

Rajaratnam in London: writing, race, and capital in Singapore's intellectual history

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## **Abstract**

Dominant historiography in Singapore celebrates Sinnathamby Rajaratnam as one of the city-state's founding national fathers, and the intellectual superintendent of state-sponsored multiculturalism in what has been characterized as an 'illiberal democracy'. Little attention, however, has been paid to the extensive periods of Rajaratnam's life in which he was not in governance with the People's Action Party, and thus had considerable intellectual autonomy. This paper examines the first of these periods, his sojourn in London from 1935 to 1947, marked by connections with overlapping communities of anticolonial intellectuals drawn from Africa, the Caribbean, and East and South Asia. Close reading of Rajaratnam's London lifeworld, his published fiction and journalism, and the many annotations he made in the books he read, reveals a very different intellectual history than the one that we think we know, and allow us to better understand his lifelong uneasiness with capitalism and racial governmentality. Re-reading Rajaratnam as an autonomous intellectual disembeds his early intellectual life from the story of the developmental state, enabling a focus on the role of affect and form in his writing. The process also offers new insights in a Singapore today where the legacies of state-sponsored multiculturalism are increasingly challenged, and where citizens, residents, and migrants seek new forms of solidarity in and across difference.

## **Key Words**

Singapore; intellectuals; Rajaratnam; London; decolonisation

In 1975, ten years after independence, a young political scientist at the University of Singapore mused about the place of intellectuals in the city-state. They might, she wrote, might perform one of four roles. They could become politicians in a system that she had described in her doctoral dissertation, submitted the previous year, as one-party dominance. Alternatively, they might continue to produce scholarship or work in the media as ‘legitimisers of the established order’.<sup>1</sup> A third possibility was to enter the civil service as ‘mandarins’ of the same governmental order.<sup>2</sup> The final role, to remain ‘outside of power’ as an independent critic,<sup>3</sup> was the most fraught with difficulty: such intellectuals were ‘vilified’ by those governing the developmental state, their ‘function . . . not recognised as legitimate’.<sup>4</sup> In their critiques exemplifying an ‘autonomy of spirit’, however, this fourth type of intellectual held true to the spirit of intellectual inquiry, and would play a crucial, if unacknowledged, role in the formation of a national community.<sup>5</sup>

The author of the brief essay in which these ideas were expressed, Chan Heng Chee, would in due course make her own journey from independent critic to mandarin as a high-ranking member of Singapore’s diplomatic service from 1989 to 2012, and then, on her subsequent return to Singapore, to a legitimiser of the established order.<sup>6</sup> Her taxonomy and

<sup>1</sup> Chan Heng Chee, ‘The role of intellectuals in Singapore politics’, *Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 3, no. 2, 1975, pp. 59-64: p. 62.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 64.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 63.

<sup>6</sup> As chair of the National Arts Council, for instance, Chan defended governmental censorship through arts funding in a speech at the Singapore International Film Festival, which operates a strict no-censorship policy. See Akshita Nanda, ‘Arts funding and censorship: Arts circle disappointed by Arts Council Chairman’s remarks’, *Straits Times*, 28 November 2015, available at [www.factiva.com](http://www.factiva.com) [accessed 20 August 2024].

her own life trajectory indicate the challenges faced in undertaking intellectual history in Singapore, and in making the past work of autonomous intellectuals usable today. As a colonial entrepôt in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, Singapore provided space for scholars and activists working in a variety of linguistic and cultural spheres, and yet they were frequently excluded by the colonial order of things from full participation in the politics and governance of a multiracial society. Under decolonisation, many of these intellectuals forged alliances across language and class with the common goal of national independence through a shifting series of imagined communities: Malaya, then Malaysia, and finally, with separation in 1965, the nation-state of Singapore. In the transition from colony to nation-state, their paths bifurcated. Those who entered government or civil service supported the dominant order, and their voices became instrumentalised and lost autonomy. Those who found themselves in opposition to the ruling People's Action Party – including many of the intellectuals Chan named in her article -- were exiled or fell silent.<sup>7</sup> The autonomous middle was squeezed, and the space in which Chan's fourth type of intellectual might operate diminished. From the early 1960s onwards, the independence of Singapore's English-medium university, the University of Singapore, was reduced.<sup>8</sup> Nanyang University, the Chinese-medium university founded in 1956, also came under governmental pressure, and in 1980 it was merged into the new English-medium National University of

<sup>7</sup> Of the seven members of the Malayan Democratic Union Chan listed, four were exiled: John Eber, Eu Chooi Yip, Lim Hong Bee, and P. V. Sarma.

<sup>8</sup> See Philip Holden, 'Spaces of autonomy, spaces of hope: The place of the university in post-colonial Singapore', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2019, pp. 451-482.

Singapore.<sup>9</sup> Intellectuals in Singapore's universities, which are now increasing in international prominence, continue to negotiate institutional and governmental obstacles to critical work on Singapore itself.<sup>10</sup> Outside the university, many have found themselves subject to sanction under legislation such as the 2019 Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), which was initially justified as a way of preventing disinformation likely to incite social conflict, but which has increasingly been directed at critical public intellectual work.<sup>11</sup>

This history has also bifurcated the way past intellectuals' lives are retrospectively narrativized. Under continued one-party dominance and a system of 'illiberal democracy',<sup>12</sup> those intellectuals in Chan's first three categories have been valorized in governmental and associated media discourses and made part of an unfolding story of nationhood.<sup>13</sup> Those who

<sup>9</sup> Yao Souchou, 'All quiet on Jurong Road: Nanyang University and radical vision in Singapore', in *Paths not taken: Political pluralism in post-War Singapore*, (eds) Michael D. Barr and Carl A. Trocki, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2007), pp. 170-187.

<sup>10</sup> George, Cherian, Chong Ja Ian, and Shannon Ang, 'The state of academic freedom in Singapore's world-beating universities', available at <https://www.asianstudies.org/wp-content/uploads/Chapter-Three-George-Chong-Ang.pdf> [accessed 18 August 2024], pp. 69-70.

<sup>11</sup> See Teo Kai Xiang, 'Civil society responses to Singapore's online "fake news" law', *International Journal of Communication*, vol. 15, 2021, pp. 4795-4815, available at <https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/17910/3593> [accessed 18 August 2024]. Teo gives an account of how the legislation 'raises the costs of participation for those whose processes of discourse-making are less deferential to the state' (p. 4809).

<sup>12</sup> Hussin Mutalib, 'Illiberal democracy and the future of opposition in Singapore', *Third World Quarterly*, vol. 21, no. 2, April 2000, pp. 313-342: p. 314.

<sup>13</sup> In S. Rajaratnam's case, for instance, it has proven difficult to disembed his life story from the national narrative. The two volumes of his biography written by former PAP MP Irene Ng, *The Singapore lion: A biography of S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2010), and S. Rajaratnam, *the Authorised biography, volume*

have been exiled or silenced have often been vilified as Communists or communalists, working against the national interest. In the last twenty years in particular, historians, scholars and public intellectuals have attempted an important project: a critical counter-narrative which retrieves the voices and ideas of those whose work and actions have been diminished or forgotten.<sup>14</sup> Yet such scholarship skirts a danger in its use of biography and in its popular reception. In an inversion of the dominant narrative, such storytelling and reception often places such figures in moralised biographies of courage in defeat, rather than fully engaging with their ideas.<sup>15</sup>

two: *The lion's roar* (Singapore: ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2024) are definitive, but make use of privileged access to government records and sources. Even the site *Intellectuals.SG*, curated by academics concerned to produce a critical intellectual history of Singapore, places his life and ideas within the unfolding of the Singaporean developmental state as a 'leading protagonist in Singapore's mainstream history' and is largely reliant on the first volume of Ng's biography. See Terence Chong and Darinee Alagirisamy, 'Chasing Ideals, Accepting Practicalities, Banishing Ghosts: S. Rajaratnam's Singapore', *Intellectuals.SG*, published online on 2 July 2021, available at <https://sgintellectuals.medium.com/chasing-ideals-accepting-practicalities-banishing-ghosts-f8840992aac1>, [accessed 18 August 2024].

<sup>14</sup> These accounts include, for example, Seng Guo-quan, "'How I wished that it could have worked": James Puthuchery's political-economic thought and the myth of Singapore's developmental model', in *Living with Myths in Singapore*, (eds) Loh Kah Seng, Thum Ping Tjin, and Jack Meng-Tat Chia, (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2017), pp. 95-104; Charles Brophy, 'James Puthuchery, Afro-Asianism and the national question on the Malayan left, 1950-1965', Masters' thesis, Leiden University, 2021; Loh Kah Seng, Edgar Liao, Lim Cheng Tju Lim, and Seng Guo-quan, *The University Socialist Club and the contest for Malaya: Tangled strands of modernity* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), as well as several of the articles in Barr and Trocki (eds), *Paths Not Taken*.

<sup>15</sup> Auto/biographical work of this kind includes Poh Soo Kai, *Living in a time of deception* (Singapore: Function 8, 2016); Said Zahari, *Dark clouds at dawn: A political memoir* (Kuala Lumpur: INSAN, 2001), and many of the essays in Tan Jing Quee, Poh Soo Kai, and Jomo K.S. (eds), *Comet in our sky: Lim Chin Siong in history*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2015).

This essay brings some of the insights of this critical scholarship to attempt a new reading of the thought of Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, an intellectual who is usually celebrated within the dominant narrative. Rajaratnam became Singapore's first Minister for Culture in 1959, served as an independent Singapore's first Minister for Foreign Affairs from 1965 to 1980, and held other positions as Minister for Labour, Deputy Prime Minister, and Senior Minister before he left politics in 1988. Official valorization of Rajaratnam focuses on these roles. He is seen as the theorist behind Singapore's multiracialism, with its 'mechanism of discipline' that divides citizens into the categories of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Other [CMIO].<sup>16</sup> He is also lauded for representing a newly independent Singapore on the international stage, enabling what is often described as an 'unexpected' or 'accidental' nation to gain global influence and respect. Such remembrance is crystallized into institutional markers – in Nanyang Technological University's S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, or in former journalist and People's Action Party Member of Parliament Irene Ng's celebratory biographies *The Singapore Lion* and *The Lion's Roar*. Two collections of Rajaratnam's speeches and essays, the edited first by Chan herself and Obaid ul Haq, and the second by Kwa Chong Guan, concentrate almost exclusively on his pronouncements while in government. The solitary scholarly bibliography of his works, edited by Gandhimathy Durairaj and Linda Yip, lists only a handful of his close to two hundred publications before the PAP's first election victory in 1959.

