# The Kampong Spirit: Sociology in Singapore

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## ABSTRACT

This article offers a compelling sociological analysis of the kampong as a site of community, cultural pluralism, and social cohesion, arguing that while modern urban development in Singapore has significantly transformed these traditional spaces, the underlying values of the "kampong spirit" have not been entirely lost.

The article is theoretically robust, drawing on three major sociological frameworks: Functionalism (Émile Durkheim), Conflict Theory (Karl Marx), and Symbolic Interactionism (George H. Mead and Erving Goffman). This multi-theoretical approach allows for a nuanced interrogation of how the kampong once served as a cohesive social unit, how its dissolution reflects broader class and power struggles, and how meaning is negotiated in everyday interactions within both traditional and modern urban settings.

By linking these theories to the evolving aspects of community, governance, economic life, and cultural practices in Singapore, the article bridges macro-level structures and micro-level experiences. It also contributes to wider academic conversations on urbanization, postcolonial development, multiculturalism, and the transformation of informal social networks.

Importantly, the essay does not romanticize the kampong, but critically examines its historical role and its symbolic function today. This approach lends itself to comparative analysis with other societies experiencing similar transitions from traditional communal living to state-managed urban environments.

**Keywords:** Sociology, Cultural Pluralism, Community Erosion, Cultural Revolution

In Singapore, the term kampong (or kampung) evokes a nostalgic image of communal living and shared traditions. The term kampong is derived from the Malay word meaning “village” or “settlement.” Historically, it referred to small, clustered communities typically found in rural Southeast Asia, especially in Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. These villages were often organized around kinship lines, common economic activities, such as fishing, farming, or trading, and shared spaces like wells, mosques, or communal halls. In Singapore, kampongs began as organic, semi-permanent settlements established by early migrants from China, the Malay Archipelago, and India during the colonial period. By the early 20th century, kampongs had become a dominant feature of Singapore’s social and physical landscape (Chua, 2014).

The colonial administration often referred to kampongs as informal or "native" settlements, contrasting them with planned urban districts occupied by European or elite Asian communities. Kampongs were often marginalized spatially and economically, but they were also vibrant spaces of cultural production, mutual aid, and grassroots resilience. Kampongs were once common across the island during the 1900s, before rapid urbanization transformed the physical and social landscape. While few physical kampongs remain today, most notably, Kampong Lorong Buangkok, their cultural significance endures.

This essay argues that the kampong embodied a form of social cohesion and cultural pluralism that has been challenged, but not entirely lost, by modern urban development. Furthermore, the essay explores the relevance of the ‘kampong spirit’ in the modernised Singapore we now live in, through the aspects of the community, culture, practices, governance and economy, by comparing sociological theories such as the theory of Functionalism by Émile Durkheim, the Conflict theory by Karl Marx.

### The Kampong Spirit: Cultural Pluralism

The phrase “kampong spirit” (semangat kampung in Malay) is a modern term that romanticizes the communal ethos of traditional kampong life. While not a term commonly used by kampong residents historically, it a

emerged in Singapore's national discourse during the late 20th century, especially as part of state-led efforts to foster social cohesion in an increasingly urbanized and individualistic society (Yeoh, 2003). "Kampong spirit" symbolizes values such as:

- **Neighbourliness**: knowing and helping one's neighbours
- **Mutual aid**: offering help without expecting formal reward
- **Inclusiveness**: accepting and supporting diverse community members
- **Informality and spontaneity**: interactions that occur outside bureaucratic structures

Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong popularized the term in his 1999 National Day Rally speech, stating that "the kampong spirit is about caring and sharing, about looking out for one another" (Goh, 1999). In doing so, the state co-opted a grassroots cultural memory into a tool for nation-building and social policy.

*Cultural pluralism* refers to a sociological condition where multiple cultural groups coexist within a society, maintain their distinct identities, and interact with mutual respect and tolerance (Kymlicka, 1995). It differs from assimilation, where minority cultures are expected to conform to a dominant norm, and from segregation, where groups live separately.

In the kampong context, **pluralism was not just tolerated but lived**. People retained their languages, cuisines, customs, and religious practices, yet cooperated through everyday neighbourly interactions. As such, *kampong spirit* exemplified what Bhikhu Parekh (2000) described as ***"intercultural conviviality"***, a condition where cultural difference is not seen as a barrier to social cohesion but as part of the community's fabric (Parekh, 2000).

**Multicultural Coexistence in kampongs**

In colonial and early post-war Singapore, kampongs were often **ethnically mixed settlements**. Malays, Chinese (of different dialect groups), Indians, Eurasians, and even smaller communities like the Peranakans and Arabs lived side by side in informal housing clusters. These residents shared physical infrastructure, such as wells, markets, and common spaces, and often participated in each other's daily lives. For example, it was common for:

- Malay and Chinese neighbours to exchange home-cooked food during festive seasons
- Indian shopkeepers to serve multi-ethnic clientele
- Children of different backgrounds to play together in open spaces
- Neighbours to assist each other during funerals, weddings, or illnesses, regardless of ethnicity.

This day-to-day ***intercultural exchange*** fostered a sense of solidarity without erasing cultural differences.

**Informal Integration Without Assimilation**

Unlike top-down multicultural policies, the kampong's pluralism was **grassroots and practical**. It wasn't enforced by laws or institutions but shaped through necessity and human relationships. In sociological terms, this represents ***integrative pluralism***, where diverse groups are linked by shared social practices while preserving autonomy over cultural expression.

This also aligns with Robert Park's (1928) "race relations cycle," in which inter-ethnic groups move from contact and conflict to accommodation and eventual integration. Kampongs provided the *accommodation* stage, where diverse groups learned to live together without losing their identities. (Park, 1928).

The kampong in Singapore historically functioned as a tight-knit community characterised by shared spaces, informal support systems, and interpersonal relationships. Residents lived in wooden houses often built on a

stilts, with communal amenities such as wells, gardens, and kitchens. Inhabitants knew one another personally, and informal practices such as leaving doors unlocked reflected a deep sense of trust and solidarity. As one resident recalled, "everyone knew everyone, and doors were never locked" (Zaccheus, 2015).

**Multi-ethnic microcosms**

To better understand the sociological dynamics behind kampong spirit, Robert D. Putnam's theory of **social capital** and his work on **diversity in multi-ethnic communities** offers a valuable analytical lens.

