Seeing xenophobia in context

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SOCIAL historians of English society tell us it was not that long ago that those outside one's village were referred to as foreigners.

The working classes were careful about ensuring their parish boundaries. Within its precincts, they were able to lay claim to formal reliefs and communal rights. For the impoverished, the parish gave them security and, ultimately, identity.

These boundaries had to be carefully preserved, and so taunts, proverbs and stories, especially those insulting the morality of women of other villages, were legion.

When the nation-building project was embarked upon, the elite in society stressed an "imagined community". Disregarding ethnic, linguistic and cultural differences, a shared history of unity was now imagined, and a vision of a bright future epoch was advanced, an attempt made possible only through the rise of the mass media.

The citizen, no matter how distant from the village, could not be considered a foreigner; the term was reserved for those outside the territory of the nation-state. The politics of nationalism was based on inclusion and exclusion - the foreigner clearly excluded and viewed with some suspicion.

The age of globalisation was believed to offer the opportunity to check negative attitudes towards foreigners across territorial boundaries. With the constant flows of people, a global citizenry with a humanistic ethic and free of chauvinism was envisioned.

Citizenship, in a number of Western societies, was being constructed no longer based on ancestry or cultural similarity but on professions of civic loyalty.

Despite the best of efforts, societies in the north and south have seen an escalation in xenophobia. Much of this is, arguably, a product of the global order, with the uncertainties of global pandemics, ecological catastrophes, global warming and terrorism constantly looming in the individual consciousness.

Coupled with this is a global economic system that makes jobs less secure, with routine retrenchment after cyclical recessions.

Under these circumstances, as sociologist Gerard Delanty writes in the journal Social Policy And Administration, "success has become a lottery, and while there are increased opportunities for self-realisation through instantaneous consumption, nothing is certain. The possibility of downward mobility is ever present".

The young and middle classes are the most sensitive to these problems. Their literacy and technological sophistication ensure that they are plugged into both mainstream and alternate media. The uncertainties, fears, anxieties, discontent and disappointments of others rub off and shape their own feelings, leading to generalised resentment.

Xenophobia is, after all, a mass form of anxiety, a fear that does not necessarily have a clear object, as Professor Delanty argues. It is then coped with through fantasy, where the anxiety is externalised onto a storyline that has instant appeal.

What better narrative than one where foreigners of all classes are essentially threats to societal well-being? This group - portrayed as arrogant, hungry to maximise their advantages, disregarding the values of civility and local culture, immoral and disloyal - is accused of swarming the land, leaving locals to become the new foreigners.

This xenophobic discourse, found regularly in online portals here, stresses that migrants pose a challenge to not only economic but also social and cultural rights. The discourse operates through hyperbole - there are no limits to exaggerations, notions are uncritically accepted and left unchallenged even by the civic-minded in society.

Nevertheless, berating locals about their xenophobic ways and their failure to embrace the foreigner may not be corrective; rather it suggests that their underlying anxieties have been ignored.

The recent impetus of the government move to address the underlying anxieties posed by globalisation should leave us hopeful that the tide of xenophobic discourse here will be temporary.

After all, a recent Institute of Policy Studies survey of integration in Singapore shows that a resounding portion of local-born Singaporeans are willing to accept new Singaporeans so long as they respect the multiracial and multi-religious framework in the country, get along with their neighbours and workmates, and speak conversational English, the language that cuts across linguistic divides.

According to the survey, there is little endorsement of the idea that those becoming Singaporean have to engage in Singaporean pastimes or be racially similar to citizens born here.

These results are in contrast to what has been observed in cross-national studies where populations polled tended to consider traditional markers such as genealogy and shared culture as important as civic loyalties. Singaporeans seem less predisposed to xenophobia in that they have fewer barriers in accepting others into their fold, since past efforts at nation-building have downplayed any one cultural heritage as integral to being part of the Singaporean family.

With the state swiftly ramping up delivery of its promise to ensure affordable housing, health care, social security and to meet the educational aspirations of citizens, the medium term should see Singaporeans feeling in better control of their future. Singaporeans will once again be able to feel the solidarity and security in sticking close to their parish.

Hopefully then, the folklore and prejudicial stories of foreigners will be a thing of the past.

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