An oppositional counter-narrative might position Rajaratnam in a very different way, as an anticolonial activist whose rhetoric and actions changed completely as soon as he entered governance. The progressive journalist who struggled against colonial censorship became a prominent member of successive PAP governments that took action against an

<sup>16</sup> Chua Beng Huat, 'Multiculturalism in Singapore: An instrument of social control', *Race & Class*, vol. 44, no. 3, 2003, pp. 58-77: p.73.

independent press; the former president of the Singapore Union of Journalists supported, in government, the de-registration of independent trade unions.<sup>17</sup> In this story, Rajaratnam becomes one of the ‘high priests’ of the post-1965 order,<sup>18</sup> one of the fallen intellectuals that Edward Said critiques in *Representations of the Intellectual* who aligned themselves with dominant national power, and allowed it to ‘narcotize’ their ‘critical sense’.<sup>19</sup>

What might happen if we detach Rajaratnam’s life and thought from each of these narratives? His life story features three periods of intellectual autonomy unconditioned by the instrumentality of governance. The first, from 1935 to 1947, when he was in London studying law, writing short stories and his first articles as a journalist, and participating in anti-colonial activism, will be the subject of this essay. The second was the period from his return to Singapore in 1947 through when he joined the PAP in 1954 until about 1957, when his writing became more instrumentally concerned with electoral politics. This decade was extraordinarily fertile intellectually, Rajaratnam exploring socialism, capitalism, and modernity in Asia, and refusing an East-West binarism. Finally, there is a period from 1988 until the early 1990s, after Rajaratnam left government and before his mild cognitive impairment shaded into the dementia that would mark the last decade of his life. These years are marked by a questioning orthodoxies of post-independence governance in Singapore, especially in the areas of racialization and economic development, a growing skepticism

<sup>17</sup> Cherian George, *Freedom from the press: journalism and state power in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2012), pp. 27-33; Liew Kai Khiun, ‘The anchor and the voice of 10,000 waterfront workers: Jamit Singh in the Singapore Story (1954–63)’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, vol. 35, no. 3 (2004), pp. 459-478, especially pp. 477-78.

<sup>18</sup> Lysa Hong and Huang Jianli, *The scripting of a national history: Singapore and its pasts* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), p. 45.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the intellectual: The 1993 Reith lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994), p. 41.



about all forms of nationalism, and a new vision of world history. A focus on the first of these periods, Rajaratnam's London years, enables us to locate generative contradictions in his conceptualisations of race, capitalism, and democracy that persisted later in his life as an immanent critique of the Singaporean developmental state. State historiography in Singapore often opposes the cool rationality of governance to the passions of a populace that cannot govern itself, and Rajaratnam, in his governmental roles, contributed to this discourse. His early writings, however, reveal a persistent tension between rationality and affect that has its roots in a lived experience as a colonial subject and anticolonial activist in wartime London, and persisted throughout his life.

My hope in this essay is to consider Rajaratnam's early intellectual life in London as an exemplification of an approach to Singaporean intellectual history that refuses moralised biography, and excavates moments of uncertainty, marginality, and contradiction. Such an account first gestures towards a reconstruction of the material spaces of Rajaratnam's London and the circles of anticolonial activists and thinkers in which he moved. It then draws on the external world of print sources, beginning with his first newspaper article, published in the Straits Settlements at the very beginning of the Second World War. These sources are supplemented by evidence of an internal life drawn from the many annotations in books he acquired in this period, preserved after his death in 2006, and now in the library of the ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute in Singapore. Such gestures cannot abstract Rajaratnam's thought as a coherent body of theory, but they can illuminate forms of intellectual praxis that constitute a usable intellectual past, with the potential to contribute in new ways to contemporary discussions of racialization and inequality in Singapore.

### **The Intellectual in the Postcolony**

Following Edward Said's influential formulation, postcolonial intellectuals have often been celebrated as figures who resist governmental or commercial cooptation, who 'whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug'.<sup>20</sup> In Singapore, the persistence of one-party dominance after 1965 might at first suggest a clear-cut choice for intellectuals between cooptation and resistance, yet this has not always been so. Given the reach of the developmental state, intellectuals have often performed a dance driven not simply by the awareness of always-shifting 'OB markers'<sup>21</sup> but also a desire to participate in national life and reach a larger community without fully surrendering autonomy. Exile does not automatically produce insight or a Saidian 'double perspective' that enables productive critique. One of the intellectuals that Chan named, Lim Hong Bee, founded the Malayan Democratic Union, Singapore's first political party, after the Second World War, and then returned to London as a representative of the All-Malayan Council of Action. Lim remained politically active in the UK, publishing the newsletter *The Malayan Monitor*, intervening in struggles over the leadership of the student-led Malayan Forum, and publicising British military atrocities during the Malayan Emergency.<sup>22</sup> By the mid 1950s, however, the organization that he represented no longer existed. Visiting London in 1955, Lim Chin Siong, on the left of the newly-formed People's Action Party, noted he had

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>21</sup> The term 'OB markers', an abbreviation for 'out-of-bounds markers', is frequently used in Singapore to describe an ambiguous and shifting 'range of things from topics which are off-limits for open discussion to rules of engagement between citizen and state, government and politicians'. See Tan Tarn How and Arun Mahizhnan, 'Subverting seriousness and other misdemeanours: modes of resistance against OB markers in the 2006 Singapore General Election', *Media Asia* vol. 35, no. 4 (2008), pp. 207-268: p. 208.

<sup>22</sup> Lim Hong Bee, *Born into war: Autobiography of a barefoot colonial boy who grew up to face the challenge of the modern world* (London: Excalibur Press, 1994), pp. 357-65. See also CO 537/4782, Political Developments: Lim Hong Bee and 'The Malayan Monitor', The National Archives of the UK (hereafter NA-UK).

‘lost touch with reality’.<sup>23</sup> Lim Hong Bee’s double perspective, in Said’s terms, had collapsed to a singular one. Another form of exile, indeed, drew autonomous intellectuals in the opposite direction, closer to the developmental state. Chan’s experience of being selected as ambassador to Washington despite being ‘a bit of a dissident’ was not unique.<sup>24</sup> Independent intellectuals Tommy Koh and David Marshall also accepted prominent international ambassadorial positions, making a judgment that the prospect of serving national interest outweighed the potential for their autonomy to be compromised.

How might we understand this restless movement, these different forms of exile and belonging? For Syed Hussein Alatas, contemplating the fate of intellectuals in development from the perspective of Malaysia and Singapore, colonialism had destroyed indigenous intellectual communities without creating new ones. Intellectuals under decolonization had often perforce entered politics in the struggle for independence, and after the founding of the developmental state, there was little space for an ‘infrastructure of the intellectual life’ to develop.<sup>25</sup> After independence, Alatas theorized, this lack resulted in the growth of what he termed *bebalisma*, a social stupidity which ‘lowered the standard of thinking amongst the administrators, the political leadership, the social classes, the business and industrial groups, and the coming generation’.<sup>26</sup> *Bebalisma* might plausibly be related to the very different paths that the developmental states in Singapore and Malaysia took after Singapore’s separation in

<sup>23</sup> Lim Chin Siong, ‘An extract from Lim Chin Siong’s posthumous manuscripts’, (trans) Lim Chin Joo, in *A comet in our sky*, (eds) Tan, Poh, and Jomo, pp.180-189, especially pp. 184-185.

<sup>24</sup> Chan Heng Chee, ‘Verbatim: Singaporean Ambassador Heng Chee Chan’, *Washington Life Magazine*, published online December 2004, available at <https://www.washingtonlife.com/issues/2004-12/verbatim/> [accessed 18 August 2024].

<sup>25</sup> Syed Hussein Alatas, *Intellectuals in developing societies* (London: Frank Cass, 1977), p. 68.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 68.

1965, from rent-seeking by elites in Malaysia to anti-intellectualism and attempts to curb the university's autonomy in Singapore. Recent work by Farabi Fakhri on intellectuals in Indonesia places this anti-intellectualism in a larger, and less moralised context. Drawing on the work of American political theorist James Burnham, Fakhri notes the transition after independence to a 'managerial state' in which an often charismatic 'nationalist political class' of intellectuals who had undergone colonial education, had won independence, and envisioned a new society, gave way to a 'new class of managers'.<sup>27</sup>

In Singapore, as we have seen, many oppositional intellectuals of this nationalist political class were detained, exiled, or fell silent. After independence, managerial competence expressed as pragmatism became central to the political legitimacy of the People's Action Party: with an electoral supermajority assured, politicians such as Lee Kuan Yew and Goh Keng Swee successfully made the transition to the role of managers superintending development.<sup>28</sup> Yet for Rajaratnam, older than most of his colleagues in the first PAP cabinet, and with a longer and richer experience of engagement with anticolonial nationalists in the imperial metropolis, the shift to managerialism was much less easy. In 1953, a year before he participated as convenor of the meeting to launch the People's Action Party, Rajaratnam wrote three long articles on Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution* in his weekly 'I Write as I Please' column for the *Singapore Standard*. He argued passionately against Burnham's assertion that '*de facto* control of the means of production has moved from the capitalists to the managers',<sup>29</sup> retaining faith in the power of the masses to demand

<sup>27</sup> Farabi Fakhri, *Authoritarian modernization in Indonesia's early independence period: The foundation of the New Order state* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), p. 2, p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> See Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian ideology and democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 58-62.

<sup>29</sup> S. Rajaratnam, 'The counter-attack against democracy', *Sunday Standard*, 20 September, 1953, p. 10.

democratisation and social change, expressed through the ‘antagonistic claims of organised labour’.<sup>30</sup> And yet this faith in mass action was eroding; in articles written in the late 1950s, Rajaratnam urged unions to confine themselves to the ‘legitimate function of getting for the workers a greater share of the reward’ while accepting ‘responsibility towards the enterprise’ of which they were part.<sup>31</sup> We can see in this change a transition from a larger social politics to a managerialism that would result in the prohibition of strikes in the 1968 Industrial Relations (Amendments) Act.<sup>32</sup>

In 1970, Rajaratnam would call for a ‘modernising nationalism’ in which individuals undertook ‘development oriented’ labour rather than retaining the ‘dangerous anachronisms’ of questioning of governmental authority that marked anti-colonial nationalism.<sup>33</sup> Despite this, his uneasiness with the managerial state would erupt at times, publicly in his condemnation of ‘moneytheism’,<sup>34</sup> and questioning multiracialism’s failure to achieve a ‘Singaporean Singapore’,<sup>35</sup> privately in his concern that Singapore’s embrace of capitalism had resulted in the production of ‘selfish citizens’,<sup>36</sup> and in his hope for the erasure of the ‘original sin’ of nationalism at the end of the Cold War.<sup>37</sup> In tracing the roots of these

<sup>30</sup> S. Rajaratnam, ‘Is rule by minority inevitable?’, *Sunday Standard*, 27 September, 1953, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> S. Rajaratnam, ‘Economic health demands the workers’ appreciation of the requirements of industry’, *Straits Times*, October 27, 1955, p.8.

<sup>32</sup> Chua, *Communitarian Ideology*, p. 61.