In his influential work *Bowling Alone* (2000), **Putnam** defines **social capital** as the "connections among individuals, social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them." He distinguishes between:

- ***Bonding social capital***: ties within homogenous groups (e.g. ethnic enclaves, family, religious communities)
- ***Bridging social capital***: ties that connect people **across** diverse social cleavages, such as ethnicity, religion, or class

Putnam argues that while ***bonding capital*** reinforces identity and solidarity within a group, ***bridging capital*** is essential for building inclusive societies (Putnam, 2000).

Singapore's kampongs were organically formed ***multi-ethnic microcosms***, where Malays, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians, and others coexisted, often in close quarters. Despite the absence of formal multicultural policy in that era, kampongs fostered ***interethnic interactions*** through shared daily experiences, such as borrowing tools, celebrating festivals, attending weddings or funerals, and sharing meals. These interactions cultivated ***bridging social capital***, creating trust and cooperation across cultural boundaries. In the kampong, people participated in each other's cultural practices (e.g. Chinese joining Hari Raya celebrations or Indians sharing Deepavali treats with Malay neighbours). Informal support systems were race-blind, hence providing assistance during illness or death regardless of ethnicity. Children also grew up playing together and learning each other's languages and customs. This supports Putnam's idea that **diverse communities can develop bridging ties**, especially when members **interact frequently, informally, and on equal footing**.

Interestingly, Putnam later complicated this optimism in his 2007 article *E Pluribus Unum*, where he found that in the **short term**, greater ethnic diversity in neighbourhoods can actually reduce social cohesion and trust (Putnam, 2007). He famously wrote in the article:

*"In the short run, immigration and ethnic diversity tend to reduce social solidarity and social capital. Inhabitants of diverse communities tend to 'hunker down', that is, to pull in like a turtle." – Putnam, E Pluribus Unum (2007)*

However, kampongs in Singapore offer a **counterpoint to this "hunkering down" hypothesis**. Rather than retreating into separate ethnic enclaves, kampong residents found **commonality through proximity, shared struggle, and mutual dependence**. These conditions helped build **bridging capital despite high diversity**, suggesting that **the key variable is not diversity itself, but how people interact within it**. Thus, the kampong can be understood as a historical example of how **informal, everyday multiculturalism** can foster social trust even across racial lines, something that Putnam suggests can happen **over time**, with meaningful social interaction and common goals.

Through the lens of **Robert Putnam's social capital theory**, kampong spirit can be seen as a successful model of ***bridging social capital*** within a ***multi-ethnic microcosm***. Kampongs demonstrate that with **frequent, informal, and meaningful contact**, diverse communities can foster trust, cooperation, and shared norms, key ingredients of social cohesion. While Putnam warns of the potential for "hunkering down" in diverse societies, the kampong experience in Singapore offers a hopeful illustration of how **diversity, when rooted in authentic community relationships, can be a source of strength rather than division**.

**Cultural Capital**

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital links the social norms and practices of kampong communities to

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Bourdieu's ideas about class, habitus, and the transmission of non-economic forms of capital, offering a deeper understanding of how kampong culture functioned as a form of informal social power and identity.

Cultural capital refers to non-economic forms of capital that influence one's social mobility, such as **knowledge, skills, values, norms, and cultural dispositions**. In his work *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu argues that cultural capital exists in three forms, ***Embodied*** (long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body), ***Objectified*** (cultural goods like books, instruments) and ***Institutionalised*** (educational qualifications and credentials) (Bourdieu, 1984).

Kampong spirit, characterised by **interpersonal warmth, mutual aid, respect for elders, informal cooperation, and interethnic tolerance**, can be interpreted as a form of **embodied cultural capital**. It consisted of learned social behaviours, deeply internalised through daily participation in kampong life. This *"community habitus"* shaped how individuals interacted, related to others, and defined their social roles.

Bourdieu's concept of **habitus**, the ingrained habits, skills, and dispositions that individuals acquire through life experience, is key to understanding how the kampong spirit was reproduced. Children growing up in kampongs learned to **greet and respect elders** across ethnic lines, to **offer help** without being asked, to **participate in shared labour** such as gotong-royong (mutual aid for communal tasks), and to **accept difference** as part of daily life, rather than as a challenge to community (Bourdieu, 1986).

These practices were not taught formally but **transmitted through socialisation** in a setting where interdependence was necessary for survival. In Bourdieu's terms, this created a ***collective habitus***, a set of shared dispositions that reinforced solidarity, trust, and cooperation. These cultural competencies gave individuals social recognition and inclusion within the kampong, much like elite cultural knowledge grants access to privileged social spaces in formal society.

While Bourdieu distinguishes cultural capital from ***social capital*** (networks of mutual obligation) and ***symbolic capital***(prestige and recognition), in practice these forms of capital often overlap. In kampongs, those known to be **generous, helpful, or wise** gained symbolic capital (status) in the eyes of the community. There are also **reciprocity networks**, offering help during illness, lending tools, or contributing food, which acted as a form of **social capital** built on trust and mutual obligation. Cultural capital (e.g. knowing when and how to offer help respectfully) determined one's ability to participate meaningfully in these social exchanges.

Thus, kampong spirit wasn't just moral, it was also a **practical form of capital** that shaped one's position in the social structure of the kampong. Those who internalised these norms could "succeed" socially in that context, gaining influence, support, and respect, parallel to how elites benefit from high cultural capital in dominant institutions.

**Urbanisation: The Driver of Community Erosion**

Singapore's transformation from a collection of rural villages into a global city is often hailed as a remarkable development success story. However, this rapid urbanisation has not come without social costs. One such cost is the gradual erosion of the kampong spirit. While Singapore has made significant advances in housing, infrastructure, and economic progress, the shift from communal kampongs to high-rise public housing estates has significantly altered the nature of social relationships. Urbanisation has contributed to the decline of kampong spirit in Singapore by disrupting traditional community structures, reducing opportunities for informal social interaction, and promoting individualism over communal values, leading to *community erosion*.

The decline of the kampong spirit began with the state-led urbanisation policies of the 1960s and 1970s. Following independence, Singapore faced severe housing shortages, overcrowding, and public health concerns. In response, the government launched massive public housing programmes under the Housing and Development Board (HDB), clearing kampongs to make way for high-rise flats. By 1990, over 80% of Singapore's population was living in public housing (Zaccheus, 2015).

