this time of the unruly crowds. This is what pushes the technocratic imaginary from a distanced contemplation of the economy (rendered calculable by supplementing mapping with risk allocation) to immediately acting upon the same

economy now conceived as a qualitatively defined whole whose “welfare” has to be secured at all costs to avert catastrophe. Yet to the extent that this whole remains finite and bounded by the spatial constraint of the nation-state, it cannot account for that which falls outside of it. At this limit, the technocratic imaginary unravels.

### Contagion in the House

The first cluster of infections in a migrant worker dormitory in Singapore was identified on March 30. More clusters were announced as Singapore entered its circuit breaker a week later. By the end of the month, the total number of confirmed cases had increased to 16,169. As it stands today, nine out of ten cases are migrant workers living in a dormitory. For years, migrant rights groups have called attention to the overcrowded and unclean conditions of the many dormitories that house the majority of low-wage migrant workers on short-term work permits coming mostly from Bangladesh, India, and China and concentrated in the construction, marine shipyard, and process industries. Government regulations permit as many as twenty men within a room no larger than the size of half a tennis court, while facilities like toilets and kitchens are usually shared. Recognizing the public health hazard this posed amidst a pandemic, activists had urged immediate action to improve standards as early as February, but it was only when infection numbers ballooned at the largest dormitory complexes that the authorities were moved to act. Several dormitories were placed on complete lockdown while healthy workers in essential sectors were quickly relocated.

As the number of confirmed cases continued to escalate two weeks into the circuit breaker, it became clear that there were two separate outbreaks: one happening in the now ring-fenced dormitories where daily increases showed no sign of slowing down, and the other, outside of it, where new cases were heading towards the low double digits. The distinction was so apparent that by mid-April the Ministry of Health was releasing separate epidemiological charts for “Work Permit and Dorm Cases” and “Community Cases.”<sup>41</sup> This made for two markedly different lockdown experiences depending on how one is circumscribed by the state. While numbers pertaining to the situation in the dormitories filled the news as the workers underwent mass testing and relocation, citizens were filing applications for the many schemes provided by the four budgets under the names Unity, Resilience, Solidarity, and Fortitude. By May, the government’s infectious diseases consultant was already telling Singaporeans that the chance of getting infected outside was literally one in a million – less a numerical

expression than an index of how successfully the community has securitized itself.<sup>42</sup> In effect, the two outbreaks created two separate communities: one conceived to be divisible into smaller, moveable units to better manage the redistribution of risk, the other imagined in immunological terms as a precarious but unified whole whose health had to be maintained by the pharmaceutical power of the Keynesian state.

This spatial doubling has always been foundational to the Keynesian project. As Angela Mitropoulos points out, postwar Keynesianism was a domiciliation of the national economy in the image of the normative household, transferring onto the state the domestic (and thus apparently pre-political) organization of the necessities of life.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, public health in the sense of what Hannah Arendt calls “a gigantic, nationwide administration of housekeeping” is literally unimaginable without this Keynesian legacy.<sup>44</sup> But just as the household or *oikos*, to use the classical Greek term that denotes not family but the hierarchical management of the individuals residing within the home, depended on the subjugation of domestic labor, the public debt of the Keynesian welfare state was underwritten by extraction in the colonies, the disenfranchisement of its own racialized minorities, and the precarization of migrant labor.<sup>45</sup> These populations at the periphery of the national body were subjected to a separate spatial imaginary: one that turned them into exchangeable and expendable units onto which all the risks of partaking in “magical” Keynesian economics could be reallocated.

In the case of Singapore, its established preference for drawing upon its reserves over borrowing ostensibly strips the magic from the immediacy of its Keynesian interventions. Yet each time the announcement is made to dip into our reserves, there is no denying the awe that accompanies this self-presencing of that which is literally unfathomable in its totality. While the common perception is that the size of our reserves is owed to the productivity of earlier generations during the eighties and nineties economic boom, there is little scrutiny over how the monies invested as capital parthenogenetically reproduces itself, as Marx would put it.<sup>46</sup> For one, the success of Temasek Holdings is often simply credited to its willingness to take high risks that sometimes pays off in handsome returns.<sup>47</sup> In a sign that technocracy has become its other, such feats of conjuring have bedazzled neighboring countries enough for them to consider setting up their own Temaseks.<sup>48</sup>