<sup>33</sup> ‘The modernising nationalism’, *The Mirror: A Weekly Almanac of Current Affairs*, vol. 6, no. 16, 20 April, 1970, p. 1.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Raja warns of the ugly cult of moneytheism’, *Straits Times*, 13 August, 1973, p.15.

<sup>35</sup> ‘Raja wants revival of “Singaporean Singapore”’, *Straits Times*, 11 March, 1990, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> S. Rajaratnam, Notebook 3, Accession No. 166\_2009, National Archives of Singapore (hereafter NAS). The notebooks are not accessible via the online catalogue, and can be consulted by approaching an archivist.

<sup>37</sup> S. Rajaratnam, Notebook 17, Accession No. 181\_2009, NAS.

contradictions in the London years, we might focus on two conflicts in Rajaratnam's thought: first, the cool rationality of political theory versus the experience of an affective community of activists, and secondly, the tensions in writing between argumentative exposition and modernist-influenced storytelling. These tensions, indeed, are embodied in the title of that first collection of essays that Chan edited: the 'prophetic' and the 'political' do not always pull in the same direction, especially given the managerialisation of politics in the developmental state.

### **Decolonizing Communities**

Sinnathamby Rajaratnam arrived in England to study Law at King's College London in late August, 1935, at the age of twenty. He had grown up in Seremban, in Malaya, where his father was conductor of a British-owned rubber estate. If he would remember this time as apolitical, he did also recount the names of Mohandas Gandhi and Motilal Nehru being spoken with reverence in the house.<sup>38</sup> London, however, introduced him to a much wider political world, and he arrived at a particular junction of history. In October 1935, soon after Rajaratnam arrived in London, Italian troops invaded Abyssinia, the last African country to maintain its independence from European colonial powers.<sup>39</sup> Abyssinia provided a rallying point that brought together London-based African and Caribbean activists into early pan-African alliances through the International African Friends of Abyssinia and then the International African Service Bureau. These solidarities quickly spread to encompass other anti-imperialist nationalist organisations such as the India League, and some sections of the

<sup>38</sup> S. Rajaratnam, Oral History of S. Rajaratnam (Politician Accession Number 000149, ), National Archives of Singapore Oral History Centre (NAS), available at [https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral\\_history\\_interviews/interview/000149](https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/interview/000149), [accessed 18 August 2024].

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

British left. The so-called Marco Polo Bridge in July 1937, and the subsequent Japanese military action in China, again encouraged anti-colonial, anti-fascist, and left-wing alliances in the colonial metropolis through organisations such as the China Campaign Committee.<sup>40</sup> After the Second World War commenced in Europe from September 1939 onwards, anticolonial activists and intellectuals in London increasingly felt themselves to be on the right side of history, and to anticipate a change in the world order after the end of hostilities. The signing of the Atlantic Charter by Churchill and Roosevelt in August 1941, with its emphasis on national self-determination, implicitly critiqued continual colonial denial of self-rule; organisations such as the CCC could not discuss Japanese imperialism without also recognising how China had been subject to over a century of British imperial aggression and dominance.<sup>41</sup>

In the years that he studied at King's, completing his LLB coursework but repeatedly failing his final exams,<sup>42</sup> Rajaratnam moved in a world of anti-colonial and anti-racist

<sup>40</sup> Rajaratnam's connections with the China Campaign Committee are suggestive; he is mentioned as knowing 'a few elite Kuomintang leaders' in London. See Ang Swee Suan (ed.), *Dialogues with S. Rajaratnam: Former Senior Minister in the Prime Minister's Office*, (trans) Lee Seng Giap (Singapore: Shin Min Daily News, 1991), p. 20. He also recalled attending a week-long seminar for Chinese students at Welwyn Garden City, and spending time at the China Institute (Oral History, NAS).

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, 1943 correspondence between the Ministry of Information, Foreign Office, and private individuals about the representation of the Opium War in the CCC pamphlet *Allies and Equals: The Story of Extraterritoriality in China*, FO 371/35846, China Campaign Committee: activities of, Code 10 file 2450, NA-UK.

<sup>42</sup> Evidence from King's College Calendar and Registry Slip Books indicates Rajaratnam completed the three years of coursework required for the LL.B. degree in 1935-36, 1936-37, and 1937-38, but 'retired' in 1938, and then sat and failed his final examinations in both 1939 and 1940. O. Snaith, Archives Assistant, King's College London, email message to author, 14 July 2022.

thought. He was acquainted, among others, with intellectuals such as George Padmore, Cedric Dover, Krishna Menon, Jomo Kenyatta, Xiao Qian, Dorothy Woodman and, through his later work for the Indian Section of the BBC's Eastern Service, George Orwell.<sup>43</sup> Much has been written about London in the 1930s and 1940s as a central 'junction box' for anti-colonial intellectual work and activism, often focusing on individuals, or particular communities and alliances.<sup>44</sup> Equally important, however, were the physical spaces that Rajaratnam and others occupied in the colonial capital, which enabled both the interchange of ideas and empathic and emotional connections between exiled colonial subjects.

The first of these spaces was the bookstore. For Rajaratnam, a key space was the Bibliophile Bookstore in Little Russell Street, near the British Museum. It had been founded in 1936 by Sasadhar Sinha, the Bengali scholar and activist associated with the Indian nationalist organisation Swaraj House, assisted by Ceylonese barrister and writer Alagu

<sup>43</sup> Rajaratnam, Oral History, NAS; "Interview No.1, 30 November 1985," in *The prophetic and the political; selected speeches and writing of S. Rajaratnam*, (eds) Chan Heng Chee and Obaid ul Haq (Singapore: Graham Brash, 1987), pp.479-502, especially p. 472-3; Ang (ed.), *Dialogues*, p. 20.

<sup>44</sup> See I. Duffield, 'Black people in Britain: History and the historians', *History Today*, vol. 31, no. 9, September 1981, pp. 34-36, especially p. 35; Brant Moscovitch, 'A "seedbed" for post-colonial leaders: Empire, internationalism and the Left at LSE, 1919-c.1950', doctoral dissertation, Oxford University, 2017, p. 95.

Accounts of anticolonial activism and intellectual activity in London in the period from 1935 to 1947 also include Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent empire: Anticolonial resistance and British dissent* (London: Verso, 2019);

Leslie James, *George Padmore and decolonization from below: Pan-Africanism, the Cold War, and the end of empire* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); Marc Matera, *Black London: The imperial metropolis and decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2015);

Moscovitch, "'Against the biggest buccaneering enterprise in living history": Krishna Menon and the colonial response to international crisis', *South Asian Review*, vol. 41, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 243-254, and Theo Williams,

*Making the revolution global: Black radicalism and the British socialist movement before decolonisation* (London: Verso, 2022).



Subramaniam, whose described it in his short story 'Liabilities' as 'small and square shaped' with a 'pretty window'.<sup>45</sup> Now a camera shop, it still conforms to that description. It was fondly remembered as a place on intellectual exchange and debate by future Indian civil servants and politicians such as P.N. Haksar, Jyoti Basu, and Indira Nehru, who was introduced to the 'exciting arguments' in the store by her future husband, Feroze Gandhi.<sup>46</sup> The Bibliophile's success as a meeting space perhaps contributed to its struggles with financial viability as a business. An observer from the Metropolitan Police's Special Branch noted that groups of 'as many as twenty-five Indian men and women have been seen to enter and remain on the premises for some considerable time. When leaving none of them appeared to have purchased any of the various extremist books and pamphlets displayed for sale in the window'.<sup>47</sup>

The bookstore was connected to other spaces: to the lecture halls, refectory and student union of the nearby London School of Economics, where Sinha and many of the other activists had studied or attended lectures, to political meetings in halls and in the Chinese and Indian restaurants in Bloomsbury and Charing Cross, and to the various chapters of Gollancz's Left Book Club, of which Rajaratnam was an eager member of the Hampstead branch.<sup>48</sup> In 1938, he would be introduced to a young Hungarian woman, Piroska Feher, at a book club meeting: they would later rent a ground-floor flat together on the fringes of West

<sup>45</sup> Alagu Subramaniam, *Closing time* (1971. New York: Ohm Books, 2021), p. 83.

<sup>46</sup> Jairam Ramesh, *Intertwined lives: P.N. Haksar and Indira Gandhi* (New Delhi: Simon & Schuster India, 2018), p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> 'Extract from New Scotland Report, No. 190, Dated 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1941', File 598/33 - Sasadhar Sinha, Indian Progressive Writers' Association: Activities in London, L/PJ/12/467, India Office Records and Private Papers, British Library (hereafter BL-IO).

<sup>48</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Interview No.1', p. 473.

Hampstead, and marry in 1943.<sup>49</sup> The bookstore thus cathected to more intimate, domestic spaces of affective and intellectual exchange: the boarding house and the flat, with its study and bedroom.

When Rajaratnam came to London in 1935, he went to stay at a boarding house in Steele's Road, just off Haverstock Hill, between Chalk Farm and Belsize Park. The landlady, Rhoda Churchill, had taken in a number of Malayan students, including lawyer Cheah Heng Sin and future Malaysian chief justice Mohamed Suffian bin Mohamed Hashim, and through the house the young law student made connections to a community of Malaysians in London. Mrs. Churchill's boarding house was one of a limited number that provided a home for non-white residents at a time of prevailing racism in London, and over time the nationalities of its inhabitants changed. In September 1939, Rajaratnam's fellow boarders consisted of a female music student from India, an ethnically Chinese brother and sister from South Africa who would soon migrate to the United States, a Chinese bank worker with connections to the Kuomintang government, and a China-born student whose brother would eventually settle in the United Kingdom and become a restaurateur.<sup>50</sup> Boarders ate together, formed relationships, and exchanged ideas. Subramaniam, now a close friend of Rajaratnam's, lived in a boarding house in Belsize Road, only a few minutes' walk away. His story 'Single Room' gives a sense of this kind of space, depicting a hostel in which Indian, Ceylonese, and African

<sup>49</sup> Rajaratnam, Oral History, NAS; Certified copy of an entry of marriage on 2 January 1943 between Sinnathamby Rajaratnam and Piroska Feher, SR/113/50/1, S. Rajaratnam Private Papers, ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute (SRPP-ISEAS hereafter).

