The Politics of

Urban Development

in Singapore

Robert E. Gamer

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To my father,

Carl Wesley Gamer,

who grieved over the human condition, but never wavered in his conviction that the good earth will support us all when we learn to treat one another with compassion.

Acknowledgments

I did the research for this book from 1964 to 1968 while teaching courses on the politics of developing nations as a Lecturer in the Political Science Department of the University of Singapore. From the time of my arrival in Singapore, I was fascinated by the dynamism of Singapore's housing and industrialization programs. I took long walks through the housing estates, eating in the outdoor stalls and talking to people. How was public housing affecting their lives and political orientations? Soon I formalized the questions into a social survey. After obtaining permission from Minister of Social Affairs S. Rajaratnam, I conducted this survey—with the aid of students—both in a public housing estate and in an area of run-down housing in the central city. The survey raised more questions than it answered. Because it seemed important to find out how the planning mechanisms were geared to dealing with such questions, I asked the Permanent Secretary of National Development, Howe Yoon Chong, whether I might study the administration of some public project. He received the idea favorably, and provided me with authorization to examine all file data on the Kallang Basin Reclamation Project.

Literature on bureaucracy has always appeared dull and lifeless to me. In contrast, the people I met in the Singapore agencies, and the files of their correspondence, were human and vital. I have never been more warmly received anywhere than by these many individuals. The things they told me about their concerns and interests gave me new eyes, to notice phenomena that I had hitherto thought trivial. I found politically relevant meanings in writings other than those on public administration and political science. On many trips to other countries I spied details I would previously have overlooked and was able to learn about political processes through them. What evolved, as the reader will discover, is a book about far more than the socialization of people in public housing

or the planning mechanisms of the Kallang Basin Reclamation Project.

On May 28, 1971, after several more subtle attempts at suppression, the Singapore Government closed the doors of an English-language newspaper whose editorial policy allowed for mild but continual criticism of Government policy, and also in May 1971 four senior officials of a leading Chinese-language daily were imprisoned on the grounds that their paper was furthering the cause of communism and communalism. These actions can be seen as an extension of the Government's continuing program (discussed in Chapter II) to maintain political capabilities. Yet they have raised doubts in some circles as to whether Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew is prepared to harbor any criticism.

The Government's cooperation with my research stands in marked contrast to these incidents. The day before leaving Singapore I called on Howe Yoon Chong to ask him if he would like to see a copy of my manuscript prior to publication. "No," he said, "but I would be pleased to get a free copy of the book, with your autograph." (I shall be sending him one.) He then remarked that his ministry's cooperation with me constitutes some proof that Singapore is an open society. I agree, and am grateful for the remarkable cooperation at all levels during my research. I have attempted to make objective comparisons of Singapore's development with that of other nations and to assess trends. As Chapter VI suggests, there seems to be no time when such comparisons and assessments have been more urgently needed in Singapore than at present. I hope that readers in Singapore, as elsewhere, will approach my evaluations with minds that are both open and critical, so that they may make comparisons and assessments of their own.

As is usual (probably more than is usual) this study has involved considerable intellectual interaction with others. A great many people —in Singapore, the United States, and elsewhere—have furnished data, read chapters, and discussed ideas with me (sometimes heatedly). I shall simply and sincerely say that they are remembered and appreciated. While I take full responsibility for what I say in this book, many of the ideas in it came from these friends and associates or resulted from my consideration of their differing ideas.

The Political Science Departments of the University of Singapore and the University of Missouri at Kansas City, and the Office of Graduate Studies at the latter institution, aided in typing various drafts. I especially wish to thank Lilian Wong, Betty Stevenson, and Carolyn Zeis for this typing, which was done expertly and with an added element

Introduction: Meeting the Challenges of Change

A Singapore delegate to an international housing conference was surprised to hear another delegate brag that his nation had no housing problem. The Singaporean, knowing the country in question to be very poor and quickly urbanizing, could not believe his ears and asked for clarification. "Yes," came the reply, "we have plenty of tents and huts for everyone."