Surely, this technocratic magic is in part sustained by the secrecy around the company’s investment activities, yet one does not require

corporate disclosure to recognize a profane reality behind the figures. I'm referring to the availability not only of cheap labor both domestically in the migrant workforce and within the wider Asian region where the company has invested heavily, but also of entire "surplussed" populations left at the disposal of a global capital market that thrives on volatility and who are thus most exposed to any fallout resulting from speculative maneuvers. As Neferti X. M. Tadiar suggests, these populations effectively function as "monetized aggregates of disposable life" that not only can be made readily available or redundant in response to the movements of capital, but also offered as "risk-absorbing collateral" through cuts in social spending resulting from corporate bailouts or buy-ups of essential industries to meet the immediate interests of the investment class.<sup>49</sup> When Singaporeans were told that migrant workers kept in lockdown were protecting us, what was thus expressed was really the structural reality of a triple-A economy guaranteed by placing the futures of entire populations on reserve.<sup>50</sup>

If prevailing imaginaries of financial contagion have been predicated on concepts of adaptation, mobility, and diffusion derived from molecular biology, the pandemic exposes how such imaginaries in fact require the naturalization of the nation-state boundary through the idiom of epidemiology.<sup>51</sup> The ability of the state to immobilize its entire population that we see today is the corporeal expression of its ability to "freeze" private assets in the short or long term to combat capital outflows during crises. While in some countries this means imposing capital controls often criticized as draconian, the long-standing "lockdown" of private savings in its reserves for them to "self-multiply" through the "surplussing" of entire populations means that Singapore can at once securitize itself while retaining full capital mobility amidst a contagion.

Perhaps, then, one might say it's fortunate that migrant workers in Singapore are in lockdown insofar as it finally allows them to share in the benefits of this securitization. Most have never had a better social safety net than what they are now experiencing: salaries paid, meals provided, free medical care. In the face of public outrage, the government has further promised a thorough review of the current system and already, alarming statistics show almost half of purpose-built dormitory operators flouting licensing conditions.<sup>52</sup> Such disclosures have allowed the government to couch their response to the situation in a discourse of transparency through which they openly reckon with an actually existing capitalism. Tightened regulation and increased inspection have been

suggested to regain the government's oversight of the industry, but this can only be magical thinking in the face of a lucrative, race-to-the-bottom industry where the direct consumers – the workers themselves – have virtually no say over their accommodations, and where operators and the employers who decide where to house their workers consider every amenity denied to the worker an additional cost-saving.<sup>53</sup>

In fact, it only takes noting that the addressee of the technocrats' discourse is the middle-class voter to be wary of this turn to transparency. If disclosure, as Rosalind Morris writes, is a practice of intimacy that reconsolidates a social sphere through the sharing of previously occulted knowledge, the power of secrecy here has been secreted back into the discourse of transparency through the occlusion of class.<sup>54</sup> After all, the purpose-built mega-dormitories located on the urban fringe where the outbreak has been most severe were only constructed to quell the racialized anxieties expressed by the public over the perceived threat that housing migrant workers in their own neighborhoods posed to their personal safety and property values.<sup>55</sup> Put bluntly, the workers were already in quarantine before the lockdown, not just from the citizens of the city-state, but also from the social surplus generated from their labor, a surplus that has now been marginally extended to them as a show of the state's largesse.

The tragic irony is that with the end of the lockdown and the temporary amenities they now enjoy, the workers will find themselves more expendable than they were before. We are already seeing traction gained by proposals to shift the construction industry where most migrant workers are employed from a labor-intensive to a capital-intensive model employing a much smaller but skilled and primarily local workforce.<sup>56</sup> Many other countries are on a similar path as the ongoing refetishization of the border has retracted both public health and economic policy into the spatial constraint of the nation-state, leaving surplussed populations stranded at the peripheries of a once teeming global market. In the short run, what is to come looks increasingly like a world split between countries that can sustain their Keynesian stimulations and spend their way out of the crisis and those that can only leave their citizens to fend for themselves and self-mobilize. For the worker, the difference is between retaining one's right to be exploited as labor through capitalist exchange, and being released into the "nonsubjectified" labor of merely persisting in a life held in abeyance as capitalism reinvents itself.<sup>57</sup>

But as we are already learning from the

pandemic, as much as the physical borders of the nation-state might stop the transmission of the virus, they cannot deter the spread of fear, anxiety, and rage in the contagion economy that might, for better or worse, catalyze the formation of crowds so feared by the technocratic imaginary. Signs of this are already present in the viral transmission of images showing how the rich and well-connected are passing their time in lockdown, their repose a luxury denied to those whose horizontal movements enable the continued provision of essential services while putting themselves at risk, and to those forced into vagrancy through their exclusion from the newly securitized nation-state. While such images once shaped the desire for admission into verticality in the hope of elevation, they now index the impossibility of translating a life of relentless horizontality into anything more than a view of the edifice from the ground.