While these policies dramatically improved living standards, they also disrupted the social fabric of kampong life, causing *social disintegration*. Residents who once lived side by side in open environments were relocated to high-rise flats with closed corridors, metal gates, and limited shared spaces. The spatial design of HDB a

estates prioritised efficiency and functionality but did not fully replicate the intimacy and informality of kampong living. As urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg (1989) argues, informal "third places" such as parks, porches, and communal courtyards are essential for building social cohesion. In contrast, the built environment of high-rise flats often discourages spontaneous interaction, fostering a sense of isolation instead (Oldenburg, 1989).

With reference to Robert D. Putnam's theory of **social capital,** modern Singapore, despite being a **planned multicultural society**, struggles to replicate the same degree of **interpersonal trust and bridging capital** found in kampongs. In HDB estates, although ethnic integration is enforced through quotas, social interaction is often minimal or superficial. As Putnam warns, diversity without interaction can lead to **parochialism**, **withdrawal**, or **indifference**. State-led efforts to recreate "kampong spirit" through grassroots events and neighbourly campaigns (e.g. the "Gotong Royong" movement or Community Bonding Funds) reflect an attempt to **intentionally build bridging capital** in urban, diverse settings. However, these efforts are often **structured and top-down**, unlike the spontaneous and relational interactions of kampong life.

Urbanisation in Singapore has also promoted a more individualistic and competitive way of life, further contributing to the decline of kampong spirit. In kampongs, daily life was collective and interdependent: people borrowed rice from neighbours, raised children together, and celebrated festivals as a community. Today, urban lifestyles are more atomised. As sociologist Chua Beng Huat (2014) notes, "The rhythms of urban life tend to fragment community bonds as people retreat into private, nuclear family units." (Chua, 2014).

In Bourdieu's terms, the **dominant field** of modern urban life is centred around formal education, economic productivity, and institutional credentials, hence **devaluating the cultural capital of kampong life**. The informal skills and values that once held high social value in kampongs (e.g. oral storytelling, communal caregiving, informal leadership) were no longer recognised as capital in the new social order. Instead, residents were expected to acquire new forms of capital: formal education, English proficiency, and bureaucratic literacy.

This transition marked a shift in what Bourdieu would call the ***"field of power",*** a redefinition of what kinds of cultural capital were valuable, and who possessed them. The kampong spirit, while nostalgically remembered, became symbolically marginalised in a meritocratic, institutionally structured society.

**Anomie**

The term **anomie** was introduced by French sociologist **Émile Durkheim** in his foundational works *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893) and *Suicide* (1897). Durkheim defined anomie as a state of ***normlessness***, where individuals in a society feel disconnected from the collective conscience due to the breakdown or weakening of shared values, norms, and social bonds.

According to Durkheim (1893), anomie arises especially during periods of rapid social change, such as industrialisation or urbanisation, when traditional norms and institutions can no longer regulate behaviour effectively. In such contexts, people may experience ***alienation, social instability***, and a ***loss of belonging***, leading to the erosion of social cohesion.

In the case of **Singapore**, the process of urbanisation, particularly from the 1960s onward, fundamentally transformed the social landscape. While it brought about modern infrastructure, economic growth, and improved living conditions, it also disrupted traditional community structures, particularly the **kampongs**, which had embodied tightly-knit, culturally pluralistic communities grounded in shared norms and mutual aid.

When kampong residents were relocated to high-rise **HDB flats**, many of the informal social systems that sustained communal life were lost. Durkheim's theory helps explain how this shift generated **anomic conditions**:

1. **Loss of shared norms and values**: Kampong communities were governed by informal norms based on trust, reciprocity, and collective responsibility. Urban living introduced new forms of interaction, often more formal, transactional, or anonymous, leading to a *weakening of the shared moral code* that once regulated social behaviour (Durkheim, 1893).

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2. **Weakened social regulation**: In kampongs, social behaviour was regulated through close interpersonal relationships and collective expectations. In high-rise urban settings, individuals became more socially isolated, and informal community oversight diminished. This aligns with Durkheim's assertion that **anomie emerges when *social regulation is insufficient*.**

3. **Fragmentation of identity and belonging**: The urban emphasis on efficiency, privacy, and individual achievement often comes at the expense of collective identity. Residents in modern housing estates may not know their neighbours, and social interactions are limited. This mirrors Durkheim's idea that without strong social bonds, individuals can feel ***disoriented or unanchored*** in society.

A 2018 study by the **Institute of Policy Studies** found that fewer than half of Singaporeans knew more than five of their neighbours, and most interactions were superficial or non-existent (Mathews, 2018). This suggests the weakening of neighbourhood-level social ties, a symptom of anomie.

Despite government efforts to revive *kampong spirit* through community activities and Residents' Committees, many residents report a lack of genuine connection or sense of belonging. These efforts, while well-intentioned, often appear ***top-down and engineered***, lacking the organic, lived quality of community that kampongs once provided.

Durkheim's concept is also evident in rising reports of social isolation among elderly residents living alone in urban flats, a population particularly vulnerable to the **psychological effects of anomie**, including loneliness and purposelessness.

Durkheim's theory of **anomie** provides a compelling framework to understand how **urbanisation in Singapore has led to the erosion of social cohesion**. As traditional community structures like kampongs were dismantled in the name of progress, the shared norms, interpersonal trust, and communal regulation that once held society together weakened. In their place emerged more individualistic, fragmented urban environments where social isolation is more common and relationships are less rooted in mutual obligation. While modernisation has undoubtedly brought material benefits, Durkheim reminds us that **social cohesion requires more than physical proximity, it demands shared values, moral regulation, and a collective sense of purpose**.

***Gemeinschaft & Gesellschaft***

To better understand the social dynamics and organisation of kampong life in Singapore from the past to the present, Ferdinand Tönnies' classical sociological distinction between *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) provides a useful analytical framework. Originally introduced in his seminal work *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887), Tönnies (2001) proposed these two ideal types to distinguish between forms of social relationships that emerge in traditional versus modern societies. (Tönnies, 1887).

*Gemeinschaft* refers to a form of social organisation rooted in personal relationships, emotional bonds, mutual obligations, and shared values. According to Tönnies (2001), *Gemeinschaft* is typical of pre-industrial or rural communities where social ties are close-knit, enduring, and based on kinship, religion, locality, or tradition. In such settings, the community functions like an extended family, and individual identity is largely derived from one's role within the group.

This description aligns closely with the traditional **kampong social structure in Singapore**, where neighbours interacted not as anonymous individuals but as familiar and interdependent members of a shared social world. Residents often referred to one another as "auntie," "uncle," or "kakak" (sister), even in the absence of biological relations. These kin-like terms signified a sense of belonging and moral responsibility toward others (Zaccheus, 2015).Informal reciprocity and non-monetized exchanges, such as helping to repair a neighbour's roof or sharing cooked food, were common and expected, reinforcing the community's internal solidarity.

