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Issue two 2011

Message from the Principal

In past forewords, I talked about writing simply and in grammatically correct sentences. I drew attention to rhetoric and substantiation to ensure that your argument has weight and force; and I emphasised the need to address an audience so that there is a sense of purpose to your writing. As I thought over why I would read one article and not another, the word “insight” came to my mind. In an age where there is an abundance of knowledge and content, what readers want are interesting insights into issues. Insights come about when you have processed information and integrated your own views to derive an analysis of the core of the matter.

Recently, we read about the riots in London. Analysts had their views on why the riots happened. BBC referred to the impact of social media and dissatisfaction with inequality within society. I found Prime Minister David Cameron’s insights particularly pertinent. In his speech to the British Parliament, he termed the riots “criminality, pure and simple” and viewed their root cause as “culture” rather than “poverty”. He attributed the riots to signs of a moral decline in British society and a culture that “glorifies violence, shows disrespect to authority, and says everything about rights but nothing about responsibilities”. Not everyone agreed with him. Former Prime Minister Tony Blair, for instance, felt that there was no problem with moral standards in society generally. The riots, he said, were primarily caused by a minority of disaffected and alienated young people who were outside the social mainstream and who constituted “an absolutely specific problem that requires deeply specific solutions”. Both men obviously have different world views stemming from their own political leanings. I think the riots reflect a disintegration of the social fabric arising from a very heterogeneous population and a school system that allowed for too much individual freedom and an ambiguity regarding values. I am speaking, of course, as an educator.

What is your own understanding of this, and other issues that you write about? I would encourage you to venture to express your own insights, based on your own reading and analysis of a situation, rather than merely reflect others’ perspectives. It will definitely make for a more interesting read.



Lim Lai Cheng (Mrs)
Principal

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Message from the Principal

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General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 1

'The government always acts in the interest of the people.' Discuss.

Liu Mo | 11S06L

Witnesses to the fall of the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak and the rampant corruption of dictator Kim Jong Il may invariably raise the question of whether governments genuinely take care of the interests of the people. Indeed, every single government – be it a divinely ordained monarch or merely a group of elders under the leadership of a tribal head – is obliged to represent the interest of the people, safeguard people's interest and ensure a better standard of living for all. Nevertheless, it might be overly idealistic to jump to the conclusion that the government always acts in the interest of the people without examining real life examples of how bad governments may compromise people's interest, and the limitations of government policies that have been formulated to advance people's interest, but have failed due to politicians' pursuit of their own agenda.

At the most fundamental level, every government is obliged to shoulder the responsibility of improving the people's living standards and alleviating their suffering as this is the very reason for its existence. A communist government promotes a 'command economy' to ensure fairer distribution of resources, hence promoting equality and raising the living standard of the poor. A democratic government, on the other hand, promotes capitalism and free trade, as it believes that freer trade allows for economic prosperity, thus allowing more people to enrich themselves and enter the middle class or even the upper echelons of society. Besides employing different economic policies to gain prosperity for the people, governments also invest in education so as to equip their people with the necessary skills to succeed in today's knowledge-based economy. Additionally, governments' expenditure on infrastructure also attests to their efforts in providing a more conducive environment for the people. All in all, it does seem that the government should, and will, act in the interest of the people to fulfill its responsibility.

Furthermore, the fact that some governments even embark on less popular policies for the long-term good of its people at the cost of losing popular support also seems to suggest that governments will always prioritise the well-being of the people over other ends. For instance, during the economic crisis in 1997, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong implemented the CPF (Central Provident Fund) cut to accumulate reserves for the country, despite causing much public unhappiness. Similarly, in China, the government enforced the one-child policy to control rapid population growth much to the unhappiness of the people. In these two cases, the governments were willing to sacrifice people's support to implement policies unpopular at the moment, and yet vital to the long-term well-being of the people (in the case of Singapore, to alleviate future economic burden, and in China, to allow better distribution of prosperity). Therefore, one may conclude that even though some of the government's actions prove to be less welcomed, they are nonetheless implemented in the long-term interest of the people.

Another perspective that shows the government's prompt action in safeguarding people's interest is that during times of crisis, rather than protecting politicians' self-interest, upright governments have shown their competency in dealing with crises, thus protecting people from suffering. When the financial crisis swept across most parts of the globe, governments in different countries came up with measures to avert the crisis, as evidenced by the US's stimulus package and Singapore's 'resilience package'. Moreover, during a disease outbreak, governments also play an instrumental role in subsidising treatment for the under-privileged, and carrying out nation-wide screening to prevent the further spread of the disease. Thus, it appears that governments do act in the interest of the people, especially in times of crisis, to protect their people from suffering the ramifications of the crisis.