Sadly, this is a view that the group of men in little rooms can never fathom. This is not a question of simply expanding the frame of the technocratic imaginary beyond the nation-state to encompass what we call the “global economy,” for what needs to be addressed is the frame itself. Take, for instance, the recent reimaginings of the ongoing climate emergency that adapt the epidemiological logic of “flattening the curve” to the management of “climate risks” so that they are kept beneath the earth’s “capacity.” The problem here is that even if planetary computation would one day allow us to calculate the totality of the earth’s resources and track it in real-time, the implication that we simply have to adjust our consumption patterns in accordance to some predetermined constraint continues to affirm the economy as the near-totalizing ground upon which today’s difficult distributional decisions are made.

But to the extent that the virus has contested this totalization through its own powers of contagion, there is an opening for us to begin thinking what I can only call the post-economy. This demands nothing less than relinquishing the aspiration to totality that at once appropriates and disavows the living labor of life underwriting this very aspiration and thus renewing the task of representing capitalist relations so that it begins from the point of view of labor, and not of the thing we call “the economy.”<sup>58</sup> The group of men in little rooms can only tell us so much. At best, we can hope for a disclosure of how far exactly we are from the brink of disaster, but not any indication of what might come after it. For now, soaking in the ambience of their words might inoculate us against the contagion in the air, but what it finally shelters us from is the possibility of a more just and livable world after the coming

storm.

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**Ho Rui An** is an artist and writer working in the intersections of contemporary art, cinema, performance, and theory. Working primarily across the mediums of lecture, essay, and film, he probes into the shifting relations between image and power, focusing on the ways by which images are produced, circulate, and disappear within contexts of globalism and governance. He has presented projects at the Gwangju Biennale (2018), Jakarta Biennale (2017), Sharjah Biennial (2017), Kochi-Muziris Biennale (2014), Haus de Kulturen der Welt, Berlin (2017), Jorge B. Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, Manila (2017), NTU Centre for Contemporary Art Singapore (2017), and Para Site, Hong Kong (2015). In 2018, he was a fellow of the DAAD Berliner Künstlerprogramm.

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- 1  
Rodrigo Roa Duterte, "Speech at Meeting with Local Chief Executives," Pasay City, February 10, 2020.
- 2  
My reading of this is indebted to Rosalind C. Morris. See her "Populist Politics in Asian Networks: Positions for Rethinking the Question of Political Subjectivity," *positions* 20, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 37–65.
- 3  
On the constitutive role of files in administration, see Cornelia Vismann, *Files: Law and Media Technology*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 4  
This is also what fundamentally distinguishes populist demagoguery from the monumental governmentality of Latin American republicanism or the authoritarian populism some have identified with Thatcherism, both of which partake in the politics of the figure in order to enrich institutional power. That said, if there is an organ of the state that excites the populist demagogue, it is the police – not because the police instantiate the rule of law but because the physical act of policing provides the referent for the populist demagogue's claim to directly fix society's problems through his personal force. On the monumental governmentality of Latin American republicanism, see Rafael Sánchez, *Dancing Jacobins: A Venezuelan Genealogy of Latin American Populism* (Fordham University Press, 2016). On authoritarian populism and Thatcherism, see Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Macmillan, 1978).
- 5  
Aaron Schuster, "Primal Scream, or Why Do Babies Cry?: A Theory of Trump," *e-flux journal*, no. 83 (June 2017) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/140999/primal-scream-or-why-do-babies-cry-a-theory-of-trump/>.
- 6  
Sánchez, *Dancing Jacobins*, 145, 259, 290.
- 7  
One of the first mentions of the "turbulent fifties and early sixties" was in a 1982 speech by then-minister of health and future prime minister Goh Chok Tong. See his "Speech at the Quarterly Luncheon of the General Insurance Association of Singapore," Singapore, March 10, 1982.
- 8  
Rene Niehus et al., "Estimating Underdetection of Internationally Imported Covid-19 cases," *medRxiv*, February 14, 2020.
- 9  
Lawrence Wong, "Speech at the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Covid-19 Press Conference," Singapore, March 31, 2020.
- 10  
Wong, "Speech at the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Covid-19 Press Conference," Singapore, April 3, 2020.
- 11  
The measures that proved the most decisive in Taiwan, one of the countries often brought up as an exemplar of the liberal-democratic approach, were early travel bans, strict quarantine policies, and consolidation of production lines for face masks – not exactly what you would find in the liberal playbook. Meanwhile, in Vietnam, the relative transparency of public data compared to neighboring China has been crucial in allowing the country governed by a one-party state to emerge from their lockdown without any fatalities. See Hsien-Ming Lin, "Lessons from Taiwan's Coronavirus Response," *East Asia Forum*, April 2, 2020; and Minh Vu and Bich T. Tran, "The Secret to Vietnam's Covid-19 Response Success," *The Diplomat*, April 18, 2020.
- 12  
As poet and playwright Alfian Sa'at expressed in a pithy remark made on Facebook: "For things like 'pesky' activists, the government uses sledgehammers, but for things like an actual pandemic where actual lives are at risk, they're trying to use flyswatters."
- 13  
Dewey Sim and Kok Xinghui, "How Did Migrant Worker Dormitories Become Singapore's Biggest Coronavirus Cluster?" *South China Morning Post*, April 17, 2020.
- 14  
Some studies on the rise of the technocratic class within specific national contexts include Garry Rodan, *The Political Economy of Singapore's Industrialization: National State and International Capital* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1989); Hong Yung Lee, *From Revolutionary Cadres to Party Technocrats in Socialist China* (University of California Press, 1991); and Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (University of California Press, 2002).
- 15  
Lee Kuan Yew, "Speech at Queenstown Community Centre," Singapore, August 10, 1966.
- 16  
Augustine Low, "To Be One Step Behind Is to Be One Step Closer to Disaster," *The Online Citizen*, April 17, 2020 <https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2020/04/17/to-be-one-step-behind-is-to-be-one-step-closer-to-disaster/>.