The social fabric of the kampong was sustained through ***organic bonds***, where the wellbeing of each individual was closely tied to the welfare of the collective. There was also a high degree of ***normative consensus***, meaning that moral values, customs, and practices were widely shared and transmitted intergenerationally through oral storytelling, festivals, and communal rituals.

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In contrast, *Gesellschaft* denotes a form of social organization typical of modern, industrial, and urban societies. Here, relationships are ***instrumental*** *and* ***contractual***, and based on rational self-interest rather than affective ties. Individuals interact primarily in the pursuit of personal goals, and social life is governed by laws, institutions, and formal bureaucracies rather than tradition or communal norms (Cambridge University Press, 2001).

The transformation of Singapore from a kampong-based society to a hyper-modern metropolis represents a shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*. As kampong dwellers were relocated to high-rise HDB flats under state-driven modernization policies, their daily routines, spatial relationships, and social interactions were fundamentally altered. In the HDB context, neighbours may live physically close but remain socially distant, often separated by locked doors, private routines, and a lack of informal gathering spaces.

In urban Singapore, relationships are more ***individualised and functional***, mediated by institutions such as schools, employers, government agencies, and legal frameworks. Social trust is less organic and more abstract, governed by civic codes rather than face-to-face familiarity. As such, what was once an intimate, emotion-laden community has been restructured into a fragmented urban society, capturing Tönnies' concept of *Gesellschaft*.

What makes kampong life a strong embodiment of *Gemeinschaft* is not just the physical proximity of residents but the ***relational density***, the frequency, intimacy, and emotional quality of interactions among community members. Daily life in the kampong involved overlapping spheres of interaction: neighbours were also friends, childcare providers, informal mediators, and co-celebrants of life's milestones. This blurred separation between private and public life fostered a deep sense of social embeddedness.

Additionally, authority within kampongs often came not from official positions but from ***customary respect*** for elders and community leaders, another hallmark of *Gemeinschaft*, where legitimacy is based on tradition and reputation rather than bureaucratic power.

The Singaporean state, in seeking to reintroduce the *kampong spirit* within urban housing estates, is in effect attempting to **recreate the values of Gemeinschaft within a Gesellschaft framework**. Grassroots organizations, Residents' Committees, and community-building campaigns are designed to encourage social bonding in an environment where structural conditions (e.g. high-density housing, fast-paced lifestyles) tend to promote impersonal relations.

This creates a **tension**: while the state recognises the emotional and social value of *Gemeinschaft*-like relations, the very conditions of modern urban governance and economic rationalism (hallmarks of *Gesellschaft*) undermine their organic development. Tönnies himself was sceptical about the ability of *Gemeinschaft* values to persist in industrial societies, and Singapore's experience illustrates this ambivalence.

Through the lens of Tönnies' theory, the kampong represents a **pure or ideal form of Gemeinschaft**, characterised by affective relationships, shared values, and moral obligations embedded in everyday life. As Singapore transitioned into a modern city-state, the organic social bonds of kampong life were largely replaced by the more formal, impersonal, and institutional structures of *Gesellschaft*. While the kampong as a physical and social reality may have diminished, the yearning for *Gemeinschaft*-like relations persists in national rhetoric and social policy, underscoring the continued relevance of Tönnies' distinction in analysing the social evolution of communities in the modern world.

**Functionalism: Society's System of Systems**

Functionalism is a sociological theory that sees society like a human body, made up of different parts (like institutions: family, education, religion) that work together to keep society stable and functioning. Each part has a function, a role it plays to help society stay balanced and orderly. When everything works properly, society is in harmony. But if one part breaks down, like in a health crisis or recession, other parts will be affected too.

Émile Durkheim, one of the founders of sociology and functionalism, believed that: Social institutions (like schools, religion, law) help maintain social order by teaching people shared values and norms. He introduced the idea of *social solidarity*: the sense of belonging and unity that holds society together. He argued that things

like crime or inequality, though seen as "bad," can have functions too. For example, crime can reinforce social norms when society punishes it.

**Race & Ethnicity**

Singapore's state-endorsed **CMIO model** (Chinese-Malay-Indian-Others) categorizes citizens by race and serves as a foundation for policymaking in areas such as housing (e.g. the Ethnic Integration Policy in HDB estates), education, and representation.

From a **Functionalist perspective**, as championed by **Émile Durkheim**, such racial classification systems can be interpreted as **mechanisms that contribute to social order and integration** in a complex, multicultural society. Durkheim believed that all parts of society (institutions, norms, roles) serve a function to maintain the stability and cohesion of the larger social system (Durkheim, 1893). In his words:

***"The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system with a life of its own."*** - *Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society* (1893)

Applied to Singapore, the CMIO model can be seen as part of this ***"determinant system":*** a set of shared identities and categories that create a sense of belonging and predictability. By clearly delineating racial groups, the state constructs a **framework for multicultural coexistence**, ensuring representation and avoiding the dominance of any one ethnic group. This supports **Durkheim's notion of *"organic solidarity",*** where social cohesion arises out of **interdependence among diverse individuals and groups**, especially in modern, complex societies:

***"Solidarity... is a wholly moral phenomenon which by itself is not amenable to exact observation and especially not to measurement."*** - *Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society* (1893)

Singapore's **Racial Harmony Day**, celebrated annually in schools, promotes intercultural understanding through cultural dress, food, and activities. From a Functionalist lens, such events act as **rituals** that reinforce ***collective consciousness***, a core Durkheimian idea. Durkheim argued that **rituals reaffirm shared values and beliefs**, binding individuals to the moral fabric of society. These collective practices promote **social integration**, especially across potentially divisive identity lines (Durkheim, 1895).

**"Society is not the mere sum of individuals. Rather, the system formed by their association represents a specific reality which has its own characteristics."** - *Durkheim, The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895)

In this sense, Racial Harmony Day is not trivial. It **symbolizes national unity**, and helps children internalize values of tolerance and multiculturalism, which is important for preventing racial conflict.

However, critics argue that Singapore's racial policies may lead to ***tokenism***: a superficial celebration of diversity without addressing deeper systemic inequalities or racism. While Durkheim did not directly address tokenism, Functionalism can respond to such critiques by acknowledging **dysfunctions**.