<sup>50</sup> The information in this paragraph is derived from two sources: Rajaratnam's Oral History, NA-S, and the entry for 12 Steele's Road in the General Register Office's *1939 Register*, available at <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/1939register> [accessed 18 August 2024]. Cheah is listed as resident at 12 Steele's Rd on p. 71 of the 1936 *Electoral Register* for the Metropolitan Borough of Hampstead as 'Cheah Hing Sing', available at <https://www.findmypast.co.uk/> [accessed 11 April 2024].

students mingled, quarreled, and came to understand each other, presided over by a Mrs. Barker, the ‘lady superintendent’, next to whom his central character feels ‘like a mouse beside a mountain’.<sup>51</sup> Encounters in the Steele’s Road House, Rajaratnam would recall, widened his intellectual horizons: one connection he mentions in his oral history recording drew him into attending a conference on the Sino-Japanese War.<sup>52</sup> Intellectual discussions, however, were never separated from affective ties: leftist Chinese writer Xiao Qian would recall in his memoirs rooming at the Steele’s Road boarding house on the same floor as Rajaratnam, and diving with him under the communal dining table when the air raid sirens sounded.<sup>53</sup>

Rajaratnam’s movement from the boarding house to the flat hints at a more intimate form of affective and intellectual exchange. As Antoinette Burton has noted, anticolonial activists in the imperial capital often formed profoundly homosocial and masculinist

<sup>51</sup> Subramaniam, *Closing Time*, p. 28.

<sup>52</sup> Rajaratnam, Oral History, NAS.

<sup>53</sup> Xiao Qian [Hsiao Chi’en], *Traveller without a Map*, (trans) Jeffrey C. Kinkley (London: Hutchinson, 1990), p. 96; Xiao Qian, *Wu dai ditu de lüren, Xiao Qian de huiyilu* (Beijing: Zhongguo wenlian chubanshe, 1997), p. 149. Kinkley’s English translation is inaccurate here, in that it translates *gongyu* 公寓 as ‘flat’, when it should be ‘boarding house’: the dining table was communal, not placed in an individual apartment, as the translated text implies. Similarly, the phrase *yi ceng lou* 一层楼 indicates that the two men had rooms on the same floor (likely, from Rajaratnam’s photographs compared to my own visit to the house in May 2022 to be the second floor in British terms), not that their shared flat was on the ‘ground floor’, as in Kinkley’s translation. I am indebted to Chan Cheow Thia for this second point. For photographs of the Steele’s Road house, its garden, and the road in front, see S. Rajaratnam, *Private passion: The photographs of pioneer politician and diplomat S. Rajaratnam* (Singapore: ISEAS, 2011), pp. 14-16.

communities.<sup>54</sup> Women activists and intellectuals such as Una Marson or Amy Ashwood Garvey, despite the efforts of scholars such as Marc Matera, remain under-acknowledged, and indeed their experiences may push us towards a reconsideration of the nature of intellectual labour that does not condense into texts that are readily useable as ‘theory’.<sup>55</sup> Many of the male intellectuals who we now remember worked with female partners in London who became central to their lives’ work. Discussing his life with Piroska in London in the 1940s, Rajaratnam noted that interethnic marriage was common at the time: -- ‘Malays, Chinese, Indians and Africans married white women’.<sup>56</sup> He was perhaps thinking of his immediate circle. Padmore, for instance, had a long relationship with Dorothy Pizer that continued when the couple moved to Ghana in 1957: she assisted him with secretarial work, supported him financially, and hosted activist gatherings, yet she was also an intellectual companion – Leslie James describes their relationship as a ‘political partnership’ that centred on debates about strategies.<sup>57</sup> Sasadhar Sinha lived with Marthe Goldwyn for over a decade, and they married in 1938: she supported him financially in his unpaid political work with her teacher’s salary.

<sup>54</sup> Antoinette Burton, ‘Epilogue: The sodalities of Bandung: Toward a critical 21<sup>st</sup>-century history’, in *Making a world after empire: The Bandung moment and its political afterlives*, (ed.) Christopher Lee (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010), pp. 351-361, especially pp. 356-357.

<sup>55</sup> Matera, Chapter 3, ‘Black Feminist Internationalists,’ pp. 144-198. For a more extended discussion of the exclusion of women intellectuals and the possibilities of inclusion, see Patricia Owens and Katharina Rietzler, ‘Introduction: Toward a history of women’s international thought,’ in *Women’s international thought: a new history*, (eds) Owens and Rietzler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp 1-25. For rethinking intellectual labour with a particular focus on Garvey, see Robbie Shilliam, ‘Theorizing (with) Amy Ashwood Garvey, in *Women’s international thought: a new history*, (eds) Owens and Rietzler (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 158–78.

<sup>56</sup> Ang (ed.), *Dialogues*, p. 21.

<sup>57</sup> James, p. 52

The everyday affective interchanges that characterised these relationships are often lost to us, often because they do not fit easily into masculinist nationalist stories of individual exile and then return.<sup>58</sup> They are fictionalized in texts such as Subramaniam's *Closing Time*, South African Peter Abrahams's *A Wreath for Udomo*, or the Progressive Writers' Association's founder Sajjad Zaheer's *A Night in London*. Hints, however, survive of Rajaratnam's experiences. Piroška continued to correspond with Dorothy Padmore for many years after her return to Singapore, writing of their life in Singapore and the discrimination Rajaratnam experienced in his new job as editor for the *Malaya Tribune*.<sup>59</sup> For an interethnic couple in London in the 1940s, racialization was never far away, differentials of privilege encountered every day on the Underground, in shops, or on the street, and then processed through domestic discussions in which the affective and the cognitive merged.<sup>60</sup>

We might understand these crossings and alliances in terms of Leela Gandhi's notion of 'affective communities'. Focusing on anticolonial solidarities across race in late Victorian and Edwardian England, Gandhi explores what she calls a 'politics of friendship',<sup>61</sup> giving examples of how homosexual and vegetarian activism intersected with anti-imperial political struggles. For Gandhi, such associations only occurred for a brief period until the formation of the Independent Labour Party led the left to focus on 'respectable, organized, single-issue

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, Joanna Simonow, 'Sexing the history of Indian anti-colonial internationalism: White women, Indian men and the politics of the personal', *Gender & History* vol. 36, no. 2, 2020, pp. 1-17.

<sup>59</sup> Piroška Rajaratnam to Dorothy Padmore, 24 July 1950, KV 2/3833, Dorothy Padmore, alias Pizer: Security Service Personal (PF) Series Files, NA-UK.

<sup>60</sup> See Ras Makonnen, *Pan-Africanism from within* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 132, for an account of discrimination against interracial couples.

<sup>61</sup> Leela Gandhi, *Affective communities: Anticolonial thought, Fin-de-siècle radicalism, and the politics of friendship* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 9.

politics'.<sup>62</sup> Yet it's arguable that the forms of utopianism re-emerged during London of the Second World War, with the suspension of electoral politics and of political rallies, and the increasing sense that a new, decolonized post-War world would emerge from the wreckage of the old. In an adroit analysis of Mulk Raj Anand's wartime broadcasts for the Indian Section of the BBC's Eastern Service, on which Rajaratnam also broadcasted, Julie Cyzewski has noted how the Indian writer made use of the trope of friendship to stage dialogues that cut across class and race, highlighting 'diverse class positions and experience' to an Indian audience.<sup>63</sup> In the boarding house, the bookstore, and the bedroom private connections, alliances, affective solidarities emerged that supplemented political organization, activism and thought in a public sphere, and yet these two forms of political were not quite reducible to each other.

### **The Public Life of Documents**

Rajaratnam published his first article, a condemnation of Hitler, in the *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle* in November 1939.<sup>64</sup> However, he only began writing more extended work in London in 1941, after the end of the Blitz. Initially, his energy was channelled into writing short stories. While it is impossible to know the exact order of their composition, it is possible to plot their development. The earliest seem to have been written under the influence of the Bibliophile Bookstore group and their journal *Indian Writing*, where two of the stories were published.<sup>65</sup> All but one have South Asian settings. The first story Rajaratnam

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

<sup>63</sup> Julie Cyzewski, "Making friends": The geopolitics of the interview on the BBC's Eastern Services', *Biography*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2018, pp. 322–43: p. 328.

<sup>64</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Malayan Indian's view of Hitler', *Pinang Gazette and Straits Chronicle*, 4 November, 1939, p. 8.

<sup>65</sup> Rajaratnam mentions K.S. Shelvankar, the co-editor of *Indian Writing*, as an important influence. See 'Interview No.1', p. 473.

published, 'But for the Stars', is a humorous account of an uncle's irrational belief in astronomy, like Subramaniam's gently ironic story 'The Mathematician', and perhaps in turn influencing the Ceylonese writer's later story 'Professional Mourners'. It was also broadcast on the BBC Home Service a year later.<sup>66</sup> Two other stories written about the same time, 'Famine' and 'Drought', are closer to the social realism of another acquaintance from Bibliophile circles, Mulk Raj Anand. 'The Tiger', published in 1942, is the first and only short story set in Malaya and featuring Malay characters. All three stories have rural settings, in which there are clear class hierarchies and an encounter with the unforgiving forces of nature. All feature racially homogenous communities, and are set on a feudal periphery that seems distant from the colonial order of things. Two further stories published in 1942, 'The Locusts' and 'What Has to Be', are more overtly political. They share South Asian locations with earlier stories, but now gesture towards the possibilities of social change. At the end of 'The Locusts', for instance, the recollection of the crushing of one of the insects between a farmer's fingers prefigures social revolution; the plot of 'What Has to Be' matches the irony of its title, suggesting that more than the medicine of the 'doctor sahib' is needed to cure the effects of an unjust society on the bodies of human beings.<sup>67</sup>

Rajaratnam's final story, 'The Terrorist', is something of an outlier. It was published in 1947, the year that he returned to Singapore, and while it also has a South Asian setting, its action takes place on a train where its protagonist, Sen, plans and then carries out the assassination of a political leader he judges to be 'a traitor and an enemy of his country'.<sup>68</sup> When he returned to Malaya in 1947, Rajaratnam clearly still saw literature as occupying an

<sup>66</sup> 'S. Raja Ratnam', Radio Scripts Index Card, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, UK.

<sup>67</sup> Rajaratnam, 'What Has to Be', *Life and Letters Today*, vol. 32, no. 55, 1942, pp 218-222: p. 221.

<sup>68</sup> Rajaratnam, 'The Terrorist', in *Modern international short stories*, (ed) Denys Val Baker (London: W.H. Allen, 1947), pp. 3-14: p. 6.

important part of his intellectual life, and announced on his return that he would soon be publishing a short story collection.<sup>69</sup> The collection itself did not materialise, but Rajaratnam's last short story perhaps indicates some of the 'contradictions and problems' that Gui Weihsin notes the modernist aesthetics of the stories as a whole raise.<sup>70</sup> In parallel, I've argued that the stories can be read as gestures towards a national imaginary that work as forms of dreaming in their movement between affective identification and more distant, anthropological narration.<sup>71</sup> If 'The Terrorist', with its compression of time and intense exploration of the affective interiority of a character whose precise politics are unclear, represents the high watermark of Rajaratnam's modernist experimentation, it also prepares the ground for the author's journalism of the 1940s and 1950s, in which formal playfulness, invented narrators, and fictional found documents would be put in the service of decolonizing polemic.<sup>72</sup>

<sup>69</sup> 'Back in Malaya', *Straits Times*, 2 March, 1947, p. 7.

