

# Conference on Managing Diversity in Singapore

Friday, 5 August 2016  
Ballroom 2, Level 3  
Orchard Hotel

PANEL 2  
New Tensions when Global Meets Local

PRESENTATION BY

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# Class Issues in Singapore: implications and solutions

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# Outline

- Meritocracy: definition & issues
- Parentocracy: definition & issues
  
- Singapore—a broadly meritocratic society?
  - How to achieve a ‘purer’ meritocracy?
    - Is inequality a problem?
- Is class consciousness present in Singapore?

- **Meritocracy and Parentocracy**

# What are the pathways to success? Are they acceptable in a meritocracy?

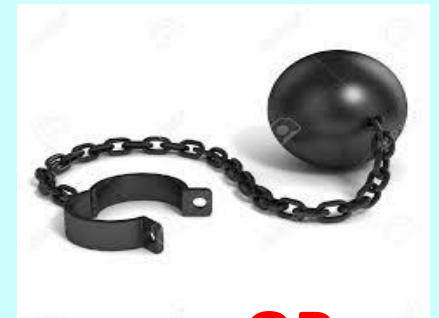
Type	Basis	Acceptability
Inheritance	Institution of private property	<b>Yes</b> , it is a key capitalist institution, but non-meritocratic.
Nepotism	Social connections (guan-xi)	Technically No. <b>Yes</b> , due to imperfect competition and need for trust.
Meritocracy	Performance reflecting ability and diligence	Technically <b>Yes</b> . No, if the rules disadvantaged some groups, e.g., IQ test.
Parentocracy	An 'impure' form of meritocracy, contaminated by inequality of opportunity	<b>Yes</b> , parents are expected to do their best for their children. No, it produces unequal opportunity.

# What is positive about meritocracy?

- **Assuming no bias in criteria used**
- **Assuming equal opportunity**
- **THEN, class origin does not determine class destiny.**
- **BUT note that equal opportunity does not produce equal outcomes.**
- **The outcome is still an unequal structure. But it is deemed to be acceptable.**

# But opportunity is unlikely to be equal?

- Tortoise and Rabbit story



OR



The tortoise is disadvantaged from the start.

The moral of the story is that with perseverance, a disadvantaged person could still win.

But is that really true? The rabbit 'sabo-ed' itself.

What would true equality of opportunity be?



## What is parentocracy?

- Primarily a middle class phenomenon.
- Middle class parents have high aspirations.
- Unlike the rich, they cannot pass their position/status directly to their children.
- The only way is via educational credentials.
- So they do all they can to ensure that their children do well in the education system.

## Is parentocracy ok? (1)

- Anything wrong with it?
- No, parents are expected to take care of their own.
- Does it distort meritocracy?
- No, their children are assessed on their school performance, not family background.
- Yes, insofar as some children are not given the opportunity to achieve their full potential.

## Is parentocracy ok? (2)

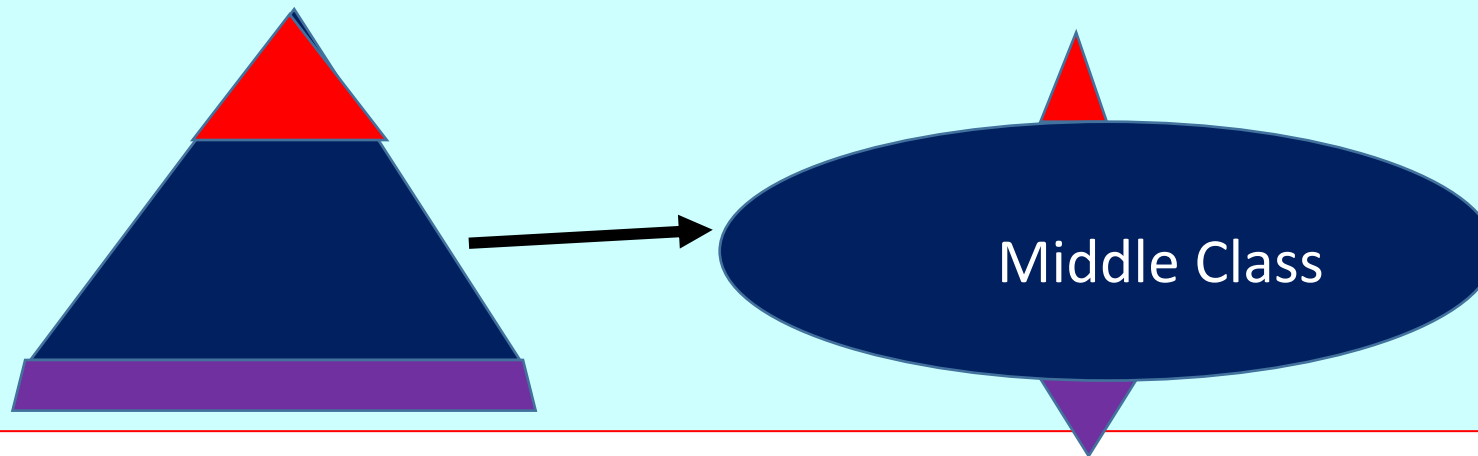
- Do we need to combat parentocracy?
- No, it makes no sense to hinder parents trying to do their best for their children.
- Even if we can prevent parents from providing tuition to their children, can we prevent them from granting their children access to social and cultural capital? We can't.
- Parental pressure add to their children's stress and may paradoxically undermine their achieving their full potential.

## Is parentocracy ok? (3)

- Do we need to equalize opportunities made unequal by parentocracy?
- Yes, if we want a fair (aka equitable) meritocracy. (Note that equitable does not mean equal)

# Is Singapore a broadly meritocratic society?

- No, it tends to focus narrowly on educational credentials.
- Even when the government speaks of multiple pathways, the hierarchy remains.
- This arrangement could change as a result of fundamental economic and cultural shift, together with government intervention in job creation and skills training.
- Possible to have a middle class society where most people have both intellectual training and specialized skills leveraging on technology, and play interdependent work roles.



# How to achieve a 'purer' meritocracy?

<p><b>Extreme measure: kibbutz</b></p>	<p><b>Collective upbringing. Common resources and experience.</b></p>
<p><b>Levelling up: Singapore</b></p>	<p><b>Taking care of the weak, rather than undermining the strong, in a 'compassionate' democracy.</b></p>



- **Inequality**
- **Class Consciousness**

# Is inequality a problem?

- Capitalism produces inequality.
- Meritocracy produces inequality.
- We support both capitalism and meritocracy, therefore we have to accept the presence of inequality.
- Bottom-line is to ensure that the lower class is able to access a decent quality of life.
- The poor aren't trapped in poverty and despair.
- The middle class can lead a comfortable and secure existence, and remain hopeful that tomorrow will be equal or better.



## Is class consciousness present in Singapore?

- Yes, but not in the classic Marxist sense of class consciousness leading to the overthrow of capitalism.
- But in the sense that citizens believe that all should have access to a decent quality of life, and that the state has a critical role to play in providing (welfare) or facilitating (opportunities) that.
- The well-off should chip in to help voluntarily (charity) or less voluntarily (taxes).
- The less well-off should make good use of the opportunities provided.

## Parting Shots

- Meritocracy and parentocracy aren't the problem, inequality of opportunity is.
- We do not need to combat parentocracy, except for the stress it generates in our children.
- Levelling up the weak, not undermining the strong.
- Continue to provide and facilitate a decent quality of life and security.
- Keep citizens secure and optimistic about the future. This will also contribute to local-foreigner integration.

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