Later Functionalists like **Robert K. Merton** expanded Durkheim's framework by introducing the idea that institutions can have **latent functions (unintended effects)** or even **dysfunctions**, which disturb social equilibrium. So, while the **manifest function** of the CMIO model and Racial Harmony Day is to **promote unity**, the **latent function** might be the **reinforcement of racial boundaries**, stereotyping, or even social segregation.

**Surveillance & Privacy in Smart Nations**

Smart nations use digital infrastructure, data analytics, and surveillance technologies to enhance efficiency, security, and governance. These innovations raise critical questions about **privacy**, **social control**, and the role of **surveillance** in society. Functionalism sees society as a system of interrelated parts that work together to maintain **stability** and **order**. Surveillance and privacy, when interpreted functionally, are not merely technological concerns but vital social institutions that contribute to, or disrupt, social cohesion.

Surveillance systems in smart nations (e.g. CCTV networks, biometric IDs, predictive policing, and digital contact tracing) serve two key **functions**, maintaining social order and promoting social integration.

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*"Punishment... is above all intended to have its effect upon honest people." - Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society* (1893)

To aid in maintaining social order, surveillance enhances the ability of the state to monitor behaviour, prevent crime, and ensure compliance with laws. Durkheim saw **punishment and regulation** as not just about the offender, but about reinforcing **collective norms**. Surveillance, in this view, acts as a **preventative mechanism**, reinforcing boundaries of acceptable behaviour (Durkheim, 1893).

*"The more the division of labor develops, the more the solidarity that results from it becomes necessary." - Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society (1893)*

Whereas for the latter, smart technologies allow governments to deliver services efficiently, foster national identity, and integrate citizens through digital inclusion. For instance, national digital IDs and e-governance platforms **symbolize unity** and a **common social structure**, echoing Durkheim's concept of **organic solidarity**, which is a cohesion based on interdependence in modern, differentiated societies.

While surveillance has functional benefits, privacy plays an equally important role in maintaining social balance, by protecting individual autonomy. Privacy can be seen as a social norm that protects the individual from the invasive power of institutions. Functionalism acknowledges that a healthy society must balance regulation with personal freedom to avoid *anomie*, a state of normlessness and social instability (Durkheim, 1897).

*"When society is disturbed by some painful crisis... people are more inclined to lose sight of the limit." - Durkheim, Suicide (1897)*

Excessive surveillance without respect for privacy can lead to alienation and mistrust, weakening collective consciousness rather than strengthening it.

Privacy also prevents dysfunction. Functionalism is concerned not only with what works, but with what disrupts social equilibrium. If surveillance becomes too intrusive, it creates social dysfunction, eroding trust between the state and its citizens, reducing civic participation, and fostering fear.

In Durkheimian terms, the tension between surveillance and privacy reflects the **need for equilibrium** between **social integration** and **individual autonomy**. **Too little surveillance** may cause norms to break down, leading to lawlessness or inefficiency. While **Too much surveillance** may lead to ***anomie*** or ***mechanical overregulation***, where individuality is suppressed.

Durkheim would argue for **functional integration**: surveillance must serve the common good and be **legitimated by collective moral values**, while privacy should be preserved to ensure **moral autonomy** and **individual dignity**.

**Gender Roles in Modern Asian Societies**

Gender roles refer to social expectations about behaviours and responsibilities deemed appropriate for men and women, which remains deeply embedded in many modern Asian societies. These roles are shaped by history, religion, culture, and socio-economic conditions. Using **Emile Durkheim's sociological theory of functionalism**, we can understand how these roles function to maintain social order, and how they are evolving under modern pressures such as globalization, urbanization, and feminist movements.

Durkheim's functionalism views society as an organism made up of interdependent parts, each fulfilling roles that contribute to **social stability** and **cohesion**. Gender roles, in this sense, are **social facts**, collective norms that exist outside individuals but shape their behaviour and help organize society.

In traditional Asian societies, such as those influenced by **Confucianism, Hinduism, or Islam**, gender roles are clearly defined. For example, **men** are expected to be breadwinners, decision-makers, and public figures. While **women** are expected to focus on domestic responsibilities, child-rearing, and upholding family honour (Durkheim, 1893).

*"Society cannot exist without a moral consensus... and that consensus must extend to the division of labour." - Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society (1893)*

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Durkheim's theory of ***mechanical solidarity***, where cohesion is based on similarity, can help explain these traditional societies. In such systems, **gender differentiation** functions to **preserve social stability** by establishing clear role division reduces ambiguity and potential social conflict. It also **transmits cultural values,** women, especially, serve as the bearers of tradition and moral education within the family. In this view, traditional gender roles act as a **moral code** that sustains collective order.

As Asian societies modernize, migrate, and globalize, these roles are shifting. More women are entering the workforce and attaining higher education. Legal reforms support gender equality (e.g. in Japan, South Korea, India, and Indonesia). Feminist movements and global norms (e.g., CEDAW) challenge patriarchal systems.

*"The more labour is divided, the more individuals become different from one another, and the more they need one another." - Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society (1893)*

Durkheim's concept of ***organic solidarity*** becomes relevant here: in modern, differentiated societies, cohesion comes not from similarity but from **interdependence** in a complex division of labour. As women take on diverse social roles, this **functional diversification** can contribute to social progress, but it also causes **normative instability** if not integrated properly.

Rapid change without clear institutional adaptation can lead to ***anomie***. For example, **working women** may still be expected to carry full domestic responsibilities, leading to stress and dissatisfaction. **men** may also face identity crises as traditional breadwinner roles are eroded. Intergenerational conflicts may arise as younger generations reject traditional expectations (Durkheim, 1897).

"Anomie... results from the lack of regulation, from the breakdown of social norms." - Durkheim, *Suicide* (1897)

Thus, while changing gender roles are **functionally necessary** in modern contexts, societies must develop **new norms and institutions** (e.g. childcare support, paternity leave, equitable laws) to maintain stability.

**Streaming vs Holistic Education**

Modern educational systems often grapple with two competing approaches: **streaming (tracking)** and **holistic education**. Streaming refers to the practice of sorting students into academic paths based on ability or interest (e.g. science vs. arts), while holistic education aims to develop the whole child, intellectually, emotionally, socially, and ethically, without rigid academic segregation.

Singapore's education system is globally recognized for its academic rigor, efficiency, and high performance. A key feature has been its long-standing use of **streaming**, placing students into academic tracks based on ability. However, in recent years, Singapore has been shifting toward a **more holistic approach** to education that emphasizes values, character, and flexibility.