<sup>70</sup> Gui Weihsin, 'Global modernism in colonial Malayan and Singaporean literature: The poetry and prose of Teo Poh Leng and Sinnathamby Rajaratnam', *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2017 pp. 1-18: p.11; available at <https://www.postcolonial.org/index.php/pct/article/view/2167/2088>, [accessed 18 August 2024].

<sup>71</sup> Philip Holden, 'Rajaratnam's tiger: Race, gender and the beginnings of Singapore nationalism', *Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2006, pp. 127-140.

<sup>72</sup> Examples of these include a letter to a European friend ('Europe over Asia', *Malaya Tribune* 1947, 5 August 1947, p.4), a fictive account by a labourer of the broken promises made to him by competing politicians in the 1955 election campaign ('The big men who came to my door: The magic of the sacred tree', *Straits Times*, 1 May, 1955, p. 4, p. 18) and 'When Malaya Ruled Britain' (*Raayat*, vol. 1. no. 7, February 1955, pp. 7-8), a satirical article that posits what a Malayan Secretary of State for the Colonies would say if Britain were a colony of Malaya, emphasising how social, religious, and national divisions make the United Kingdom unfit for self-rule.



Rajaratnam's energies from 1943 onwards, however, were mostly directed to a less literary form of journalism. He wrote for the progressive Sunday newspaper *Reynold's News*, and later served as London correspondent for the Bombay-based *Free Press Journal*. His early short articles were written anonymously and are thus difficult to identify. From 1943, however, he began publishing longer form journalism with bylines. The fall of Singapore to Japanese forces in early 1942 offered an opportunity for anti-colonial activists in London. The British had seen Malaya as a model colony, and yet there had been little resistance to the Japanese from colonial subjects. Conservatives expressed puzzlement. The extraordinary collapse of British Malaya, writers in socialist publications such as the *Tribune*, *New Statesman*, and the Independent Labour Party's *New Leader* argued, represented not just a military defeat, but illustrated the weakness of a colonial order based on the co-optation of a small native elite and the alienation of the masses. 'How could', George Padmore wrote in the *New Leader*, 'a people whose existence had been entirely ignored, presumably because they were considered unfit to participate in the government of the country, suddenly resuscitate themselves as it were, and assume responsibility in defence of the system which had until then failed to recognise their existence?'<sup>73</sup>

In London there were few anti-colonial activists with deep knowledge of Malaya. Padmore's article, for instance, made the common error of confusing ethnic Malays with 'Malayans', a non-ethnic identity based on residence that formed the basis for a putative common citizenship in a future multicultural nation. When the Fabian Colonial Bureau held a conference focusing on Malaya in March 1942, they were able to invite the St Lucian economist Arthur Lewis and Ghanaian scholar Robert K.A. Gardiner to talk of lessons that might be learned from the catastrophe in Malaya for the Caribbean and West Africa

<sup>73</sup> George Padmore, 'The crisis in the British Empire', *New Leader*, 27 June, 1942, p. 4.

respectively. To speak for Malaya itself, however, they could only draw on a Mr. David Freeman, ‘for many years resident in Malaya’.<sup>74</sup> A year earlier, in 1941, the National Council of Civil Liberties had called on future Malayan Democratic Union founder Lim Kean Chye and London-based law student Athisayam Appajee as representatives of Malaya to address their conference on civil liberty in the colonial empire.<sup>75</sup> Lim, however, had returned to Penang later in the year, joining an exodus from England of many other students, including Rajaratnam’s friends Lim Hong Bee and Sardon bin Jubir, who went home only to see Malaya fall to the Japanese.<sup>76</sup> Appajee remained in England but seems to have withdrawn from political activism, perhaps because of his ongoing work with the Ministry of Information.<sup>77</sup>

From 1942 onwards, then, Rajaratnam began to occupy the space of an authoritative voice on Malaya and Malayan politics in London. In 1942, when he published ‘The Changing Malay People’ in the journal *Asia and The Americas*, the young journalist was still negotiating this authority. ‘I am not myself a Malay’, he wrote, ‘but a Jaffnese from northern Ceylon. Yet I have been brought up and educated in Malaya for so long that I feel justified in

<sup>74</sup> ‘Empire collapse? A critique of colonial administration’, *Empire: A Bimonthly Record*, vol. 4, no. 6, March 1942, p. 6.

<sup>75</sup> Typescript Programme for “‘Conference on Civil Liberty in the Colonial Empire” held on 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> February 1941’, File U DCL/56/9, Conference on Civil Liberty in the Colonial Empire, Liberty Archive, Hull University Archives. Lim’s name is mis-spelled as ‘K.C. Liem’.

<sup>76</sup> In his biography, Lim recalls leaving London to take the Blue Funnel Line ship *Ulysses* from Glasgow in April 1941, but the ship did not sail until June 10<sup>th</sup> (Lim, *Born into war*, pp. 265-277). Sardon is listed on the Shipping Departure Record, although Lim does not mention his presence on the tortuous voyage that involved an initial diversion to Newfoundland. For Rajaratnam’s friendship with Sardon, see Ang, (ed.), *Dialogues*, p. 20.

<sup>77</sup> ‘War’s effect on Malayan students in England’, *Sunday Tribune* (Singapore), 19 November, 1939, p. 5.

trying to express what I think the Malay felt and thought'.<sup>78</sup> He developed his account of Malaya as a product of a 'complex and diseased colonial policy'<sup>79</sup> in a series of later articles for the same publication, noting how racial capitalism in colonial Malaya had drawn upon Chinese and Indian migrant labour while promoting the 'fossilization of Malay society' in a 'precapitalist' feudal mode of production.<sup>80</sup> This economic inheritance could not now be simply wished away. In exploring the challenges of forming 'a single political community' that transcended 'racial, cultural, and linguistic differences', Rajaratnam expressed reservations about nationalism's exclusions that he would continue to hold for the rest of his life.<sup>81</sup> A future Malayan political and cultural community might be forged by a vision of citizenship, but this vision would only be possible after an economic transformation: while 'racial partisanship' was not entirely conditioned by economic inequality, it would be 'least evident when warmed by economic prosperity'.<sup>82</sup>

Rajaratnam's status as a commentator was further shown by Padmore's selection of him as the Malayan representative at the All-Colonial Subject Peoples' Conference in held in London on 10 June 1945. Padmore noted that his lecture gave an 'excellent survey of race relations as well as the economic and social set up in the Malaya States [sic] now under Japanese occupation'.<sup>83</sup> In the September of the same year, he facilitated a discussion on

<sup>78</sup> Rajaratnam, 'The changing Malay people', *Asia and the Americas*, vol. 42, no. 8, August 1942, pp. 449-453: p.450.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p. 449.

<sup>80</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Malaya's three peoples', *Asia and the Americas* vol. 46, no. 10, October 1946, pp. 451-52: p. 452.

<sup>81</sup> 'Malaya in transition', *Asia and the Americas* vol. 46, no. 9, September 1946, pp. 396-98: p. 398.

<sup>82</sup> 'Malaya's three peoples', p. 451.

<sup>83</sup> George Padmore, 'Subject peoples of different empires meet to unify nationalist bodies: Aim at immediate end to colonialism', *West African Pilot*, July 2, 1945, pp. 1-2: p. 2.

‘India and South East Asia’ at a summer school organized by Swaraj House, the Indian nationalist organisation.<sup>84</sup> The title of the session indicates the expanding interests of Rajaratnam and his circle in imagining a new geopolitics after the end of World War II. By 1945, he and others were using ‘South East Asia’, a regional designation made popular through the Allied creation of the South East Asian Command (SEAC) in 1943,<sup>85</sup> to imagine new connections and alliances in a region formerly envisioned as part of a number of colonial empires or spheres of influence.

In a series of articles in the *Tribune*, *Asia and The Americas*, and *Reynold's News*, Rajaratnam explored the future of specific nationalist struggles in Southeast Asia, and placed them within the wider context of decolonization. He was scathingly critical of the July 4, 1945 independence of the Philippines, seeing it as resulting from an alliance of Filipino landowners and American capital, embodied in the figure of the ‘well disciplined puppet’, Japanese collaborator, and now President, Manuel Roxas, and brought about by the suppression of the Hukbalahap guerillas who sought agrarian reform.<sup>86</sup> An article on post-War Japan made a similar point: Allied policy should not be to keep Emperor Hirohito in place within a constitutional monarchy as a nod to tradition. Rather, the United Nations and other bodies should recognise the ‘sordid background’ of the ‘Emperor system’, and the way in which it expressed the interests of militarism and monopoly capital.<sup>87</sup> The argument of the article, however, contains the germs of a contradiction that would become central to

<sup>84</sup> K. I. Muhiudeen, ‘Annual Report of the Swaraj House: from 7<sup>th</sup> November, 1944 till 7<sup>th</sup> November, 1945’, File 2572/42, Swaraj House, London: Activities of members and meetings, L/PJ/12/658, BL-IO.

<sup>85</sup> Russell H. Fifield, ‘Southeast Asia as a regional concept’, *Asian Journal of Social Science*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1983, pp. 1-14: p. 3.

<sup>86</sup> Rajaratnam, ‘America’s new banana republic’, *Tribune*, 19 July, 1946: pp 9-10: p. 10.

<sup>87</sup> Rajaratnam, ‘The Mikado: myth and reality’, *Tribune*, 20 July, 1945: pp. 7-8: p. 7.

Rajaratnam's thought. On the one hand, the 'evil institution' of the imperial system existed because of 'trickery' practiced on the masses: 'the people' had to be 'saved from it' by external intervention.<sup>88</sup> Yet at the same time, Rajaratnam argued, no decisions could be 'imposed against the will of the people'. His solution, for now, was to urge the release of the 'thousands of liberals, socialists and communists' from Japanese prisons: if this were done, the wheels of history would begin to turn again of their own accord.<sup>89</sup>

Further articles followed making similar arguments for social transformation to end colonialism in French Indochina ('Indo-China: The Background') and Indonesia ('New Storm Over Asia'), the latter given greater urgency by the new Labour Government's use of British troops to suppress nationalist forces in Java in support of the 'quinine monopolists and the wealth bankers and shippers of Amsterdam'.<sup>90</sup> Rajaratnam's early thought perhaps reaches its synthesis in an August 1945 article, 'Asia on the Eve of Storm', which gives a historical account of the rise of anti-colonial nationalism in Asia, the denial of Asian aspirations of an explicit commitment to racial equality in the Treaty of Versailles in 1919, and then the growth of mass nationalist movements seeking 'social revolution' in the inter-war years, often taking the Soviet Union as their inspiration.<sup>91</sup> The 'proletariat of the world', Rajaratnam noted, 'are no longer where they were in Marx's day. They are herded together in the sweatshops of Shanghai, Bombay and Calcutta. In every sense they have nothing to lose but their chains'.<sup>92</sup> Yet they were outnumbered by Asian peasantry, living on the land, and

<sup>88</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 8.