Nevertheless, proponents of the statement seem to base their stand on the assumption that every government is upright and competent in fulfilling its responsibility of advancing its people's interest.



Both the annals of history and current affairs prove otherwise. Saddam Hussein, the notorious dictator of Iraq, embarked on unnecessary wars on Iraq's neighbours and turned the once promising oil-rich nation into a highly unstable and oppressive one, with its people suffering from deprivation of human rights. The Zimbabwean President Robert Mugabe's misrule of his country resulted in an inflation rate that ran into the millions, with his people suffering from severe poverty and the unequal distribution of resources. Looking back to history, we also have Adolf Hitler, who, in the name of advancing the glory of Germany, implemented his genocide agenda, killing millions of innocent Jews under his rule. Considering these governments' misrule of their countries, which resulted in suffering for their people, the aforementioned assumption is indeed untenable.

Proponents of the statement also fail to realise that the internal power struggle within a democratic government may also become an obstacle for the government to act effectively for the benefit of its people. For instance, when President Obama introduced the universal healthcare plan, he faced stiff opposition from the rival Republican Party and questions from Congress. While such opposition may have arisen from valid concerns over the budget deficit, it remains undeniable that opposition to the healthcare plan resulted from partisan struggle as the Republicans surely did not want to see the Democrats' initiative succeed and score more political points with the people. As a result, the internal power struggle between two parties slowed down the passage of the healthcare plan, thus exacerbating the situation of poor Americans who urgently need the plan to subsidise their medical expenditure. Another example may be clearly seen during the Cultural Revolution in China, where Mao sought to consolidate his rule and clear the party of dissidents who disagreed with his decisions. In this case, the power struggle and its resultant nationwide revolution claimed the lives of millions and brought stagnation to the country's economic development. We can thus reasonably conclude that when the government is obsessed with tightening its grip over the rule of the country, it may act in a way to ensure its own power base at the expense of the well-being of the people.

Furthermore, whose interest are we looking at? While the government may attempt to advance the interest of one group of people, such an attempt may at the same time disadvantage another group. In Malaysia, the government generously grants the bumiputera lots of privileges in the fields of commerce, politics and education to ensure them benefits. However, such an attempt to raise the living standards of the bumiputera was done at the expense of equality for people from other ethnic groups. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, the government favours the Sinhalese, the dominant ethnic group, over the minority Tamils, and caused much unhappiness in the country. These two cases vividly demonstrate how governments may sacrifice the interest of one group of people to benefit another group of people, both of whom are under the rule of the same government.

In conclusion, while the government ideally will and should act in the interest of the people, helping them to improve standards and protecting them from crises and dangers, there are also instances where governments fail to fulfill this obligation, sometimes intentionally to advance the government's agenda and consolidate power, sometimes inevitably as it is difficult to accommodate the interests of everyone at one time. It is worth mentioning that a government that is over-protective of its own interests and completely overlooks the interests of the people may expect the same consequence as Hosni Mubarak or Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali, and ultimately be ousted out of power by its dissatisfied people.

Marker's comments:

Excellent – lucid and clear arguments. Good range of examples.



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 2

'The government always acts in the interest of the people.' Discuss.

Yuen Wing Yan | 11S06S

In any country, the government holds the most power in making decisions of national importance for the population. In exchange for this power, the citizens expect their government to ensure stability and economic growth, increase the standard of living and more importantly, listen to and fulfill their aspirations. In order to stay in power, or out of a genuine calling to serve their electorate, governments tend to adhere to the needs and wants of the population. While the main responsibility of the government is to act in the interest of the people, there are notable instances where governments do otherwise, especially when there are clashes with their own interests. Hence, the above statement is not always true.

The most glaring inconsistency with acting in the interest of the people would be when authoritarian governments seek to preserve their own power, be it by force or any other means. With an increasing interconnectedness throughout the world and the advent of technology, people living in repressive regimes aspire to be like the rest of the world as well. They hope for more freedom of expression and openness of the government, amongst other aspects of political freedom. However, fearing that their positions are increasingly threatened, autocrats impose heavy censorship of the press and other forms of media so that these views will be silenced. While they may claim that this is in the interest of the people, there is clearly much discontent amongst the population who feel that their aspirations are neglected. An apt example would be China, where calls for a "Jasmine Revolution" were quickly silenced and activists and dissidents were rounded up for questioning. Even a proposed silent, peaceful protest in the streets of Beijing prompted the government to dispatch riot police to break up the protest before it could even start. Therefore, it is clear that governments do not always act in the interest of the people, especially when it is at odds with their interests of preserving their own power.

