
Book Reviews

Jinee Lokaneeta, Editor

Mobilizing Gay Singapore: Rights and Resistance in an Authoritarian State. By Lynette J. Chua. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014. 215 pp. \$69.50 cloth.

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What can activists do when an authoritarian state wary of anything that can be perceived as a challenge to its power, and a socially conservative society that values stability and nonconfrontation, combine to cut off all readily recognizable avenues to collective organizing and action? One answer, as described in Lynette Chua's book *Mobilizing Gay Singapore*, is to employ "pragmatic resistance"—a unique and creative form of activism that subtly pushes boundaries while appearing, at the same time, to stay within them.

Looking at gay activism in Singapore from the early-1990s to 2013, Professor Chua examines how activists created, preserved, and advanced the gay movement by interpreting and subsequently responding to changes—both concrete and implied—in the city-state's social and political conditions. The book blends a concise explanation of Singapore's sociopolitical history with activist interviews to both recount the course of gay activism in Singapore and to develop a model of how activism can be undertaken in an authoritarian state via pragmatic resistance.

As a general term, pragmatic resistance is a way of understanding how activists pull on their "contextually embedded knowledge and experiences as resources" (p. 16) to read political and cultural environments, develop movement tactics, and then revise them as experience is gained and/or as conditions are perceived to change. Within the specific context of *Mobilizing Gay Singapore*, pragmatic resistance takes the form of activists avoiding direct conflict with the state, ensuring the legality of the movement's public actions, making narrow claims that both appeal to the value of social stability and are careful to not be perceived as broader rights claims, and, finally, appealing to the need to preserve a certain international image of Singapore.

The narrative proceeds by presenting a linear and detail-rich history of the gay movement in Singapore. As the book progresses through the movement's distinct stages—its precarious and largely hidden beginnings, its relocation to the relative safety of the internet, and finally to its incremental emergence into the public realm where it has taken increasingly bold steps—attention is paid to describing how the specific tactics of pragmatic resistance change over time while the basic form remains constant. It is in Chapters 3–7 that pragmatic resistance is repeatedly demonstrated and the movement's creativity comes through. Activists circumvent public event registration requirements by publicly advertising private, invitation-only events where one simply responds to the advertisement to obtain an invitation. Singapore citizens effectively undo denied foreign speaker licenses by reading papers written by the rejected persons at events that these same people still attend as audience members and where the floor is opened up for discussion. Media censorship rules that ban nondeviant portrayals of homosexuality are undermined by activists finding ways to place stories in the media that do not appear to publicize gay issues as such (e.g., focusing on a licensing denial for a gay organization), but that subsequently lead to stories and letters to the editor that raise issues about the treatment of gays and ultimately create public awareness. As the movement's confidence grows activists unearth and use obscure parliamentary rules to prompt official state discussions of gay issues and exploit the state's token loosening of public free speech and assembly rules to stage increasingly large public rallies.

These, and many other examples of pragmatic resistance discussed in the book, all show how Singapore's gay activists are able to stay within strict legal and cultural limits while, at the same time, they are able to resist and alter them. Revealing the pattern and defining characteristics of this form of collective organizing and action is testament to the activists' will and it provides an interesting contrast to how many think of activism, social change, and the place of law in more open democracies. The pragmatic resistance heuristic is most helpful in understanding how the fledgling movement rose, survived, and grew in a hostile environment. While Professor Chua does work to explain how pragmatic resistance's character holds as the movement becomes increasingly established and bold, the explanations sometimes seem strained with the more contemporary illustrations of activism. It is, for example, easy to see that when activists forced Parliament to discuss the repeal of a criminal law banning "gross indecency" between men they did employ legal procedures and did not take to the streets—both hallmarks of pragmatic resistance. It is, however, harder to see how this was not a form of confrontation that publicly challenged the state's authority—two things that are explicitly avoided in pragmatic resistance.

Relatedly, while the book does a very good job of living up to the self-stated expectation of providing a rich explanation of the larger sociopolitical context and the activists' subjective evaluation of the corresponding political opportunities and limitations, more could have been done to explain the nature and effect of the emerging Christian conservative countermovement that began to challenge gay activists in the 2000s. The introduction of a substantial countermovement changes the environment within which the gay movement acts and adds a new entity beyond the state that they must interact with and take into account. This significant change in the sociopolitical context raises various questions. Is the movement freed from the constraints that produce pragmatic resistance when facing a nonstate adversary? If so, will it still devotedly adhere to pragmatic resistance as its only form of activism? If they stick with pragmatic resistance does its basic form change in any way? While some of these issues are introduced they are not significantly explored in the text.

These criticisms, however, are overshadowed by the book's overall contributions. The in-depth exploration of a contemporary gay movement in an authoritarian state is a unique contribution to the study of social movements generally and gay rights specifically. The concept and examples of pragmatic resistance also provide a very compelling contrast to how much of the literature discusses political opportunity, resource mobilization, the means of activism, and the place of law and rights in social movements. On this last note, Professor Chua's concluding discussion of the nature of law and the politics of rights in Singapore is terrifically compelling and invites pairing with many of the major Americanist texts on law and social movements. Taken collectively, *Mobilizing Gay Singapore* is an engaging read and a very welcome addition to the literature.

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Comparative Matters: The Renaissance of Comparative Constitutional Law. By Ran Hirschl. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 320 pp. \$45.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Benjamin L. Berger, Osgoode Hall Law School, York University

As the epigraph to one chapter in his impressive volume, *Comparative Matters: The Renaissance of Comparative Constitutional Law*, Ran