<sup>90</sup> Rajaratnam, 'The new storm over Asia', *Reynold's News*, 4 November, 1945, p.2.

<sup>91</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Asia on the eve of storm', *Asia and the Americas*, vol. 45, no. 8, August 1945: pp. 378-381: p.380.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, p. 380.

now increasingly disenfranchised by having to produce cash crops for export to world markets. In the new world after the war, Asia's future could only be assured by industrial development freed from the fetters of imperialism. The 'western powers' were faced with a choice: to grease the wheels of history by giving 'material and political support to ... democratic forces' or to resist and risk an 'embittered and frustrated nationalism turning perhaps to the ways of Fascism, as politicians like Bose, Ba Maw, and Soekarno have done'.<sup>93</sup> This reference to collaboration under Japanese occupation of Burma and Indonesia perhaps looks backward as well as forward, drawing on Rajaratnam's earlier broadcasts for the BBC Eastern Service in 1942, in which he had condemned Asian anticolonial leaders' wartime cooperation with the Japanese as an extension of a putative 'Fascist International.'<sup>94</sup>

In the published work during the London years, then, we might see two halves that do not quite make a whole. The fiction draws on a world of affect enabled by Rajaratnam's participation in a politics of friendship in London, and a form of writing that is not simply goal-oriented, even as its settings gesture towards an arena of decolonization in South and Southeast Asia. The journalism's analysis is drawn from a progressivist understanding of history that is rooted in Marxism, and appeals to the intellect for a rational understanding that

<sup>93</sup> Ibid, p. 381. For Ba Maw's own account of his role as head of state in Burma during the Second World War, see *Breakthrough in Burma: Memoirs of a revolution, 1939-1946* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968). For the context of Sukarno's collaboration with the Japanese, see M. C. Ricklefs, *A history of Modern Indonesia since c.1200* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2008), pp. 235–247. On the contradictions of Sukarno's relationship to fascism, see Angus McIntyre, 'Marx Versus Carlyle: Sukarno's View of Hitler's Role in History', *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs* vol. 43, no. 2, 2009: pp. 131-163.

<sup>94</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Japan's puppet show', transcript of broadcast on 13 April 1942, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, UK; Rajaratnam, 'The fascist international', transcript of broadcast on 10 December 1942, BBC Written Archives Centre, Reading, UK.

will evade political trickery. Yet in both fiction and journalism there is the sense of a “will of the masses” that emerges from affective experience, which is explicable in world historical terms, and yet which is irreducible to either rationality or affect. To follow these intertwining and at times contradictory threads, we need to enter Rajaratnam’s library.

### **The Library and the Inner Life**

Rajaratnam’s inner world can be traced in the annotations he made to books in his personal library, which are now preserved as the Rajaratnam Collection in ISEAS Library. Of the 134 volumes in the collection published in or before 1947, many are clearly bought later, and indeed several bear stamps or stickers from Singapore bookstores. The annotations often form a palimpsest, with key texts returned to, and further notes added in later in life, especially in the years after Rajaratnam’s retirement from politics in 1988. Three clues do, however, enable us to locate key texts that were marked up during Rajaratnam’s time in London: the fact that several are wartime editions published on cheap paper, the occasional presence of newspaper articles from the early 1940s used as spills or bookmarks, and a few annotated comments that refer to specific, datable events. From the early annotations in fountain pen or pencil, though, we can plot a progression from dutiful note-taking as an undergraduate, which often involves the glossing of a word such as ‘viviparous’ or ‘phylogeny’, to a more substantive engagement, and often outright disagreement, with the argument of the text.<sup>95</sup>

In these engagements in Rajaratnam’s library, these spidery dialogues in the margins of printed texts, three themes emerge. The first returns us to George Padmore, and to Marx. Rajaratnam has a Marxist vision of societal progress as an inevitable series of changes in

<sup>95</sup> Rajaratnam’s annotations to H.G. Wells, *Mr. Belloc objects to ‘The Outline of History’* (London: Watts, 1926), pp.20-21, S. Rajaratnam Collection, ISEAS Library (hereafter RC-ISEAS).

modes of production through dialectical praxis. When annotating Serge Chakotin's account of a historical movement from Christendom to a world dominated by science and then to a new world marked by 'the coming of Socialism', Rajaratnam, in his annotations, translates these three periods into more orthodox Marxist terminology, the first as a combination of 'primitive society, feudal' and the latter two as '2. Capitalist, 3. Socialist'.<sup>96</sup> Marx's influence also extended to the relationship between the economic base of society and its cultural and intellectual superstructure. Like Padmore, C.L.R. James, and their contemporary, Eric Williams, he was thus sceptical of volitional humanitarianism that claimed to stand outside historical forces. Annotating Leonard Barnes's *The Duty of Empire*, for instance, Rajaratnam objects to the author's characterization of the 'British anti-slavery campaign' as one exception to utilitarian and economically determinist views of State policy. In the margins, he notes, following James and Williams, that the campaign 'had a substantial economic basis for its practical realisation'.<sup>97</sup> This places him to the left of the democratic socialists of the Fabian Society who would exert influence on his future People's Action Party colleagues such as Lee Kuan Yew.<sup>98</sup> The Fabian Colonial Bureau's publication *Empire* would conclude its review of Williams's pathbreaking *Capitalism and Slavery* with the observations that the study's connection between industrial capitalism and abolition resulted from 'devious reasoning' and that readers should remember that 'economic determinism is rarely the whole

<sup>96</sup> Rajaratnam's annotations to Serge Chakotin, *The rape of the masses: The psychology of totalitarian political propaganda* (London: Labour Book Service, 1940), p. 66, RC-ISEAS.

<sup>97</sup> Rajaratnam's annotations to Leonard Barnes, *The duty of empire* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1935), p. 30, RC-ISEAS.

<sup>98</sup> Michael D. Barr, 'Lee Kuan Yew's Fabian phase', *The Australian Journal of Politics and History*, vol. 46, no. 1, 2000, pp. 110-126: p. 113-14.



truth in historical events'.<sup>99</sup> Rajaratnam's notes clearly differentiate his position from this: for him, economic forces are paramount.

To a Marxist belief in social evolution and the importance of the economic base in terms of mode of production and division of labour, Rajaratnam added a scepticism about racial classification and racial hierarchies that was drawn from contemporary anthropology. As he moved away from his study of Law at King's College, he seems to have become interested in anthropology and colonial economics, especially texts connected with the field of critical colonial studies that was emerging at the London School of Economics in the 1930s where many of his friends and interlocutors took classes.<sup>100</sup> These explorations in anthropology led him away from race towards culture. Rajaratnam's library contains a 1936 student edition of American anthropologists Ralph Linton's *The Study of Man*, and many of the annotations are definitional and summative, indicating they come from an early period of intellectual engagement. The annotations focus in particular on Linton's discussions of race, and his chapter on 'The Significance of Racial Differences', in which the author argues against theories of evolutionary inequalities between racial groups, and indeed theories of racial difference *in toto*. Rajaratnam also bought a wartime edition of Ruth Benedict's *Race and Racism*. He returned to it in the early 1990s, but the annotations he made then can be distinguished from earlier pencil underlinings, highlighting passages in which Benedict discusses the impossibility of racial categorization,<sup>101</sup> and the frequent misreading of socially

<sup>99</sup> 'Capitalism and Slavery', *Empire*, vol. 8, no. 3 (September-October 1945), p.11.

<sup>100</sup> Moscovitch, "'A 'seedbed' for post-colonial leaders'", pp. 127-128. In his Oral History, Rajaratnam notes that he attended classes on three campuses: Kings, LSE, and University College.

<sup>101</sup> Rajaratnam's annotations to Ruth Benedict, *Race and racism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1943), p. 23, RC-ISEAS.

acquired cultural traits as hereditary racial ones.<sup>102</sup> Finally, he bought American anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits's *Acculturation: The Study of Culture Contact* at a bookstore near the British Museum. In this text, he marked up passages concerning cultural contact and transmission in which there was 'some relative cultural equality between the giving and receiving cultures', in contrast to the cultural assimilation forced upon subjects by much colonial rule.<sup>103</sup>

These concerns regarding race, culture, and the possibilities of multiracial societies and polities were brought together in a text by the Indian-born Eurasian zoologist and social scientist Cedric Dover. In a speech given later in life, Rajaratnam would recall attending the launch of Dover's book *Half-Caste* in London – likely in April, 1937.<sup>104</sup> Dover and Rajaratnam knew each other: he was part of the *Indian Writing* and the Bibliophile circle, and, like Rajaratnam and Anand, would work under George Orwell in the Indian Section of the BBC's Eastern Service. *Half-Caste* seems also to have been a text to which Rajaratnam returned repeatedly in his life, especially in the early 1990s, with his growing concern about how the 'Chinese Malay Indian Other' classifications of state multiracialism had hardened racialized boundaries, and caused the prospect of a 'Singaporean Singapore' to recede. Like the anthropologists Rajaratnam encountered, Dover offered skepticism regarding racial categorisation, and condemnation, in a passage that the young student marked up, of the 'evil,

<sup>102</sup> Ibid, 6.

<sup>103</sup> Herskovits, Melville J. *Acculturation: The study of culture contact* (New York: J.J. Augustin, 1938), p. 7.

<sup>104</sup> 'Fax to *Straits Times*, *SBC News*, *Business Times*, *Lianhe Zaobao*, *Shin Min Daily News*, *Berita Harian*, *Tamil Murasu*: A copy of speech given at the launch of the Book "Singapore Eurasians - Memories and Hopes", 18 July 1992, SR/055/040, SRPP-ISEAS. In the speech Rajaratnam notes that he still has a 'somewhat battered copy' of the book.

foolish and dangerous' practices of "'race" prejudice'.<sup>105</sup> However, Dover offered him more than a condemnation of racism as 'syndicated xenophobia',<sup>106</sup> by unfolding a vision of a 'multiracial civilisations'.<sup>107</sup> He revisioned Indic, Classical Greek, and Medieval European cultures as gaining vitality from periods of invasions, migration, cultural flows, and 'dilution of the dominant stock'.<sup>108</sup> Dover then looked forward to a future in which Eurasians, 'Euroasiatics',<sup>109</sup> and 'Eurafricans',<sup>110</sup> present in port cities throughout the world from Bombay to Singapore to Cape Town, would constitute a cultural vanguard in opposition to the 'ethnomania of Western superiority'<sup>111</sup> and lead the inauguration of a 'classless society'.<sup>112</sup> In addition, Dover gave only qualified support to anti-colonial nationalism as a means to an end, endorsing Nehru's 'concept of national freedom as a prelude to social freedom and internationalism'.<sup>113</sup> The two themes of social evolution towards cultural hybridity and a scepticism about nationalism would persist in Rajaratnam's thought, the former publicly in his challenges to state multiracialism, the latter privately, in the notebooks he kept late in his political career and after his retirement.