Another prevalent situation where governments do not act in the people's interest would be when they use underhanded means to satisfy their greed for economic wealth. It is certainly human nature to feel the temptation when dealing with large amounts of money in national accounts. Therefore, there are many who succumb to the temptation of corruption at the expense of the nation's welfare. There are many countries with corrupt leaders, from ex-President Chen Shui-bian of Taiwan to ex-Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who are both under probe for embezzlement of public funds. In the case of India, one of the largest scandals revealed recently was the siphoning of food aid by a complex network of government officials and middlemen like lorry drivers. There was a clear plan that enabled them to divert large amounts of food aid to be sold in black markets for profit. Compare this to the presence of millions of starving people in India, and it is clear to anyone with a conscience that this is definitely not the right thing to do. Such atrocities show how governments can do things that undermine the interest of the people.

If there is too much argument between major parties in the case of bipartisan politics, then the government may end up not acting in the interest of the people as well. In a bid to limit the power of other parties and to disagree for the sake of disagreeing, politicians may end up hindering the implementation of policies that have significant benefits to the population. A prominent example would be the United States of America, where the Republicans vowed to go against President Obama's healthcare bill simply because it was championed by the Democrats. There are also other policies such as economic reform, which met with implementation difficulties due to the bickering, prompting President Obama to urge both parties to achieve greater common ground and try to decide on what is best for the nation instead. Hence the government may not be able to act in the best interest of the people if they are too preoccupied with such arguments.



Nonetheless, it would be too narrow-minded to blame governments for not acting in the interest of the people because there are too many instances where they do, and they deserve credit for bringing their countries to greater heights. There are times when a government may even choose to make a pragmatic decision over a popular one, because it is convinced of the benefits it can bring and is unafraid to face criticisms that may even threaten support for itself. Many of the policies we have in Singapore are certainly unpopular in many ways – we often hear grouses about increasing Electronic Road Pricing taxes, complaints about Singapore as a ‘fine’ city – yet these policies serve to achieve greater social good such as reducing traffic congestion and maintaining order respectively. The policy of bringing in foreign talent may also touch some raw nerves, but the Singapore government does so to ensure competitiveness and greater economic growth for the country. This shows how governments do strive to work towards achieving the best for the nation, even if it may cost them their popularity.

There are also instances where the government may be unfairly blamed for undermining the people’s interests, simply because the long-term impacts are not felt yet. A controversial example would be how the Chinese government stood firm during the Tiananmen Square Protests in 1989 and denied citizens their right to protest, even sending army tanks to crush many university students gathered there. It received much condemnation from the international community, and while the means may be unjustified and too harsh, the intention of preventing a change to democracy may be somewhat reasonable. At that point in time, China was just in its baby steps towards opening up its economy, and poverty was still a major issue. Many were still uneducated, and this prompted some observers to say that it was not yet ready for democracy, and China’s phenomenal progress today may not have been possible if not for firm and decisive policy making by the ruling party then. Hence, when long-term benefits are taken into account, the government may actually be acting in the people’s interest, even if it appears otherwise.

Another difficulty would arise from satisfying the myriad interests within the population. It is naive to assume that a country is homogenous and everyone’s interests are the same. While there are some commonalities, notable clashes would be between majority and minority interests. For example, in Singapore, homosexuality is not encouraged and thus there is a lack of rights for this community, as seen from the presence of the Penal Code 377A. This compromises the freedom of homosexuals, yet the Singapore government argues that the majority of the population is still uncomfortable with this issue and the nation is still seen as a traditional one in this Asian society. Therefore, to protect the majority’s interests and maintain social stability, there may need to be some sacrifice of the minority’s interests at times. Hence, the government is unable to always act in the interest of every individual in the population.

Therefore, from the many instances where governments deliberately or inevitably compromise on the people’s interests, it is not true to claim that the government always acts in the interest of the people. Nonetheless, governments should try to do so as far as possible so that they are accountable to the citizens who entrust power to them to ensure the smooth running of the nation and greater progress in the future.

Marker’s comments:

A sensible, mature discussion!

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 3

'Terrorism is born out of oppression.' Do you agree?

Chua Cheng Xun | 11S03F

'Terrorism is the tactic of demanding the impossible, and demanding it at gunpoint.' This quote by renowned polemic and neo-conservative, Christopher Hitchens, aptly describes the nature of terrorism. Indeed, terrorism is a method through which terrorists express their goals, demands and motivations. It feeds on fear and aims to create a climate of fear oftentimes by targeting innocent or less than innocent civilians. It is through publicising and glorifying these acts of destruction that they can attain their goals. I believe that terrorism is certainly one of the many tactics utilised by states, religious fundamentalists, et cetera, to achieve their own self-interests.

