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Securing Singapore: Applying Biopolitics

By Alan Chong and Tamara Nair

Synopsis

Government can pre-empt political agitation and terrorist activities by imported workers and local militants by monitoring them via the lens of Biopolitics and networked surveillance.

Commentary

IT IS a given that Singapore's strength - its open economy - is also its greatest weakness in an era of increasingly porous borders and competitive labour markets. Singapore attracts both high and low skilled foreign workers. Leaving aside the possible reactionary rise of xenophobia amongst some Singaporeans, there is a logical expectation that foreign nationals who are granted permission to work in Singapore may carry their diasporic politics here. It is even more alarming that they may engage in diasporic activities directed at their countries of origin while in Singapore.

One must surely be concerned about sit-ins by workers from South Asia at the Ministry of Manpower in the early 2000s. Then came the SMRT strike by bus workers from China. The Little India Riot of 2013 raised the curtain on the fact that certain segments of South Asian workers tended to assume that meting out 'street justice' was the norm when an outrage was perpetrated against their co-nationals. Increasingly Singaporeans have to be concerned that what they read in world news about complex relationships between government and society in many labour-sending countries may find its way here.

'Monitoring' Transnational Population Flows via Biopolitics

One way to prevent the importation of these issues is to forewarn ourselves through fairly rigorous social scientific analysis of the networked social behaviour of the many foreign workers populations that have settled here temporarily for work. Many of us trust their good intentions in coming here to work. While empathising with them, one must also be mindful that, given recent happenings globally as well as within our borders, we also need to watch for unwanted activities.

In studying modern societies and their systems of control, French philosopher Michel Foucault discussed a notion of power that operated through applied science. This was not simply a science of politics but especially, a policy science of analysing populations in terms of ethnicity, social networks, predispositions towards disease, income stratification, proneness to types of crime, and even mental health.

Foucault labelled this Biopolitics. Empowered with this matrix of knowledge, the modern government no longer needed to cast a wide dragnet to pacify an entire population just to target a minority of 'wrong doers' amongst them.

One way of practising Biopolitics is to execute a series of programmes to increase 'normalisation' – a way to ward off undesirable behaviours by helping with assimilation, to reduce the notion of the 'other'; of 'us' and 'them'. The sole reason for this would be to reduce resistance to established powers, be they social, religious or political, in the country of employment. Regardless of methods used, the aim is to gently steer worker populations towards degrees of 'Singaporean-ness' or good 'resident-ship' and promote a peaceful existence for all.

Terrorism on Home Ground

Likewise, terrorists recruited from, and operating in, urban environments match the scanning possibilities of Biopolitics. The 27 Bangladeshi ISIS converts, discovered here in the wake of the Jakarta attacks of January 2016, were arrested through networked surveillance and then deported. From time to time, other Jemaah Islamiyah and ISIS recruits among Singaporeans are placed in preventive detention, thanks to the unswerving efforts of the Home Team's monitoring assets and concerned friends of the would-be terrorist.

Yet as many terrorist incidents overseas reveal, surveillance by the Ministry of Home Affairs and police are not foolproof. This is where in-depth case analyses may potentially predict propensities towards mass terror threats.

Following the arrest of 19-year-old M Arifil Azim Putra Norja'i for his ISIS connections in May 2015, Edwin Tong, the deputy chairman of the government parliamentary committee for Home Affairs and Law, commented: "Youths today are very impressionable, not yet mature enough to differentiate what are ideals and what is practical and reality. They are highly connected to the Internet, they are tech-savvy. This story brings home the fact that we cannot take it for granted...[The] best defence is our society and people around us...It's about being close to them, know what they are reading online, and observing any change of behaviour."

Likewise, the reverse case of another youth, 23-year-old, Wang Yuandongyi, who

was arrested in March 2016 for attempting to join the Kurdish People's Protection Unit to fight ISIS in Syria, merits equally close analysis through social science methods of 'profiling' and analysing case studies. It would seem that the bitter truth of 'new' threats to national security requires such countering action on the part of the state.

Transnational Demographic Threats

Modern governments have devised public policies, penal systems, health systems, policing systems, education policies and rehabilitation programmes to sanitise the urban population of wrong-doers. Although we do not need to concern ourselves with Foucault's specific case studies of prisons and mental asylums, it does not require a stretch of the imagination to realise the practical implications of his thinking for Singapore's national security. This is not a rehash of the 'Big Brother watching you' psychology inspired by George Orwell's infamous novel *1984*, but a call to embrace the use of social science for monitoring actual and over-the-horizon threats to Singapore.

As many reports from all over the world have shown, political activities are likely to precipitate damaging spillover effects upon the host economy and state. The latest examples arise from Brussels, Belgium and Cologne, Germany. Disenchanted Arab immigrants have used the Molenbeek neighbourhood as a base from which to attack both Brussels and Paris. Unnamed migrants were reported to have violated many women during New Year celebrations in Cologne's public places.

To Be Forewarned to Be Forearmed

The modern state is inseparable from its surveillance techniques. The logical security response must surely be to tap into it intelligently, and with great sensitivity, without running into hang-ups about 'Big Brother' watching its citizens. To date, the fact that we have been free of terrorist incidents since the hijack of SQ117 says a lot about the efficacy of Singapore's security agencies and their human intelligence and electronic detection capabilities.

Equal credit ought also be given to the multiracial ideals ingrained in our population since 1965. This has contributed significantly to our heightened sense of respect for differences in beliefs, practices and thinking.

But to go forward in dealing with transnational population threats, one must deploy the many tools at hand, including the essence of disciplines like sociology, anthropology, geography, political science and networked analysis. These disciplines can effectively assist in tracking psychological drifts and the derangement of normal attitudes.

To be forewarned is to be forearmed – and this is why the social sciences are powerful tools of modern existence. They must equip the Home Team with the forewarning of where trouble might brew. These should serve as the subtle augmentations of the capabilities of our already robust security agencies going forward into the era of fluid threats.

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