When Singapore secured independence from the British in 1959, under the leadership of the People's Action Party, it boldly confronted two common contemporary problems—political instability and urban deterioration—and found solutions for them. Singapore's 1,500,000 inhabitants faced an acute housing shortage; virtually the whole built-up portion of the island's 225 square miles was rapidly decaying into a wretched slum. Racial tension was mounting between the majority group and minority groups. Unemployment was on the rise and was especially serious among minority groups. The students were expressing their restlessness by street demonstrations, sit-ins, camp-ins, and other forms of civil disobedience. The Communists, who had recently accepted a truce that largely ended their guerilla warfare in the countryside of Malaya, were marshaling their forces to take over Singapore. Feelings ran high, and several times the city had been torn by bloody rioting.

In 1959, Singapore's new government began a frontal attack on these problems. Within a decade it had changed the face of them all. It successfully implemented techniques and institutions with which American cities and federal agencies are currently experimenting: urban renewal; public housing (every twenty-five minutes, a new flat is completed); community centers; neighborhood committees; the adaptation of communications media to promote social and political ends; grassroots political party restructuring; coordination of bureaucratic and political agencies; improvement of police training; reorganization of elementary, secondary, and vocational education; a Job Corps; fair employment leg-

islation; a heavy conscription into peacetime military service; construction of industrial estates; loans, tax incentives, and other assistance for new businesses; construction of new water, sewerage, electrical, and road facilities; and more.

Cumulatively, these programs have helped Singapore move within a decade into political peace and economic prosperity. The massive inflow of foreign capital attests to this success.[1] This book discusses these programs and analyzes the role they played in bringing stability out of turmoil. Singapore has faced the challenges of change with remarkable vigor.

Despite these accomplishments, however, I remain pessimistic about urban development—in Singapore and elsewhere. Many cities fall far behind Singapore in the dynamism of their urban development programs; in an era of rapid change such as the present, this is a cause for special concern. Yet even when a city like Singapore has developed vigorous programs that are politically astute, administratively convenient, and fiscally sound, there is still no assurance that they benefit the poor (who, in the case of Singapore, constitute the majority of the populace). What distresses me most is that my careful perusal of the inner workings of the Kallang Basin Reclamation Project, and of literature on urban development programs elsewhere, produces little evidence that the problems of the poor have been basically assuaged by these programs. In fact, there is some evidence that these programs may be disrupting life patterns in a manner that could ultimately hold back the economic progress of the most disadvantaged portions of the populace.

Furthermore, the answer to this problem does not seem to lie in the direction of bigger and better urban planning. In Part Three of this book, I think about possibilities for modifying Singapore's planning procedures, and find little latitude for changing them. I also explore planning in some other cities with differing economic bases and bureaucratic setups, and find similar inadequacies in meeting the needs of the poor. Whether simple or sophisticated, fledgling or grandiose, planning decisions remain ensconced in the hands of middle and up-

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[1] At the end of 1969, US$335 million in foreign capital was invested in Singapore. By the end of 1970 that figure had grown to US$570 million. During 1970 US$350 million in foreign capital was committed for investment in the Republic. Cf. James Morgan, "Singapore's Future," *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. LXXIII, No. 35, August 28, 1971, 33.

per class groups; this, I conclude, is the major problem. In the closing chapters of the book I explore means for grappling with this problem by infusing poorer elements with greater political efficacy. I argue that poorer people once had such efficacy in a rural setting, and that those who have moved to the city must attempt to regain this efficacy by recreating some of the cohesion that characterized preindustrial social life. The last chapter ends on a mildly positive note by suggesting some guidelines that might be followed in achieving this objective.

The book is divided into three parts. The following subsections explain the theoretical concerns of each part.

PRECONDITIONS FOR PLANNING

The land of tents and huts cited in the epigraph at the beginning of this Introduction had no housing program. This lack of response to a probable need must partly be blamed on the attitude of the delegate and his government. Yet the delegate may have been disguising a sheer inability to act. There are a number of objective conditions that need to be established before a government can actually institute reform programs. It took Singapore many years to develop these preconditions for planning. In comprehending how a government plans, it is as important to analyze how it developed these preconditions as it is to look into the planning itself:

Resources   Some nations have extensive resources; others, few. The extensiveness of natural, financial, and human resources is of less consequence than their accessibility to one another. A basic transportation system must link populated areas and natural resources. The government needs means to lure a percentage of extant financial resources into development projects. Agricultural development requires reliable supplies of water; urban development, a steady source of inexpensive electrical power.