17  
Lee, "Speech at Meeting with Principals of Schools," Singapore, August 29, 1966.

18  
Lee, "Speech at Queenstown Community Centre."

19  
Lee, "Speech at Queenstown Community Centre."

20  
*Socialism That Works ... The Singapore Way*, ed. C. V. Devan Nair (Federal Publications, 1978). For an account of the events leading up to PAP's resignation from the Socialist International and the publication of this book, see Leong Yew, "Relocating Socialism: Asia, Socialism, Communism, and the PAP Departure from the Socialist International in 1976," in *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture*, ed. Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 73–92.

21  
Goh Keng Swee, "A Socialist Economy that Works," in *Socialism That Works*, 78.

22  
Goh, "A Socialist Economy that Works," 83–4. For an account of how the state's public housing inscribed homeowners within the wage economy, see Loh Kah Seng, *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (NUS Press, 2013).

23  
This also explains the government's choice of the circuit breaker metaphor. More recently, health minister Gan Kim Yong, in speaking of the phased reopening of the economy at the end of the circuit breaker, compared the process to how, with actual circuit breakers, we have to turn on the switches "slowly, one by one," in order to locate the source of the electrical fault. Gan Kim Yong, "Speech at the Multi-Ministry Taskforce on Covid-19 Press Conference," Singapore, May 19, 2020.

24  
See <https://www.mewr.gov.sg/safe-distancing>.

25  
Temasek Holdings has a portfolio valued at US\$230 billion, while the amount of reserves managed GIC has been stated to be "well over US\$100 billion." In addition, the Monetary Authority of Singapore holds about US\$279 billion in foreign reserves. For an account of transparency issues surrounding Singapore's government-linked companies, including Temasek and GIC, see Gary Rodan, *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia* (RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 48–81.

26  
Tharman Shanmugaratnam, "Speech at PAP Rally for Bukit Panjang SMC," Singapore, September 5, 2015; and Tharman, "Speech at PAP Rally for East Coast GRC," Singapore, September 9, 2015.

27  
Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 5–6.

28  
Mitchell, *Rule of Experts*, 287.

29  
Manu Bhaskaran and Linda Lim, "Government Surpluses and Foreign Reserves in Singapore," *Academia SG*, May 4, 2020 <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/government-surpluses-and-foreign-reserves-in-singapore>.

30  
On the definition of risk as calculable uncertainty, see John Maynard Keynes, *A Treatise on Probability* (Macmillan, 1921).

31  
For an account and critique of the government's expansion on public healthcare spending in recent years, see Michael Barr, "Singapore: The Limits of a Technocratic Approach to Healthcare," *New Narratif*, April 16, 2020 <https://newnaratif.com/research/singapore-the-limits-of-a-technocratic-approach-to-healthcare/>.

32  
For a reading of how the Singapore state has sought to manage the successive crises of capital without undermining the logic of capital itself, see Ho Rui An, "Crisis and Contingency at the Dashboard," *e-flux journal*, no. 90 (April 2018) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/90/191694/crisis-and-contingency-at-the-dashboard/>.