Through the lens of **Emile Durkheim's theory of functionalism**, we can analyse how both streaming and holistic education serve important social functions, and how their evolution reflects broader changes in Singaporean society.

*"Education is only the image and reflection of society. It imitates and reproduces the latter in order to function properly." - Durkheim, Education and Sociology (1922)*

Durkheim believed that education plays a vital role in **socialising individuals** and preparing them to function in society. Schools are not just centres for learning knowledge, but institutions that **instil moral values**, **discipline**, and **a sense of belonging** to the wider society. This way, education helps reproduce the **collective consciousness**, ensuring that societal values and norms are passed on to new generations (Durkheim, 1922).

**Streaming**, introduced in the 1980s, placed students into academic paths (Express, Normal (Academic), and Normal (Technical)) after the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE). From a **functionalist perspective**, streaming allowed for **efficient role allocation.**

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*"The more the division of labour develops, the more individuals become different from one another, and the more they need one another." - Durkheim, The Division of Labour in Society (1893)*

Durkheim emphasized the **division of labour** in complex societies. Streaming aligns with this by directing students into roles that best match their abilities, helping to create a **functionally specialized workforce**. Singapore's meritocratic approach ensured that each student could contribute to society in a role suited to their strengths, be it academic, technical, or vocational (Durkheim, 1893).

Streaming also creates social order and discipline. Streaming created **clear expectations** and **structured pathways**, minimizing disruption and ambiguity in the school system. This contributed to the broader goal of maintaining **social stability**, a core concern of functionalism.

While functionally efficient, streaming in Singapore also produced **social consequences** that Durkheim might identify as **dysfunctions**. For example, students labelled "Normal" or "Technical" often experienced **stigma**, affecting self-esteem and social inclusion. Early sorting (as young as age 12) led to **social stratification**, disproportionately affecting students from lower-income backgrounds. Rigid structures risked producing ***anomie***. As a result, the system, while functionally efficient, began to erode **moral cohesion** and **equality of opportunity**, prompting a national rethinking.

In recent years, Singapore has made major reforms toward **holistic education**. This is evident in the abolition of streaming in secondary schools (replaced with **Subject-Based Banding** in 2024). The emphasis on **21st-century competencies** (e.g. critical thinking, resilience, global awareness). Furthermore, character and citizenship education (CCE) help foster **social responsibility and moral values**

*"The school is the instrument par excellence for the fashioning of a moral being." -Durkheim, Moral Education (1925)*

From a functionalist view, these reforms aim to strengthen ***organic solidarity***, cohesion in diverse, interdependent societies. Holistic education fosters the **collective consciousness** by nurturing empathy, civic-mindedness, and a shared sense of belonging, crucial in Singapore's **multi-ethnic** and **multi-religious** society (Durkheim, 1925).

Both **streaming** and **holistic education** in Singapore serve important roles in maintaining **social stability and cohesion**. While streaming contributed to economic efficiency and role allocation, it also introduced moral and social challenges. Singapore's recent reforms reflect Durkheim's belief that institutions must evolve in response to **moral needs**. Holistic education, by emphasizing moral development, shared values, and inclusive growth, helps strengthen the **collective consciousness** and ensures that education remains a force for **social integration** in a changing society.

**Conflict Theory: Society's Power Class & Inequality**

Conflict theory is a sociological perspective that sees society as being made up of groups in competition for power, resources, and control. It says that inequality is not natural or necessary, but created and maintained by those who are in power. Instead of focusing on social harmony like functionalism, conflict theory focuses on conflict, exploitation, and power struggles between different classes or groups.

Karl Marx, a philosopher and economist known for his critiques on capitalism sees that society is divided into two main classes: The bourgeoisie (the ruling class / capitalists) who own wealth and the means of production (factories, land, capital), and the proletariat (working class) who sell their labour for wages. The bourgeoisie uses their economic power to maintain social and political power, often shaping laws, education, media, etc., to serve their interests. Institutions like education or law may look neutral, but Marx argued they often serve the interests of the ruling class, keeping the working class in their place. Marx would say that schools do not just teach knowledge, but also teach obedience, competition, and acceptance of inequality. This benefits employers, who want workers who follow rules, not people who question the system.

**Income Inequality & Poverty**

Singapore is often celebrated as an economic success story, with high GDP per capita, global competitiveness, and low unemployment. Yet, behind this prosperity lies a **deep concern with income inequality and poverty**, especially among low-wage workers, the elderly, and migrant laborers.

To understand this issue sociologically, **Karl Marx's conflict theory** offers a powerful analytical tool. Marx saw society as fundamentally divided between **those who control the means of production (the bourgeoisie)** and **those who sell their labour (the proletariat)**. In this context, inequality and poverty are not accidental outcomes but the result of **structural exploitation and class conflict**. Karl Marx argued that capitalist societies are driven by **class struggle** between the ruling class and the working class. According to Marx:

*"The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles." - Marx & Engels, The Communist Manifesto (1848)*

In capitalism, the bourgeoisie owns the **means of production** (factories, capital, land), while the proletariat owns **only their labour**. This relationship is inherently exploitative because capitalists extract **surplus value** from workers, paying them less than the value of what they produce (Marx, 1848).

While Singapore does not fit the classic Marxist image of an industrial capitalist state, Marx's theory remains relevant when examining the **structural roots of inequality**. Singapore's rapid growth has heavily depended on **global capital**, **low-wage labour**, and **foreign investment**. Capital owners and high-skilled professionals benefit disproportionately from this system, while low-skilled workers, both local and migrant, face stagnant wages. According to the Department of Statistics Singapore (2024), the **Gini coefficient** (a measure of inequality) before government transfers stood at **0.437**, indicating a significant wealth gap (Marx, 1867). Marx would argue that:

*"Capital is dead labor, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour." - Marx, Capital: Volume I (1867)*

This reflects how structural forces in capitalism lead to **wealth concentration** among the elite, while the working class faces economic vulnerability.

Singapore's dependence on **low-wage foreign workers** in construction, cleaning, and domestic work shows a clear division between the **ruling economic class** and the **disempowered labour force**. Migrant workers often live in dormitories with limited rights and are excluded from union representation. This reflects Marx's notion of the **reserve army of labour**, a surplus labour force that capitalists use to keep wages low and competition high:

*"The industrial reserve army... belongs to capital quite as absolutely as if the latter had bred it at its own cost." - Marx, Capital: Volume I*

Singapore has no official poverty line, but relative poverty is significant. For example, ComCare assistance (Singapore's main financial aid scheme) reached over 100,000 beneficiaries in 2023, and studies by LKYSPP show that 10–12% of households live below the relative poverty threshold (50% of median income).