Skills   Human resources are the most essential components of development. Planning requires engineers, economists, architects, and statisticians. Skilled bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, and various types of skilled and semiskilled laborers, must also emerge from the culture and the schools. Of secondary, but vital, importance are agronomists, urban planners, geographers, sociologists, lawyers, survey researchers, mathematicians, and economists with advanced specialized skills. Personnel can sometimes be temporarily recruited from abroad. Yet because of

the fast turnover, general shortage, and high cost of expatriate staff (not to mention the need for maintenance of national independence) at least some nationals trained in these skills are necessary. Since the educational process is complex and requires many years for each individual, it needs long and careful cultivation.

Administrative capabilities   People with necessary skills may have become available. Still, they must be brought together into organizations with the ability to conceive and carry out socially useful projects. Key administrators must achieve enough command over resources to create such organizations out of existing bureaucracy.

Political capabilities   Resources, skills, and administrative capabilities can become accessible during times of chaos. To follow through on development programs, however, the Government needs enough stability to concentrate on development rather than simply on its own continuance in office. Its development goals must be acceptable to its principal political supporters. It must be in a position to mobilize available resources, skills, and administrative capabilities.

To develop efficient programs, a city or nation will need a modicum of each of the above preconditions. Even many wealthy nations (the United States included) and wealthy cities (New York and Los Angeles included) lack several of the above attributes. These partially endowed places can do something about their problems, but run a risk that what they do will be inappropriate. Singapore has developed a modicum of all these preconditions. Part One discusses how it has done so.

THE DYNAMICS OF PLANNING

As the preconditions take root, a government needs to organize planning in a manner that will provide socially beneficial programs and neutralize the influence of rivals who would use their power to adapt these programs to serve their own purposes. Older and younger civil servants, economic and political groups, private developers and landowners, planners and financiers, and various government agencies all compete for scarce resources in Singapore, as elsewhere. In the second part of the book we shall follow the interaction of the government with all of these groups in its efforts to make its programs socially beneficial. As we shall see, it has not been entirely successful in this regard.

This inadequacy partly stems from the programs themselves—their initial objectives do not always jibe with the needs of the people. To

make its priorities conform with societal values, a government needs specific information about the needs and aspirations of a wide variety of societal groups. Both an atmosphere of freedom in which grievances will be expressed, and trained personnel capable of doing surveys and studies to evaluate such grievances, are necessary in this process. These are lacking in Singapore.

Another reason these programs fall short is the fact that the Singapore Government has not always found it possible to neutralize the power of those who would divert programs to more limited objectives. An individual's ability to divert the objectives of programs may derive from his possession of needed skills or resources, or from the fact that his political support is desired. If the government must rely upon wealthier people for its resources, it may find them demanding the use of the resources in a manner that tends to favor their interests at the expense of some of the objectives of the original program. If it must rely on bureaucrats for skills, they may slant the programs to the needs of their own agencies. If it must rely on partisans for information, they may supply a distorted picture of societal aspirations. In Singapore, as in many other places, these problems are endemic. Not uncommonly, Singapore finds them hard to eradicate.

It is sometimes suggested that such problems can be erased by manipulating the structural organization of planning. Louis J. Walinsky, for instance, suggests the creation of a Planning Group and a Planning Authority—both very different from anything that exists in Singapore.[2] The Planning Group would be separate from all functional agencies of the bureaucracy, and would carry out all aspects of planning. It would be in a position to consult with all kinds of citizen groups, and to coor-

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[2] Louis J. Walinsky, *The Planning and Execution of Economic Development* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1963), 13–20. He suggests that the Planning Group be headed by a man who is "intelligent, capable, interested, alert, dynamic, politically sophisticated, and possessed of considerable initiative." This group, staffed by experts from a variety of disciplines, will do economic and social planning, statistics-gathering, research, budgeting, and will create the administrative means to carry out projects. It would draw up a broad framework for economic and physical planning. The Planning Authority would preferably be chaired by the Prime Minister and, in addition to some other ministers, would contain chief civil servants. It would be furnished with a staff of economic and technical advisers, and the Head of the Planning Group would serve as its secretary. It would approve new projects, make major modifications in policy or in the overall plan, approve financial measures, settle major disputes among agencies, and sometimes reorganize agencies.