A third element also stands out in Rajaratnam's reading and his annotations: a curiosity about the relationship between individual psychology and broader patterns of social change. This interest appears to have begun quite early. In an early article published in the

<sup>105</sup> Cedric Dover, *Half-caste* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1937), p. 61.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid*, p. 14.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid*, p. 80.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid*, p. 83.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, p. 167.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*, p. 188.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, p. 274.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, p. 277.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid*, p. 285.

Straits Settlements when he was only 24, Rajaratnam, writing from London, gave an account of Hitler's rise to power, condemning the German leader's 'anti-rational psychology and inferiority complex', and his use of the swastika as a 'tribal totem'.<sup>114</sup> By the early 1940s, his interest in psychology deepened through reading Sergei Chakotin's *The Rape of the Masses: The Psychology of Totalitarian Political Propaganda*, and he made extensive annotations to his copy. Rajaratnam rejected Chakotin's Behaviourist account of Fascism, noting that 'biological behaviour is put in motion by other facts outside of man', but he remained curious about the way in which populism, crowds and mass gatherings might reflect and drive historical processes.<sup>115</sup> Enclosed within Rajaratnam's copy of Chakotin's text is a condensed article originating from ultimately from Charles MacKay's nineteenth-century study of crowd psychology *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*, and annotated 'Dec. 1939'. Chakotin cites Gustave Le Bon, and after returning to Singapore in 1947 Rajaratnam would buy a copy of Le Bon's *The Crowd* from City Bookstore on Collyer Quay. In his notes, he focuses on Le Bon's thesis that crowds are intellectually inferior, but at times emotionally superior, to individuals. 'Doubtless a crowd is often criminal', Le Bon wrote in a passage that Rajaratnam underlined, 'but also it is often heroic'.<sup>116</sup> We might see here, again, a generative tension between an understanding of history as rationalized progression, and one that acknowledges the power of affective connections.

In annotations made in his London years, Rajaratnam showed a complementary interest the place of the individual, reading and annotating two sceptical accounts of exceptional individuals who drove social change. These were Edmund Wilson's historical survey of revolutionary socialist thinkers from Michelet to Lenin, *To the Finland Station*, and

<sup>114</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Malayan Indian's View of Hitler', p. 8.

<sup>115</sup> Rajaratnam's annotations to Chakotin, *The rape of the masses*, p. 33, RC-ISEAS.

<sup>116</sup> Le Bon, Gustave. *The crowd: A study of the popular mind* (London: Benn, 1947) p. 34.

Max Nomad's *Apostles of Revolution*, the latter text, in an introductory passage Rajaratnam underlined, plotting 'ever-recurring tragic failures of all revolutionary mass movements which invariably fall short in achieving their originally professed aims'.<sup>117</sup> In his further annotations to Nomad's book, in particular, Rajaratnam disagreed with its criticism of Marxism and socialist aspirations, yet he seems to have followed Nomad in a skepticism about 'a sort of Caesaristic socialism'<sup>118</sup> 'directed by an intellectual aristocracy'.<sup>119</sup> 'Who', he questioned caustically in the margins, should this aristocracy itself in turn 'be directed by?'<sup>120</sup> This question returns us to the contradictions shown in the journalism a few years later: if the will of the people was suppressed, and the dialectical motor of history stalled, how might individuals intervene to restart it?

These concerns come together in Rajaratnam's own reflections on his place within the process of historical change. Ethnically Tamil, Ceylon-born, Malayan by upbringing, he did not conform to Dover's description of a racial hybrid, but he was acutely aware of his cultural hybridity. The majority of Malayan students in England were Chinese, with a smaller number of ethnic Malay students, often the sons of aristocrats or future civil servants on government scholarships, and an even smaller number of students of Indian or Ceylonese heritage: he did not quite fit into this expatriate community.<sup>121</sup> Yet, as his oral history testimony makes clear,

<sup>117</sup> Max Nomad, *Apostles of revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1939), p.1.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 394.

<sup>120</sup> Rajaratnam's annotations to Nomad, *Apostles of revolution*, p. 394, RC-ISEAS.

<sup>121</sup> A reporter from the *Malaya Tribune* interviewed Khoo Kay Chuan, a student at London University, on his return to Singapore in January 1941. Khoo estimated that there were "about twenty" Malayan students still in Britain, listing predominately ethnic Chinese students' names but including Rajaratnam, Emily Sadka, and Athisayam Appajee ('Malayan Students in Britain "Carry On"', *Malaya Tribune*, 16 January, 1941: p. 3). The

he was also something of an outsider in the anti-colonial India League, headed by V. Krishna Menon, in Swaraj House, and indeed in the *Indian Writing* community. Growing up in Seremban, in colonial Malaya, we have seen, Rajaratnam heard his father's teacher friends talking with admiration of Indian nationalists such as Mohandas Gandhi and Motilal Nehru. In London, though, while he volunteered for the League, he was not a member, because he was not considered Indian: like the English socialist Fenner Brockway, who worked alongside him, he was at best a kind of 'honorary Indian'.<sup>122</sup> Contributors' notes to the various journals he wrote for indicate this shifting identity, its instability sometimes compounded by editors' errors. In *Life and Letters* he was described as 'from Ceylon',<sup>123</sup> in *Modern International Short Stories* as 'one of the leading Indian short story writers, at present living in Britain',<sup>124</sup> in *Asia* magazine variously as 'a Sinhalese [who] . . . grew up in Malaya',<sup>125</sup> and 'a Jaffnese from the north of Ceylon',<sup>126</sup> and in *Reynold's News* as 'a Malayan journalist'.<sup>127</sup>

This fluid identity leads us to a final text in Rajaratnam's library, one which he purchased in England and returned to later in life. This was American sociologist Everett Stonequist's *Marginal Man* (1937), with its reference to a figure that evolved at times of social change, a 'stranger' in Georg Simmel's sense, but one actively engaged in society, in

estimate seems low, even allowing for departures from late 1939 onwards, but perhaps gives a sense of a core community that spanned London and Cambridge.

<sup>122</sup> Rajaratnam, Oral History, NAS.

<sup>123</sup> Robert Herring, 'Editorial', *Life and Letters Today*, vol. 32, no. 55, March 1942, pp. 157-58: p.158.

<sup>124</sup> 'The Contributors', in *Modern international short stories*, (ed) Baker, n.p..

<sup>125</sup> 'Asia', *Asia and the Americas*, vol. 41, no. 4, April 1941, [p. 153].

<sup>126</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Asia on the eve of storm', p. 378.

<sup>127</sup> Rajaratnam, 'The new storm over Asia', p. 2.

no way a ‘*déraciné* cosmopolitan’.<sup>128</sup> In sections of Robert Park’s introduction to the text which Rajaratnam underlined once, and then again, Stonequist’s mentor notes that the ‘marginal man is a personality type that arises at a time and a place where, out of the conflict of races and cultures, new societies, new peoples and cultures are coming into existence [,] ... an incidental product of a process of acculturation, such as inevitably ensues when peoples of different cultures and races come together to carry on a common life’.<sup>129</sup> In an annotation most probably written when he returned to the text and his earlier notes in the early 1990s, Rajaratnam would posit that it was not the ‘racial hybrid’ but the ‘cultural hybrid’ that was responsible for ‘the dynamics of history’.<sup>130</sup> This enabled him to extend Dover’s argument. In the 1992 speech in which he recalled his first encounter with the text of *Half-Caste*, Rajaratnam reflected on his shifting identity: his Ceylonese Tamil heritage had resulted in his categorization in Singaporean multicultural governmentality not as ‘Indian’, as everyone assumed, but as ‘Other’. ‘As far as I am concerned’, he wrote then, that ‘makes me a 100 per cent unadulterated Singaporean. I am quite at home to be designated: “The Other Race”’.<sup>131</sup> The early reading of Stonequist may well have encouraged Rajaratnam to see his cultural marginality not as a weakness but a strength, giving leverage at a fulcrum of history. If Rajaratnam saw himself as an expression of such a personality type, Chakotin’s text offered him a way of using it to gain agency. In a passage heavily marked up by Rajaratnam, Chakotin, channelling Stalin, writes of the journalist as an ‘engineer of souls’, able to ‘play the whole keyboard of human instincts, their depths and their sublimations’, and appealing

<sup>128</sup> Everett V. Stonequist, *The marginal man: A study in personality and culture conflict* (New York: Scribner's, 1937), p. 177, p. 179.

<sup>129</sup> Robert Park, Introduction to Stonequist, *The marginal man*, pp. xii-xviii: p. xxx, pp. xvii-xviii.

<sup>130</sup> Rajaratnam’s annotations to Stonequist, *The marginal man*, p. 54, RC-ISEAS.

<sup>131</sup> ‘Fax to *Straits Times*’, SR/055/041, SSRP-ISEAS.

not just to reason but to emotions through ‘appropriate wording and arrangement’, through those literary techniques that the Malayan writer honed in his short stories.<sup>132</sup> And yet such techniques seemed to reach out beyond the managerial metaphor of the engineer, towards affective relations that could not be so easily harnessed.

### **Rajaratnam Today**

What emerges from this excursion into the basement of intellectual history? We can, of course, see in this account the beginnings of many aspects of Rajaratnam’s later thought. Some of this readily allies with managerialism: his interest in port cities as spaces of cultural interaction, for instance, drawn from Dover, predicts his later pronouncements on Singapore as a Global City while Minister for Foreign Affairs.<sup>133</sup> In two areas, however, the intellectual inheritance of the London years is in tension with the orthodoxies of Singapore’s postcolonial modernity, and of the managerial order. First, his concern that capitalism be simply a way station to a socialist future foreshadows his later assault on ‘moneytheism’ in post-independence Singapore.<sup>134</sup> Second his skepticism about racialisation predicts future concern about the negative effects of CMIO divisions on the formation of Singaporean cultural identity, articulated in his interventions reviving the notion of a ‘Singaporean Singapore’, expressed more forcefully after his political retirement in 1988.<sup>135</sup> The London years, in this reading, were not simply prentice work for a managerial career, but generative of a way of

<sup>132</sup> Chakotin, *The rape of the masses*, pp. 116-117.

<sup>133</sup> Rajaratnam, *Singapore, global city; Text of address by Mr. S. Rajaratnam, Minister for Foreign Affairs to the Singapore Press Club on February 6, 1972* (Singapore: Ministry of Information, 1972), NAS, available at <https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdffdoc/PressR19720206a.pdf> [accessed 19 August 2024].

<sup>134</sup> See Rajaratnam, ‘Fataltheism and the lure of moneytheism’, *New Nation*, 22 August, 1972, p. 5.

<sup>135</sup> See, for example, ‘Raja wants revival of “Singaporean Singapore”’, *Straits Times*, 11 March, 1990, p.2; Rajaratnam, ‘2B or not 2B, that is the ?’, *Trends, Straits Times*, 27 October, 1991, p.30.



seeing that, when not occluded by the demands of political power, would foreground the constitutive contradictions of Singapore's modernity.