There are grounds to argue that terrorism is born out of oppression. For one, proponents of this stand often argue that when the oppressed are forced to the point of desperation with no possible alternatives to voice their injustice, it may well work as the only way for the oppressed to seek redress. This argument has many similarities to the concept of *Bellum Iustum* – "Just War". For one, just as how nations are justified to use self-defence as a right and justification to enter a war, "just-terrorism" is possible for the oppressed to defend themselves. The Umkhunto we Sizwe (Spear of the Nation) was a case in point. An armed wing of the African National Congress in South Africa during the Apartheid, it was responsible for bombing many government infrastructures, for example, schools, museums, etc. The leader was of course, the now widely respected Nelson Mandela. Now the actions of Umkhunto we Sizwe were certainly deplorable, for it caused immense pain to those who lost their loved ones to bombs and grenades planted by the African National Congress (ANC), but it was an expression of injustice by the black South Africans who were discriminated against by apartheid policies. They were denied suffrage, access to government-provided public goods, as well as access to higher education by the White rulers, and terrorism was, to the ANC, a necessary tactic to force the government to the negotiation tables and to restore fundamental human rights once denied to them. Thus, in this case, terrorism was born out of oppression. Another example would be the recent Domodedovo International Airport blast in Moscow, which killed more than thirty innocent civilians. Planted by Chechen separatists, it was, again, a tactic born out of their desperate need to force the Russian government into granting them independence. Again, the method of terror is perhaps objectionable, but it will be folly not to recognise its origins. Since the Cold War, Chechen people have been subjugated under Russian rule. Even after decades, they have yet to enjoy social and economic progress, and have had to contend with poor education and high unemployment. They thus see the bombing of Domodedovo Airport as a way for them to express their desire for the right to self-determination. Here again, terrorism was born out of oppression.

However, it is fallacious to suggest that terrorism is a tactic somehow unique to oppression. Sometimes, acts of terror may be carried out for no other reason but religion. Indeed, this is a strong point to make in the wake of 9/11 where the profile of terrorists has increasingly become that of an educated and working class young man who happens to be radicalised by nothing else other than religion. Indeed, many neo-conservatives in the United States have criticised the proposition that somehow oppression led to the event of 9/11. To them, the argument of "oppression" has become nothing more than a façade for religious fundamentalists to defend their real desire to spread Jihad and ensure complete dominance of their extremist form of Islam. Indeed, in Osama bin Laden's letter to America, aside from criticising the United States for oppressing Arabs in the Middle East and demanding that they completely withdraw from the Middle East, Osama went on to demand America's conversion to Islam. In fact, Osama himself was hardly an oppressed individual. Having been born into a wealthy business empire in Saudi Arabia, Osama was well-educated and even trained by the US's Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). Underlying his main motivations is instead, the spread of his own religion through a misinterpretation of Jihad. To him, America is the Satanic nation and terrorism is a tactic to force them into repentance and conversion. We also see other instances where religion, rather than oppression, becomes a main source of terror. For instance, just last week, Pakistani Minorities Minister Shahbaz Bhatti was killed in a terrorist attack



by Punjab Taliban in Pakistan because he had been trying to reform Pakistan's archaic blasphemy law which criminalises, by death, offences insulting Islam. Indeed, too many a time, religion is the true justification for terrorists to conduct terrorism while "oppression" merely works as a convenient tool for terrorisms to assume the moral high ground.

Other than oppression, terrorism might even be born out of political self-interest. This applies to a domain of terrorism – state terrorism, where nations begin to use tactics of terror to pursue their own self-interest. Again, in these cases, oppression becomes a loosely applied term to conveniently justify their actions. Take Iran for instance, which has been publicly funding and sponsoring Hamas and Hezbollah for the past two decades where it provided both financial and military aid that are often used to launch rockets from Lebanon and Gaza into Israel. Through sponsoring Hamas and Hezbollah, both internationally denounced as terrorist blocs, Iran was in actuality attempting to widen its Shiite scope of influence in the Middle East such that it could compete with Saudi Arabia for dominance in the Middle East while reducing America's influence within the region. Again, this was done under the façade of defending the "oppressed Palestinians" in and around Israel so that they could assume their right to self-determination. It is interesting to note however, that the Palestinian Liberation Organisation has often condemned Iran for her undue influence. Poll studies in Palestine and Lebanon have similarly revealed that Iran is not welcome in the region. Aside from Iran, one can also point to Libya who uses state terrorism to achieve the political goal of improving Muammar Gaddafi's image in Libya, and also to force the United States to the negotiation table. The Lockerbie bombing in the 1980s did just that when Gaddafi sent al-Megrahi to plant a bomb in a civilian airliner which detonated in mid-air, sending hundreds of innocent civilian victims to their graves. Clearly, in instances like state-terrorism, political interests, more than anything else, are used to justify their acts of terror.