33  
Geoff Mann, *In the Long Run We Are All Dead* (Verso, 2017), 7.

34  
Mann, *In the Long Run*, 12.

35  
As Mann argues, Keynesians understand the exceptionality of bourgeois liberal society through its historical relationship to revolution. He notes that the specific revolutionary history that produced bourgeois liberalism, namely the French Revolution, is one that allegorizes the potential destruction to civilization posed by revolution, especially when left in the hands of the masses. Insofar as preserving civilization is their primary task, Keynesians thus acknowledge and legitimize this history but seek "to render it unnecessary, to 'revolutionize' without revolution." It follows that only a bourgeois liberal society can sustain what is at once an immanent critique of liberalism and of revolution. See Mann, *In the Long Run*, 21–3, 85.

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36  
Keynes, *Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes, Volume VII: The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* (Royal Economic Society, 2013), 136.

37  
Mann, *In the Long Run*, 229, 276–7.

38  
Mann, *In the Long Run*, 333–4.

39  
Keynes, *Collected Writings, Volume VII*, 20.

40  
Mann, *In the Long Run*, 228.

41  
See <https://www.moh.gov.sg/covid-19/situation-report>.

42  
This estimation was made by infectious disease specialist Dr. Leong Hoe Nam during a video interview on May 6, 2020. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c35R7aAgce0>.

43  
Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* (Minor Compositions, 2012), 60, 213.

44  
Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958), 28.

45  
Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion*, 220.

46  
In Marx's inimitable description, money "differentiates itself as original value from itself as surplus-value, just as God the Father differentiates himself from himself as God the Son, although both are of the same age and form, in fact one single person." See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One*, trans. Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1976), 256.

47  
Sara Webb, "Temasek's Chief, Ho Ching, Likes to Take Risks," *New York Times*, July 27, 2007.

48  
Both Thailand and Indonesia have cited Temasek as a model for incorporating their state assets as a vast holding company. See Suttinee Yuvejwattana, "Thailand Evokes Temasek as Junta Tries to Revive State Firms," *Bloomberg News*, November 24, 2016; and Henny Sender, "Indonesia Looks to Set Up Sovereign Wealth Fund," *Financial Times*, December 3, 2019.

49  
Neferti X. M. Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability within Global Neoliberalism," *Social Text* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2013), 27.

50

One of Temasek's most controversial acquisitions was its purchase in 2006 of Shin Corporation, owned by the family of then-prime minister of Thailand, Thaksin Shinawatra. Protests and demonstrations erupted after news broke that the sale was tax-exempt. In 2007, Temasek was ruled to have breached Indonesian anti-trust laws after acquiring a substantial share in Indosat, the country's second-largest telecommunications company. During the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States, GIC was heavily rewarded after it sold about half its holdings in Citigroup following a bailout agreement reached with the US government in 2009. On the fraught acquisitions of Shin Corporation and Indosat, see Beng Huat Chua, *Liberalism Disavowed: Communitarianism and State Capitalism in Singapore* (NUS Press, 2017), 101. On GIC's investment in Citigroup, see Rick Carew et al., "Citi Bailout Also Bails Out Singapore Fund," *Wall Street Journal*, September 23, 2009.

51  
Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion*, 221.

52  
Danson Cheong, "Parliament: About Half of Dorm Operators Flout Licensing Conditions Each Year, Says Josephine Teo," *Straits Times*, May 4, 2020.

53  
For a detailed study on the political economy of low-wage migrant labor in Singapore, see Stephanie Chok, "Labour Justice and Political Responsibility: An Ethics-Centred Approach to Temporary Low-Paid Labour Migration in Singapore" (PhD diss., Murdoch University, 2013).

54  
Rosalind Morris, "Intimacy and Corruption in Thailand's Age of Transparency," in *Off Stage / On Display: Intimacy and Ethnography in the Age of Public Culture*, ed. Andrew Shryock (Stanford University Press, 2004), 225–43.

55  
Daniel P. S. Goh, "The Little India Riot and the Spatiality of Migrant Labor in Singapore," *Society & Space*, September 8, 2014.

56  
This was proposed by Yeoh Lam Keong, the former chief economist of GIC, during a video seminar on April 26, 2020. See <https://www.facebook.com/wpyouth/videos/167273911228627/>.

57  
Tadiar, "Life-Times of Disposability," 23.

58  
As David Harvey, among others, has argued, the postmodern aversion towards representationalism on the assumption that it reconstitutes

totality is exactly what feeds into capitalism's totalization of social life. The task at hand is to understand capital not as a thing, but as a dynamic process of creative destruction, and one can only do so through a representational project that accounts for its internal relations without reducing them to a fixed totality. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Blackwell, 1989), 338–45.

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