In the last decade or so, public discourse in Singapore has become increasingly concerned with both social inequality and racism. Social media, the internet, and the fact that an ever-increasing percentage of Singaporeans have a university education are factors that have democratised intellectual activity, spreading it far beyond the boundaries envisioned by Chan in 1975. In a sense, the city-state has itself become a junction-box, with younger Singaporeans returning from study abroad, or encountering contemporary theorists of race through university courses at an increased number of domestic institutions. Such intellectual encounters have enabled the production of a new critical vocabulary. The notion of 'Chinese privilege', building on Peggy MacIntosh's seminal work on White privilege, has provided non-Chinese citizens and residents with a way of articulating their experiences, while also being criticized for ahistoricity.<sup>136</sup> In parallel, a new generation of intellectuals and activists have articulated a 'brown' identity that explores 'the lived experience of being othered in a Chinese-majority country', through expository and creative work, and also through online

<sup>136</sup> The following represent some of the many contributions to the discussion: Adeline Koh and Sangeetha Thanapal, 'Chinese privilege, gender and intersectionality in Singapore: A conversation between Adeline Koh and Sangeetha Thanapal', *b2o: the online community of the boundary 2 editorial collective*, available at <https://www.boundary2.org/2015/03/chinese-privilege-gender-and-intersectionality-in-singapore-a-conversation-between-adeline-koh-and-sangeetha-thanapal/> [accessed 18 August, 2024]; Humairah Zainal and Walid Jumblatt Abdullah, 'Chinese privilege in politics: A case study of Singapore's ruling elites', *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 22, no. 3, 2021, pp. 481-497; Sai Siew Min, 'Why there is Chinese privilege in Singapore but it's not analogous to White privilege', *Academia.sg*, 17 June, 2021, available at <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/why-there-is-chinese-privilege-in-singapore-but-its-not-analogous-to-white-privilege/> [accessed 18 August, 2024]; Daniel P. S. Goh and Terence Chong, "'Chinese privilege' as shortcut in Singapore: A rejoinder", *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 23, no. 3, 2022, pp. 630-635.

fora.<sup>137</sup> While careful to emphasize the specifically Singaporean experiences, such articulation, when it moves from experience to theory, frequently draws upon scholarship of race encountered through the prism of a global academy centred on North America: bell hooks, Frantz Fanon, or others.<sup>138</sup>

In this environment, remembering Rajaratnam may help in two ways. The first is in linking capitalism and race, in encouraging individual experience to be seen not simply within the framework of trauma or within the bounds of a discursive system, but as connected to a larger system that has both economic and cultural elements, and to its specific historical manifestation in Singapore. Given the legacy of Asian values discourse in Singapore, governmental discourse often creates a binary of community-based Asian tradition versus Western ‘liberalism’, which is seen as individualistic.<sup>139</sup> Official responses to new critiques of racialization, while not entirely monolithic, have often taken the form of a kind of ‘umpiring’ in which all citizens are urged to be respectful of each other, embrace ‘rich traditions’, and not become ‘pale imitations of Europeans or Americans’.<sup>140</sup> The commitment to socialism

<sup>137</sup> Kristian-Marc James Paul and Mysara Aljaru, ‘Brown is redacted: Introduction’, in *Brown is redacted: Reflecting on race in Singapore*, (eds) Kristian-Marc James Paul, Mysara Aljaru, and Myle Yan Tay, (Singapore: Ethos, 2022), pp. 11-17: p. 12. See also Farah Banawy, ‘Multiethnicity in multicultural Singapore: Critical autoethnography to understand racism in Singapore’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no.1, 2021, pp. 118–126, and the online Instagram forum *Minority Voices*, facilitated by Sharvesh Leatchmanan, available at <https://www.instagram.com/minorityvoices/> [accessed 18 August, 2024].

<sup>138</sup> Paul and Aljaru, p. 17; Hazirah Mohamed, ‘Kita dah cukup manis? (We are sweet enough?): Resisting the bitter pill of racialised health framing on the Malay community’, in *Brown is Redacted* (eds) Paul, Aljaru, and Tay (Singapore: Ethos, 2022), pp. 185-198: p. 194.

<sup>139</sup> Chua, *Communitarian Ideology*, pp. 65-66.

<sup>140</sup> Lawrence Wong, ‘Speech on multiracialism and faultlines by Mr Lawrence Wong, Minister for Finance, at the IPS-RSIS Forum on Race and Racism in Singapore on 25 June 2021’, Ministry of Finance, Singapore,

rather than liberalism in Rajaratnam's thought indicates a way of thinking both collectively and progressively that overcomes the liberal/traditional West/East binarism. Racial capitalism also opens up an awareness of multiple marginalities that makes possible alliances that cut across race, gender, and class, and that place different experiences of disempowerment and privilege in dialogue with each other.

There is a second way in which tracing the roots of Rajaratnam's thought provides a useful intervention in the present. Concepts such as Chinese privilege and 'brown' identity emerge from a contestation of the umpiring role of the state and its associated parastatals, often through emphasising affective responses to individual experiences of racism and racialization. Such contestations and consciousness-raising are important, and yet also skirt the danger of an individualised use of affect, manifested through what Timo Beeker and others have termed 'bottom-up psychiatrization' and expressed through use of psychological vocabulary in which the recovery and re-narration of traumatic experience forms the basis for agency.<sup>141</sup>

available at <https://www.mof.gov.sg/news-publications/speeches/speech-on-multiracialism-and-faultlines-by-mr-lawrence-wong-minister-for-finance-at-the-ips-rsis-forum-on-race-and-racism-in-singapore-on-25-june-2021>, [accessed 18 August 2024].

<sup>141</sup> The literature on this topic is voluminous. While earlier scholarship, such as Nikolas Rose's *Inventing our selves: Psychology, power and personhood* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) often focused on the role of psychological institutions in the creation of subjectivities, more recent work has focused on how individuals themselves internalise and mobilize psychological categories as identities. See Timo Beeker, China Mills, Dinesh Bhugra, Sanne te Meerman, Samuel Thoma, Martin Heinze, and Sebastian von Peter, 'Psychiatrization of society: A conceptual framework and call for transdisciplinary research', *Frontiers in Psychiatry* no. 12, 2021, article 645556, available at <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsy.2021.645556>, [accessed on 18 August, 2024]. For a recent critique of the role of trauma, in particular, see Catherine Liu, 'The problem with

In these new discussions of race, commentators often return to the Frantz Fanon of *Black Skins, White Masks*, and to the primal scene of racism in which he, and immigrant from the French Caribbean, is rudely made aware of his blackness in France, in a predominately white world. Spectators gather to look at him; a child cries out in fear. ‘I wanted to kill myself laughing’, Fanon writes, ‘but laughter had become out of the question’.<sup>142</sup> It is tempting here, especially given Fanon’s use of psychoanalytic language, to universalise this as a quintessential experience of othering. Yet it’s important to realise, in Henry Louis Gates’s words, how easy it is to make Fanon into a ‘global theorist in *vacuo*’,<sup>143</sup> a ‘Rorschach blot with legs’.<sup>144</sup> Fanon here has prepared for this incident by mentioning his experience in Martinique, and its elaborate hierarchy of colourism that differed from the othering he encountered in Paris; his careful discussion of an inner psychic experience is ultimately in the service of an anti-essentialist view of race. There’s a context here, in that the account of the creation of a specific ‘historical-racial schema’<sup>145</sup> does not preclude wider application to different historical contexts, but also indicates that such application needs careful work.

For Rajaratnam, there too was a similar moment. Some time when he was looking for another place of lodging in London, perhaps in 1940 or 1941, when he left the boarding house in Steele’s Road to find a flat for himself and his partner Piroska Feher, Rajaratnam was refused a room in a London hotel because of his race.

trauma culture’, *Noema Magazine*, 16 February, 2023, available at <https://www.noemamag.com/the-problem-with-trauma-culture/>, [accessed 18 August 2024].

<sup>142</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black skins, white masks*, (trans) Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), p. 91.

<sup>143</sup> Henry Louis Gates, ‘Critical Fanonism’, *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 17, no. 3, Spring 1991, pp. 457–70: p.459.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid*, 458.

<sup>145</sup> Fanon, p. 91.

[T]o me it was like the lash of a whip across my face – and, as it were, while my hands were tied behind my back. I tried to dismiss this incident from my mind. After all, that was not the only hotel in London. But for days I could not get rid of the feeling of terrible humiliation brought about for no other reason than that because I had the wrong complexion. One kept licking the wound hoping to heal it, but it became more inflamed.<sup>146</sup>

So far, this seems like Fanon: a racial trauma marked on the body. But when Rajaratnam recounted the story in one of the early articles he would write for the *Malayan Tribune* in Singapore, in August 1947, after his return to Malaya, he recounted it as part of a fictive letter to a European friend, folding it within the politics of friendship. The form of the article as letter drew on his earlier experiences writing for the *Tribune* in London, on Mulk Raj Anand's 1942 'Letter to an Englishman',<sup>147</sup> explaining the contradictions of British policy towards India, and George Orwell's 'Letter to an Indian' in reply,<sup>148</sup> addressing Anand by his first name, misrepresenting some of his positions, accepting others, reaching out to build alliances across difference. It also built on Rajaratnam's own 1942 BBC broadcast, no doubt under Anand's influence, in the form of a letter directed, implicitly, to Subhas Chandra Bose.<sup>149</sup> Here a modernist pastiche of another form – an article, broadcast, or a book review in Anand's case, rephrased as a letter – becomes the basis of affective connection.

In a Singapore marked by the legacies of managerialism, then, the thought fostered by Rajaratnam's London years speaks in two ways. First, it intervenes in the narrative of nationhood, asking us to think about socialist pasts and the imbrication of capitalism and race. Second, it offers a way of acknowledging affect that moves beyond the clearing of ground that the excavation and witnessing of trauma permits, towards new alliances and

<sup>146</sup> Rajaratnam, 'Europe over Asia', p. 4.

<sup>147</sup> Mulk Raj Anand, 'A letter to an Englishman', *Tribune*, 21 August, 1942, p. 10.

<sup>148</sup> Orwell, George [Eric Arthur Blair], 'Letter to an Indian', *Tribune*, March 19, 1943, p. 15.

<sup>149</sup> 'Open letter to an Indian quisling', transcript of broadcast on 27 August, 1942, BBC Written Archives Centre.

friendships in the quest for social change. ‘Communism is finished’, he argued in one of the last extended interviews he gave. ‘Capitalism cannot work. In the end, it will be Socialism’.<sup>150</sup>

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### **Competing Interests**

The author declares none.

<sup>150</sup> ‘Sinnathamby Rajaratnam’, in *Leaders of Singapore*, (ed.) Melanie Chew (Singapore: Resource Press, 1996), pp. 151-157: p. 155.