dinate the activities of the bureaucratic agencies. The Planning Authority would be a Cabinet level group that would give final authorization to the Planning Group's programs, back them when they could not settle conflicts among other groups, and periodically check to see that projects are being implemented as planned. Walinsky reminds one that planning is more than a succession of five-year plans, maps, econometric analyses, statistics, budgets, and projects. Planning is a flexible process involving continuing interactions among people and their values. He suggests that good planning involves care in assigning responsibility and routinizing methods of coordination.

From time to time, outside experts and academics have suggested changes in Singapore's planning structure that would move it in the direction of Walinsky's approach to planning. Before these suggestions can be placed in proper perspective, it is important to examine the degree to which her present procedures provide for flexibility in coordinating the interactions among people and their values.

Part Two of the book, then, explores the organizational processes that produced the Kallang Basin Reclamation Project. It also examines some of the above shortcomings in those processes, and raises the question of whether these shortcomings might be overcome by structural reorganization of planning.

THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT OF PLANNING

Were Singapore to top off its exceptional resources, skills, and administrative and political capabilities with exceptional planning procedure on the order of that suggested by Walinsky, trouble might still ensue. In fact, it might be argued that Singapore has done *too* well in establishing these capabilities, and that a streamlining of planning structure might actually make the situation worse unless it were accompanied by an improvement in the social environment within which planning operates. Enhancing the power of those with planning capabilities may simply allow those whose interests run counter to the needs of people to wield broader power.

There was an age when man could do little to manipulate his environment. Today he is capable of effecting enormous changes in short periods of time. As the economy develops, it affects many aspects of life. And, whether this development is by government or private citizens, it may cause more upset than uplift to human lives.

In many places, sectoral planning is poorly coordinated. An agricultural board clears land, a zoning board approves private clearance of land, an engineering section produces irrigation, a housing authority produces housing, and so on. Meanwhile, private businesses are also active, causing unrelated changes in the individual's living pattern. An individual needs housing that satisfies him and that he can afford. He needs neighbors and cultural facilities with which he feels comfortable. His job must offer him both security and an above-subsistence income. The educational system has to promise his children the same advantages. If any of these aspects are lacking for an individual, his environment becomes unstable. At the same time, his political efficacy can be weakened, as he must devote increasing time to straightening out his personal affairs.

As urbanization progresses, it becomes increasingly difficult to get all these parts working together. Planning means more than undertaking desired activities; it also involves creating stable environments for individual citizens. Ironically, as one comes to depend on ever-larger economic and bureaucratic organizations to achieve these results, their power to divert programs from the objective of creating stable individual environments increases. A sophisticated planning procedure—even one with Walinsky's central control facilities—could be controlled as easily by people with a stake in unstable environments (or in growth at whatever human costs) as by those who place broad human needs first. Furthermore, the very attributes that contribute to government's power to intervene—preconditions of planning and organizing techniques— tend to speed economic growth rather than to hold it in check. They help produce newer, more powerful moguls who can even more effectively divert planning—and the political processes—to their own ends.

Job centers that train people for menial jobs which provide no mobility might increase discontent rather than diminish it. Urban renewal that moves people away from their jobs, or raises the cost of living, or destroys small businesses, might increase economic misery rather than end it. Rural development programs that create dissatisfaction with a rural way of life faster than they make rural living viable are likely to cause more instability than they remove. A growing gross national product can itself be an imbalancing factor if it increases the gap between the rich and the poor, the city and the countryside, the ethnic majority and ethnic minorities, or the capital city and the rest of the country. All of these can result from an accretion in the power of the upper

and middle classes through augmented planning potentials. By enhancing the power of these classes, massive urban development and industrialization programs may be weakening government's ability to serve human needs, rather than strengthening it as is commonly assumed.

Perhaps there is a basic incompatibility between the planning mechanisms of urban industrialization and the needs of the poor. This is the central concern of Part Three of the book. Can the social and economic systems of the postindustrial world support urban planning that is compatible with the needs of human beings?

Contents