Finally, terrorism can also be born out of poverty and poor social conditions. This applies to "blind terrorists" who are often people without any goals or ideology other than the one goal of putting food on their families' tables. Cases such as these are often a result of poor social and economic conditions instead of oppression. "Blind terrorists" are thus lured or compelled by terrorist organisations to work for them, with the promise that their families will be taken care of. Attracted to the promise of financial security, these people thus become terrorists. This can be clearly seen in Pakistan where the Lashkar-e-Taiba (Army of the Good) is known for receiving funding from Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), that are in turn used to incentivise poor uneducated Pakistanis into this "profession". The Mumbai Bombings in 2008 for instance were conducted by poor Pakistanis who were offered financial aid by Lashka-e-Taiba for perpetuating violence and terror in Mumbai. In Afghanistan, the Taliban was also known for offering poor Afghan villagers financial security in exchange for fighting against American soldiers. Again, the list goes on. "Blind terrorists" many a time turn to terror because of the financial incentives provided, not because they adhere to a faith in fighting for the rights of those oppressed. Thus, terrorism can be born out of a practical need for terrorists to fill their own stomachs.

At the end of the day, we must recognise that there are complex and multiple nuances in reality. Terrorism is often born out of a confluence of factors other than the need to fight oppression alone. What many often fail to realise is the fact that terrorism is a tactic. It is a method used across nations and groups, not just by the "oppressed", for whatever political purposes they wish to achieve. It is a blunt instrument that rarely succeeds, but nonetheless continues to fascinate, or rather, disgust human civilisation. Oppression provides a good reason for terrorism to be used as a tactic because of the potential for justification for its distasteful acts under *Bellum Iustum*. Many groups and nations have conveniently used it to justify their actions, and thus many will simply agree with the statement at face value. It is upon closer inspection that we recognise that it is simply a cherry-picked reason to suit their self-interests. Ultimately, I am of the stand that oppression is certainly not the only rationale for people to use this tactic. For us to win the war against terror, this is one distinction we must not neglect.

Marker's comments:

Cheng Xun, this is an excellent piece with obvious evidence of extensive reading and a mature understanding of complex issues.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 4

Is pragmatism an impediment to real progress in Singapore?

Benavon Lee Shuhui | 11A03A

Singaporeans are often seen and stereotyped as a pragmatic group of individuals who are constantly hard at work, extending their office hours or striving in the rat-race of working life in order to get the next big promotion. These habits are by no means harmful or perfectly noble intentions that we as individuals should aspire to, but the complaint often voiced by Singaporeans themselves is that our pragmatism has become a stumbling block to our own success. Often, this is due to the over-emphasis on materialistic rewards as the sole yardstick for success. The resulting consequence is that Singaporeans fear innovation and taking the path less trodden simply because it is not as secure to do so or because the fear of failure is too great. I believe that pragmatism has become an impediment to real progress in Singapore as the nation needs mavericks and new innovations in order to remain at the forefront of progress in the future.

Opponents of the given statement would argue that it is precisely the pragmatic nature of Singapore – in terms of governance, education and societal aspects – that propelled Singapore from a Third World to a First World nation. After separation from Malaysia, Singapore was forced to quickly rebrand herself as an attractive manufacturing hub for Trans-national Corporations (TNCs) in order to ensure her economic survival. The large-scale urban redevelopment and planning that ensued in order to create proper manufacturing zones in Jurong and Paya Lebar resulted in the displacement of many village communities, which caused unhappiness to the people. However, these policies were necessary in order to ensure the long-term economic viability of the nation. Being pragmatic about this affair may not have been easy for the government, but on hindsight, it acted to ensure progress for this nation.

In another aspect, Singapore is pragmatic in its investment in new tourism ventures. This has allowed most of its ventures to be carried out with optimal success precisely because the government was realistic and 'safe' in adopting tried-and-tested tourism ventures. Some examples include, the building of the Singapore Flyer which was modelled after the famous London Eye, the building of the Integrated Resorts on Sentosa and at Marina Bay, which are modelled after the Las Vegas Casino and Entertainment Strip, as well as the hosting of the Formula One Races, which was an improvement of the Formula One races held in neighbouring Malaysia's Sepang Circuit. Singapore has a penchant for modelling other countries' successful tourism ventures and injecting improved infrastructure and management with the intention of superceding these models-cum-rivals. While detractors may argue that this lack of innovation and 'Singapore' method of practical investment is uncreative, who can argue with the landslide success that all these attractions have had in attracting tourists to Singapore as well as diversifying the entertainment scene in this country?

However, I believe that as Singapore moves on to another era of competition, this role of pragmatism is no longer valid for the new challenges Singapore will face.