Many elderly Singaporeans continue to work into their 70s, often in low-wage jobs (e.g., cleaners, food court workers). A Marxist view would interpret this as a failure of the state to protect aging workers, exposing them to the vulnerabilities of the capitalist system, even in retirement (Marx, 1844). Despite high productivity, many workers remain economically insecure, while corporate profits soar.

*"The worker becomes all the poorer the more wealth he produces." - Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

In Marxist theory, the state is not a neutral actor but serves the interests of the dominant economic class. In Singapore, while the government provides significant redistributive mechanisms (e.g. Workfare, Silver Support, housing subsidies), it also maintains a pro-business, low-tax environment that favours capital accumulation (Marx, 1848).

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*"The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." - Marx & Engels, The Communist Manifesto (1848)*

Thus, Marx would critique Singapore's state policies as managing inequality without challenging the capitalist structure that creates it.

Singapore has traditionally emphasized social harmony over class struggle. However, growing awareness around issues like high CEO salaries vs low-income workers, inadequate retirement protection, and the rapid rising cost of living, may lead to what Marx called *class consciousness*: where the working class becomes aware of their exploitation and demands systemic change. However, state mechanisms (e.g. legal restrictions on protests and unions) limit organized resistance, maintaining the status quo.

From Karl Marx's conflict theory perspective, income inequality and poverty in Singapore are not simply economic challenges but symptoms of a deeper class-based power imbalance. The capitalist structure, favouring capital owners, multinational corporations, and elite professionals, generates systemic inequality and exploits the labour of both local and migrant workers.

While Singapore's government actively mitigates the worst effects through targeted welfare policies, it stops short of addressing the root causes of inequality, ownership of capital, class domination, and labour exploitation.

In Marx's terms, true equality would require a transformation of the economic structure, not just redistribution within it.

**Immigration & Integration of Foreign Workers**

Singapore relies heavily on migrant workers, especially in sectors like construction, shipbuilding, cleaning, and domestic work. According to the Ministry of Manpower (MOM), as of 2024, there are over **1.4 million foreign workers** in Singapore, a significant proportion of the labour force.

These workers are divided mainly into two groups. The h**igher-skilled "expatriates"** (white-collar professionals with Employment Passes), and the **low-skilled laborers** (on Work Permits), mainly from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and the Philippines.

From a Marxist lens, the **foreign low-wage workers** constitute a vulnerable subclass of the proletariat, **exploited for cheap labour** to serve the interests of Singapore's capitalist economy (Marx, 1848). The state and corporations benefit from keeping the cost of production low through the employment of foreign labour:

*"The proletariat is... a class of laborers, who live only so long as they find work, and who find work only so long as their labour increases capital." - The Communist Manifesto, Marx & Engels (1848)*

In Singapore, low-wage migrant workers receive minimal wages, live in cramped dormitories, and lack full rights and protections. Their disposability and replacement reinforce their **precarious class status**, serving to drive down labour costs overall. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, foreign worker dormitories became hotspots due to overcrowded conditions, highlighting systemic neglect. This mirrors Marx's view that the working class is only valued for its economic utility.

Marx noted that the bourgeoisie **divide the proletariat to prevent unity** (Marx, 1850):

*"The real fruit of their battles lies... in the ever-spreading conviction that only the proletarians can help themselves." - The Class Struggles in France (1850)*

In Singapore, there is **tension between local workers and foreigners**, with locals blaming migrants for job competition and wage suppression. This **intra-class conflict** distracts from the structural inequalities created by capital owners. This division serves the capitalist class by **fragmenting worker solidarity** and maintaining the existing social hierarchy.

Marx argued that the ruling class controls not only production but also **ideology and culture**:

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*"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." - The German Ideology (1845)*

In Singapore, while the state promotes values like **multiculturalism and racial harmony**, these narratives often **exclude migrant workers** from full integration. Low-wage migrants are segregated in housing, restricted in public behaviour, and often portrayed in utilitarian terms (e.g. as "helpers" or "labour") (Marx, 1845). This **symbolic exclusion** reinforces class distinctions and prevents full social integration, consistent with Marxist analysis of ***cultural hegemony***.

Therefore using Marx's conflict theory, we can see that firstly, **migrant labour sustains Singapore's capitalist economy** through exploitation. Secondly, **social divisions between locals and foreigners** serve to prevent working-class unity. Lastly, **Cultural narratives and state policies** maintain the dominance of the elite while marginalizing migrant voices.

Thus, from a Marxist perspective, immigration and integration in Singapore are not just about labour policy or social cohesion, they are **tools of class control** in a capitalist system.

**Workplace Discrimination & Glass Ceiling**

Despite being a global economic hub, Singapore faces persistent issues of **workplace discrimination** and the **glass ceiling**: the invisible barrier preventing certain groups (especially women, minorities, and older workers) from reaching top leadership roles.

Key concerns include gender inequality in leadership positions, ethnic discrimination (particularly against Malays and minority races), nationality-based bias (e.g. preference for expatriates over locals), and age discrimination (especially against older workers). Some examples include:

- **Gender Gap in Leadership**: Women make up over **40% of Singapore's workforce**, but only **16.2% of board seats** in listed companies (Council for Board Diversities, 2023).
- **Racial Disparities**: Studies show **Malay and Indian workers** face hiring discrimination. A 2018 study by KRIHS showed that **Malay applicants were significantly less likely** to be called back for job interviews than Chinese applicants.
- **Age Bias**: Older workers (above 50) face fewer job opportunities and limited promotions, even with experience and qualifications.

From a Marxist view, these patterns reflect the **exclusion of large segments of the labour force from decision-making power**, maintaining elite dominance and profits.

According to the **Ministry of Manpower (MOM)** and **Tripartite Alliance for Fair and Progressive Employment Practices (TAFEP)**, over **1,300 workplace discrimination complaints** were received in 2023, many relating to **gender, race, and age**.

From a Marxist perspective, workplace discrimination and the glass ceiling are **tools used by the dominant class to maintain control** over the working class by creating **hierarchies within the workforce**. These divisions prevent worker solidarity and preserve elite interests (Marx, 1845). Marx believed that social structures are designed to maintain the power of the ruling class:

*"The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas." - Marx, The German Ideology (1845)*

In the modern workplace, **meritocracy is often a myth**, those in power (corporate elites) decide who is promoted, hired, or rewarded, often based on implicit biases rather than performance. Discriminatory practices serve to **exclude marginalized workers** from high-paying, decision-making roles, thereby **preserving power within a select class**.

