Breaking with the past

In the changing global order, Singapore needs to introduce innovation and novelty into the system

Once had a professor who said that making money was less dangerous than having ideas. In fact, Adam Smith saw commerce as a way of making society more stable. He believed in markets because they operated on the rule of soft politics, thus allowing people to gain respect and acceptance through money rather than war or coercion.

Commerce introduced stability by laying out clear ambitions and desires, making it difficult for individuals to want or think outside of socially sanctioned goals and values. Smith’s early theory of capitalism was conceptualised as a never-ending escalator, with the catch being that there was always somebody just ahead of you. In short, our economic system is an enduring cycle of distraction and illusion.

In the inaugural Singapore Writers Festival lecture, one of the things that American economist Steven Levitt, co-author of the best-selling Freakonomics, pointed out was the success with which Singapore was able to really harness the spirit of economics. The talk was on unconventional thinking and how as we move further into this disorientating economic crisis, we will need to break from the past.

We have a tendency to believe that because something worked in the past, it will continue to work for us now. But we are reaching a point in history where it is becoming increasingly clear that there is something not quite right with the old way of doing things. For us to overcome the current situation, we need to introduce innovation and novelty into the system in creative and imaginative ways.

There needs to be a willingness to depart from the old ways of doing things; to cultivate ideas that break rules. Singapore makes great students, Dr Levitt, William B Ogden Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago, told the audience. Our students are intelligent and poised and hard-working, but we also produce students who are least likely to break rules.

One of the things that Singaporeans have gained a reputation for is an impeccable sense of work ethic. The idea of the Asian work ethic has become so heavily associated with Asian values and culture that we even tend to speak about it as if it is part of our biology.

For better or for worse, an excellent work ethic continues to be an important part of our socialisation and cultural habitus. Many of us were raised to believe that discipline and hard work were the keys to success, and anything less amounted to personal failure and poor upbringing. We can joke about it and debate its merits, but the fact remains that there is a strong emphasis on productivity and industriousness that exists here.

These values and skills have also made Singapore incredibly successful — the spirit of capitalism thrives on hard work, diligence and enterprise. Capitalism quickly declared war on any sign of unproductivity and inefficiency. We live in a system that glorifies output, prosperity and profit. It only makes sense that we would encourage a similar kind of pride in work.

These are all things that produce great students, and to extrapolate from that, a thriving workforce, but the problem with this kind of work ethic is that it leaves little room for any sort of creative interior space. There simply isn’t the time.

Idleness is the enemy of productivity, and a good work ethic demands for us to always be dealing with the immediate matters of the present. Dr Levitt says that we are much too occupied with the immediate here and now. There will always be a test to study for, a project to work on, a paper to write. It is a system upon which modern society builds itself around depends on a tight schedule of deadlines.

But thinking and having ideas does not work like this. Ideas take time. They require incubating, ruminating, stewing and, yes, even procrastinating. In fact, they function on a completely different kind of time than the one that our economic system does.

While they may deal with matters of the present, all ideas strive for immortality. In a sense, unconventional thinking and innovation are qualitatively different and often incongruent with the definition of success that our capitalist economy has created.

The focus on profit, regulations, bottom lines and results under which capitalism thrives can actually serve to suffocate innovation and novel ideas. Ideas tend to fail more than they succeed. Some will never produce tangible, quantifiable profits, no matter how good they are. Not all of them can be successfully mass produced.

In Singapore, we need to find a way to cultivate this specific kind of interiority even if it comes at the sacrifice of immediate results. Ideas are dangerous because they dare to break rules and depart from the status quo. They reveal the flaws and shortcomings of the system, and demand for us to want more from ourselves and expect better from others.

They are dangerous precisely because they insist that we do things differently, both in small and large ways, in order to bring about real change.

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