The overt focus on the 'hardware' of her citizens has resulted in the production of no doubt highly-skilled and highly-educated individuals. Yet, this has been done at the expense of the development of future mavericks and innovators who are necessary to keep Singapore at the forefront of the technological era. The emphasis on academic-based results and national-based examinations prevent students from cultivating interests outside the academic curriculum as most students are pragmatic and recognise that it is important to focus on academic achievement. It is common to have many Singaporean parents aspire for their children to become engineers, doctors, lawyers or accountants simply because these are respectable jobs that ensure financial stability and do not deviate from the regular job scope expected from university graduates. As a result, the churning out of highly-capable yet uniform thinkers from the education system will not



result in the creation of industry leaders and pioneers that will keep Singapore at the forefront of technological advancement.

Moreover, pragmatism has prevented the development of the 'software' that enables Singapore to become a truly cultured and refined First-World nation. Goh Chok Tong, Singapore's former prime minister, once lamented how Singapore "had not achieved" First-World status because of the lack of cultured individuals who deeply appreciated the arts. Arts appreciation seems to be confined only to the upper echelons of society and has simultaneously alienated most of the average Singaporean heartlanders. Average Singaporeans consider paying to watch these artistic performances a "frivolous" expenditure that can only be enjoyed by the elite and rich in Singapore, illustrating how pragmatism has robbed Singaporeans of enjoying the intangible yet very emotional catharsis of indulging in a comedy or dramatic play.

Lastly, pragmatism has resulted in the clinical and somewhat stagnant political atmosphere in the nation. Citizens are more than willing to accept the ruling People's Action Party's (PAP) good governance even though there are certain policies that people are unhappy about. Since the PAP has proven that they are a competent and efficient government with an entire slew of policy changes that have positively impacted Singapore, most citizens do not want to "disrupt" the status quo and are therefore unlikely to outrightly voice liberal or radical views. This is illustrated by the many individuals who choose to remain out of politics as they already believe that the PAP will eventually correct policies with which they are disenchanted. Likewise, the lack of opposition to policies being implemented illustrates the pragmatic nature Singaporeans have in remaining ambivalent since the government is seen to be doing a good job.

While pragmatism has shown itself useful in the early stages of progress in this young nation, in the long run, Singapore needs to look beyond the safety net of the tried-and-tested route in order to venture into uncharted, but possibly more rewarding waters.

Marker's comments:

Interesting essay, Benavon. You have demonstrated knowledge on the subject matter with adequate substantiation based on the Singapore example. Good use of personal voice too.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 5

Is pragmatism an impediment to real progress in Singapore?

Lee ZhuYi | 11S06K

“Get real” is an oft-heard refrain that has recently taken up permanent residence in popular culture. However, its underlying emphasis on pragmatism has pervaded every aspect of society from state to market to individual. In the past years, Singapore has been accused of having little press freedom, to which our defense was and is always the same: it works. Pragmatism, and its concern for results, has been the implicit cause of many of Singapore’s obstacles to true progress. This is because progress cannot be nailed down quantitatively to a set of indicators, nor measured by an economic yardstick. It strays deeper into more abstract territory, such as the development of a cultural and intellectual state. To these ends, there are no chartered routes, no dictated methods; progress will not be guided by a set of quantifiable objectives. In this light, one might see pragmatism as a stumbling block on the way to actual progress.

Prima facie, Singapore owes much of her visible and tangible progress to having been pragmatic and sensible. In spite of strong opposition, no expense was spared to make Singapore “a bustling metropolis”. In the recent movie *It’s a Great, Great World*, Singaporeans are shown to have lost many things of sentimental value in the demolition of Great World, Happy World, and Gay World, once the “capital” of social life in Singapore. The last kampong in Kembangan is slated for redevelopment. But it is because of this painful yet necessary restructuring of land use in Singapore that we now have first class facilities. The land on which the Biopolis and Seletar Aerospace Park now stand was once littered with black and white colonial houses. But these facilities are integral to the Economic Development Board (EDB) master plan to develop niches in our quaternary industries. Needless to say, with the improvement of infrastructure here, Singapore has come a long way, with Gross Domestic Product per capita leaping an impressive fifty-fold from approximately 500 USD to 25 000 USD that it stands at today.