The **glass ceiling** disproportionately affects women and minorities, even when they have qualifications equal to or better than their peers (Marx, 1867). From a Marxist view, this is not an accident but a **feature of capitalist hierarchies**:

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*"Capital is dead labour, which, vampire-like, lives only by sucking living labour." - Marx, Capital, Volume I (1867)*

The workplace becomes a site where women, ethnic minorities, and migrant workers are **paid less, promoted less, and expected to conform more**, effectively becoming **'cheap labour'** within a capitalist system.

Marx argued that the bourgeoisie **divides the working class** to prevent unified resistance. In Singapore, this can be seen in how different groups (e.g. Singaporeans vs. foreign workers, Chinese majority vs. Malay/Indian minorities) may experience different forms of discrimination (Marx, 1850).

*"The real fruit of their battles lies... in the ever-spreading conviction that only the proletarians can help themselves." - Marx, Class Struggles in France (1850)*

This **fragmentation weakens collective bargaining power**, making it easier for employers to suppress wages and control labour.

While Singapore promotes a ***tripartite model*** (government, employers, unions), Marx would argue that the **state serves the interests of capital**:

*"The executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." - The Communist Manifesto (1848)*

Although agencies like MOM and TAFEP promote fair employment, **systemic bias remains** because legal and institutional structures often prioritize economic growth and corporate competitiveness over **equity and redistribution**.

Through Karl Marx's conflict theory, we can interpret **workplace discrimination and the glass ceiling in Singapore** as a method of **preserving class domination** and restricting upward mobility for marginalized groups. A **divide-and-conquer strategy** to fragment the working class. A way to **extract surplus value** by underpaying and undervaluing certain categories of workers. Evidence that **capitalist meritocracy is not truly equal**, but ideologically shaped to protect elite interests. Unless these class-based structures are challenged, **discrimination will remain embedded** in the workplace under capitalism.

**The Myth vs Reality of Meritocracy**

Meritocracy in Singapore is the belief that success is based on individual talent, effort, and achievement. This ideal is deeply embedded in Singapore's governance and education system. As Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's founding Prime Minister, said (Lee, 2000):

*"We must attract talent and give it every encouragement to rise to the top. Only then can we ensure that Singapore is led by the best." – Lee Kuan Yew*

This belief supports the idea that anyone, regardless of background, can succeed if they work hard enough.

From a Marxist perspective, **Singapore's meritocracy may function as an ideological tool** that legitimizes existing class inequalities by appearing fair and neutral. In reality, it may reproduce privilege via access to education and social mobility and class reproduction.

While the education system is the centre piece of Singapore's meritocracy, Marxists argue that access is **unequal**. This is because elite schools (e.g. Raffles Institution, Hwa Chong) are disproportionately attended by students from affluent families. Similarly, wealthier families can afford tuition, enrichment, and resources that boost academic success, advantages the working class lacks. Sociologist Teo You Yenn notes (Yenn, 2018):

*"Children from better-off families have more resources to do well in school. So-called 'merit' is often purchased." – This is what Inequality Looks Like (2018)*

Thus, **the appearance of merit masks inherited privilege**, a key concern in Marxist critique.

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Data shows that upward mobility is **slowing** in Singapore. A 2018 study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) revealed that children from higher-income families tend to remain in the same income quintile as adults. This suggests ***intergenerational reproduction of class***, and not a truly fluid meritocracy.

Marxists argue that the **myth of meritocracy** is used to blame the poor for their circumstances, ignoring systemic barriers. This **individualizes failure** and distracts from how **capitalist structures** favour those who already have economic and cultural capital.

In Marx's terms, this promotes ***false consciousness***: the belief in a fair system, which prevents workers from recognizing their exploitation and organizing against it. This is evident as even government officials have acknowledged these contradictions: Former Education Minister Ong Ye Kung (2018) stated (Kung, 2018):

*"When meritocracy becomes hereditary, it ceases to be meritocratic." – Minister Ong Ye Kung*

Despite this, the system still **privileges the elite**, creating what Marx would see as a **class-based system cloaked in neutrality**.

Using Marx's conflict theory, we can see **Singapore's meritocracy not as a neutral system of fairness**, but as a tool that r**einforces class hierarchies,** d**isguises systemic inequality**, and l**egitimizes elite dominance under the illusion of fairness**.

**The Future Spirit: Integrating Theories for Singapore's Future**

Singapore is a highly urbanized, multicultural society shaped by rapid economic development, strict governance, and a strong emphasis on meritocracy and social cohesion. Sociologically, it provides a rich context for examining **social structures**, **class divisions**, and **everyday interactions**. Using classical and contemporary theories, we can analyse how society functions, how inequalities emerge, and how people construct meaning in their lives.

Durkheim's functionalist theory views society as a system of interrelated parts working together to maintain **social order and cohesion**. Institutions like education, the family, religion, and the state serve key roles in **social integration**. As Singapore deals with **an aging population**, **immigration**, and **social fragmentation**, it will rely on institutions to maintain unity. However, overly rigid systems may begin to alienate or marginalize citizens who no longer fit traditional moulds, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, gig workers, and youth subcultures. Durkheim warned that ***"anomie"*** arises when society fails to provide individuals with meaningful roles, this could be a risk in a rapidly changing, digital, and globalized Singapore.

Marx's theory focuses on **power struggles between dominant and subordinate groups**, emphasizing how the ruling class (bourgeoisie) maintains control through economic and ideological domination. Singapore may see **greater calls for redistribution**, welfare reforms, and more inclusive policies. Marx's critique warns that ***economic stratification*** can threaten long-term social harmony. Growing economic polarization could lead to social unrest or distrust in the state. If the gap between the **"haves"** and **"have-nots"** widens, demands for **redistributive policies**, **labour rights**, and **class-based advocacy** may increase. Conflict theory predicts that if inequality becomes too intense, it will undermine the very social order that functionalism seeks to protect.

Singapore's future lies at the intersection of **social stability (Durkheim) and inequality and power (Marx)**. A sociological understanding must account for: How institutions maintain order and legitimacy. How inequalities challenge that order. How individuals create meaning and resist norms in everyday life. Only by combining these perspectives can we critically examine Singapore's evolving society and envision a more **inclusive, just, and empathetic future**.

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