IS THERE A SOCIAL POLICY IN SINGAPORE?

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Policies and programmes of social amelioration have been dominated by discourses of the Western welfare state since the middle of the last century. The unremarkable observation that can be made about these discourses is the unabashed normative and ideological tones adopted by the advocates of the welfare state and the workfare state. As the assault on the welfare state by the conservative right and the neo-liberals began in the 1970s and gathered pace, it was inevitable that the economic dynamism of pre-1997 East Asian societies was held up as an alternative to discredit a welfare state ‘in crisis.’ In this essay, I examine the relevance of Western conceptualisation of social policy and welfare programmes to understanding the approach taken by the People’s Action Party (PAP) government, in power since 1959, in social redistribution. I argue that the first generation PAP leadership, led by Lee Kuan Yew, had developed a robust political response to the normative dominance of the welfare state discourse. However, this should not obscure the coherence of its social policy, which has its origins in a utopian yet pragmatic vision that the more successful a society is, the more it is able to care for those who fall behind.

I Social Policy, Citizenship and Post-industrial Society

In the previous paper, I referred to social policy as social amelioration and social alleviation as understood by Titmuss; and social policy as social citizenship and social participation as part of a wider process of social integration within a nation-state, envisaged by T.H. Marshall. The intimate link that Marshall drew between social policy, broadly defined, and social citizenship assumes that citizenship is unproblematic. The concept of citizenship is contestable and should, Mullard (1999: 13) argues, be viewed as competing discourses. He identifies several such discourses (ibid.: 13–18). The public citizen accords priority to personal freedom, values plurality, differences and transparency, and seeks to expand public space in order to create a democratic culture. The independent citizen is committed to the unfettered market economy and
rejects political intervention. The entitled citizen, mirroring Marshall’s social citizenship, claims access to resources and opportunities to enable meaningful participation in society; the State strives to guarantee a minimal level of such participation. The discourse of communitarian citizenship eschews the egoism of the independent citizen, and promotes social responsibility and commitment to the community. These citizenship discourses are conceptually distinguishable but they are by no means mutually exclusive. In reality, they overlap as I will illustrate next.

Few Singaporeans would subscribe to the discourse of the public citizen; more would harbour ideas of the independent citizen. I would suggest that many Singaporeans have strong expectations of entitlement, as they have evolved a dependency on the State, after a sustained period of affluence since the 1970s, which has seen families double their standard of living in just one generation. It is the fear of the pervasiveness of the entitled citizen, that has caused the PAP government to maintain communitarian citizenship as a counter discourse. I have elsewhere pointed out, that the PAP government espouses the civic-republican tradition of citizenship (Hill & Lian, 1995: 244–245). It is a citizenship that is communitarian, emphasises the elements that integrates citizens into the community, involves participation for the collective good, and requires citizens to fulfill their obligations and duties to the nation-state. What I am suggesting here is that beneath the social policies instituted by the PAP government is a social vision of what is good for Singapore, one of which is communitarian citizenship. Equally important, it may be argued, the government is committed to social citizenship, in so far as this provides economic and educational opportunities to its citizens, so that the latter can strive to achieve a particular standard of living commensurate to the Marshallian notions of participation in a civilised society and enjoyment of social heritage. Hence, there is an overlap of discourses of the entitled and communitarian citizen. Needless to say, these are competing discourses between the citizenry and the State, the former putting pressure on the latter to increase the level of welfare provision in the city-state.

It is useful to distinguish the two meanings of social policy, one broadly defined, and the other in its restricted sense. Broadly defined, social policy is about the analysis of access to life-enhancing and life-sustaining resources (Gil, in Lavalette & Pratt, 1997: 2) so that criminal justice or environmental policies are as relevant as wages or housing policies in its consequences for the lives of citizens. Social policy is