It was also in the name of political stability that Singapore has chosen to “be realistic” instead of strictly adhering to textbook values of democracy: free speech and equality. In the formative years of this nation, there was an ugly battle between the People’s Action Party and the Barisan Socialis (BS), among others. This was finally controversially “resolved” by incarcerating many BS members and preventing them from running for office, a fact that is often glossed over in the annals of Singapore history. The very same spirit of oppressing opposition, mirrored by other states such as Myanmar, would likely be decried as unethical. However, given the successes of the later victors, these measures were put in a positive light. Furthermore, a culture of political apathy has been born, especially in the younger generation of Singaporeans. Thus, indifference has a profound stabilising effect on politics, although critics note this is unhealthy for any state. It seems that Singaporeans have traded their individuality, right to free speech and political opinion for security. Any grouses with the present government are suppressed because it is simply more practical to thrive in a more strictly controlled state than one without order. In the name of pragmatism for national security, we have compromised on our pledge to racial equality by disallowing ethnic Malays from filling certain roles in our army. The present state in Singapore is far from ideal, but “it works”.

In Singapore, practicality and the need for economic development has also led us to embrace subtle forms of social engineering. When we needed engineers, schools funnelled students towards particular subjects, such as Mathematics and Physics; when the demand and market arose for biotechnology, there was a sudden surge in classes offering Biology. In 2003, the number of classes offering biology in certain schools increased about five-fold. This and the aforementioned compromises on our ideals surface the first few problems with pragmatism: it sets blinkers over our eyes such that we are guided by needs and a primal instinct to survive. Firstly, it brings up the perpetual struggle between the realist and the idealist. Pragmatism is an insidious threat to our



dreams and ideals. Being chased to extremes, it may even turn a utopia dystopian as Aldous Huxley describes in '*Brave New World*'. Secondly, there are also problems with execution. Needs are dynamic. And in line with being pragmatic, one's actions will be in a continual state of flux. This discontinuity may prove to be detrimental to our progress. A classic example in the Singaporean context would be our approach to languages. Thirty years back, Singaporeans were called upon to place emphasis on English as a medium for communication, and thus the importance of Mother Tongue, in particular Chinese, waned. However, the emergence of China on the world stage had given the government sufficient impetus to place the emphasis back on Chinese. This radial shift has left Singaporeans with a confused identity, sometimes manifested in a confused pidgin of both languages and an inability to speak either fluently.

Real progress cannot be measured by economic markers, nor visual statistics, nor a list of indices. According to the often cited Maslow's hierarchy of needs, the above-mentioned indicators can only help us determine how well we have achieved our basic needs, such as health and survival, physically and socially. But they cannot move us further up the hierarchy. Real or true progress sits at the pinnacle of that hierarchy – self-fulfillment. Often, pragmatism leads us to give up our right to individuality for mere survival.

Admittedly, without pragmatism, Singapore might be in chaos, or saddled with administrative inefficiencies and a poorly run state, rife with unrest and trouble. Within that kind of state, progress will likely not be made at all, neither those that are basic to human existence nor those that define and glorify it. Thus, a sort of compromise needs to be reached. To this end, John Stuart Mill's attitude might be key to this resolution. By adopting Mill's harm principle, it would enable the state to afford liberty and freedom of self-realisation to its people, while the very same clause would help the state control liabilities, such as detractors. Pragmatism should be a tool in the hands of Singaporeans, and not a law that bridles true progress.

Marker's comments:

Very cogent and well developed argument which is very forcefully made, yet without failing to recognise the merits of the pragmatist approach. A real pleasure to read.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 6

'The arts disturb while the sciences reassure.' How true is this?

Sarah Giam Yi Xin | 11A03A

Anyone who has watched the dark psychological thriller released this year, *'Black Swan'*, will certainly remember Natalie Portman's ballerina character's horrific descent into insanity, as a result of being forced to adopt a persona in a performance so unlike her originally sweet, gentle personality. Her terrifying hallucination of droplets of blood appearing on the bathtub and manic fearing of the many twisted self-portraits she had painted and hung on her bedroom wall sent many stomachs in the audience churning, who, yet, were unable to prise their eyes away from the tragedy unfolding in front of them. This is a prime example of the sheer ability of the arts to disturb, as it exposes sides and shades of human nature when pushed to its utmost limits, and makes us wonder, secretly, if we too are indeed capable of such emotions. Science, on the other hand, due to its dealings with tangible, concrete entities and definite formulas and theories, seems to be of a more stable, constant nature, and is thus more reassuring to our human minds. However, due to the large scope of issues that the spheres of science and arts entail, as well as our human ability to turn the uses of the sciences and the arts either for comfort-giving or disturbing purposes, it cannot be said that the sciences completely provide a reassuring salve from the inconstancy of our world, nor can the arts be attested to be only capable of unsettling us.

Proponents of the view may say that the arts have the ability to unseat us due to its dealings with controversial issues and opinions usually silenced in the mainstream media prior to their expression while the sciences have bestowed upon us many inventions that have made our lives more comfortable and convenient, and also because the sciences deal with concrete formulas and ideas accepted by the public until and if they are refuted by a new discovery. Indeed, the play *'Blackbird'* performed by the Singapore Repertory Theatre last year elicited a slew of shocked, horrified and undoubtedly disturbed responses from the audience, unsettled by the portrayal of a younger girl's sexual relationship with a much older man. Emma Yong's unforgettable portrayal of that girl, Una, coming back after many years to her former lover, not for revenge, for she still loves him and is unsure of the purpose of their meeting – disturbs audiences firstly because of the touchy, usually avoided issue of romantic relationships between people of widely disparate ages, as well as its clever sidestepping of our human sense of justice, and revenge against our oppressors and purveyors of evil. Emma Yong's vulnerability as the girl onstage probably made the audience inadvertently wonder at the complexities of the human heart which they might never grow to understand, and thus inevitably brought some measure of unsettlement due to the 'unknown' rearing its head. In contrast, the sciences seem to have brought us not only reassurance of the mind in the definite, concrete formulas we learn of in Chemistry – an acid mixed with water will be diluted in that proportion – but also material comforts which technology has brought us in the 20th century, be it the efficient public transport system Singapore enjoys, our air-conditioned office buildings, or even the medical processes of In-Vitro Fertilisation that have brought many a barren couple much joy at seeing a child they thought they would never be able to conceive. However, what these creations of art and scientific innovations hold in common is the fact that both were initiated by human beings – and we, therefore, wield the power to ensure either the reassurance or disturbance, of both the spheres of the sciences or arts.

In fact, events throughout history have shown the human ability to do just that – the arts not only disturb but can also provide a salve for emotional turmoil faced by us. Artist Frida Kahlo painted a portrait of her deceased husband to alleviate her loneliness in living without him; writer Sylvia Plath similarly wrote a letter to her husband explaining her reasons for madness and consequent suicide reassuring him that "no one would have loved her better, or made her happier than him." On a broader scale, art therapy is used widely today as treatment for people who have been scarred by events in life from bullying, having suffered natural disasters or those who are shackled by the chains of depression. Many of us feel refreshed after listening to the melodious strains of



classical music, or even the latest pop tunes today. As such, the arts definitely have the potential to reassure, and even to heal in many cases. Conversely, the sciences, when used by humans with the wrong motivations result in not merely immensely disturbing but disastrous consequences. Who can forget the two nuclear bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in World War II, a severe misuse of the discovery of nuclear power, which killed millions, or the Chernobyl incident whose radioactive effects last till today? Another case in point would definitely be the Tuskegee experiment, which ran for thirty years, where scientists injected the syphilis virus into the bodies of African-Americans for a “first hand observation” of the effects of the deadly virus, the African-Americans chosen due to their status as a racial minority at that time. These events throughout the annals of history, some of which continue today, are testament to the fact that the arts have the potential to reassure and liberate, and the sciences to disturb and destroy, depending on how they are harnessed by us.

That said, some of the initial disturbances caused by the arts may be necessary to point out glaring truths ignored by society, or inspire social change, hence translating into the eventual liberation of the oppressed, and reassurance in the long run. Similarly, what seems to be reassuring in the sciences may actually hide many flaws which have already begun to disturb us, especially in terms of our health. Anonymous French Artist JR, who travels to cities around the world to create art reflective of society, or provocative of the happenings in them, recently took a picture of an Israeli and a Palestinian, then placed the photos, which looked eerily similar, as part of his artwork. Though it may disturb citizens from either of the nations embroiled in bitter conflict against each other, it may spark a realisation in them that they are not as different as they feel they are, and may introduce the first light of reconciliation between the two countries. His painting of the face of a grandmother on the steps where she reportedly lost her grandchildren, kidnapped in the slums of Brazil, if adequately publicised, might incite guilt in the kidnappers for tearing a family apart, or be the impetus for government intervention into problems in slums. Waris Dirie, a Somalian girl who suffered the immensely brutal, humiliating procedure of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) when she was twelve, wrote a book *‘Desert Flower’* on her suffering, which was later produced as a film. Though the greatly horrific procedure of FGM might have gone greatly ignored by the Somalian government, the film’s inevitable disturbance of the general public has sparked many movements against the procedure. Similarly, technological innovations like the Internet, though seeming to be an initial provider of convenience, has resulted in Internet addiction being a widespread ailment today in South Korea, where two millions of their citizens are reportedly addicted. Likewise, the process of cloning has brought about much unexpected disturbance: although reproductive cloning has its benefits of more speedy recovery for burn victims as the cells of the injured areas can be cloned from the patient’s tissue, reducing the potential of rejection, cloned animals tend to have abnormally large organs and are much more vulnerable to illness, having weaker immune systems. As such, the initial disturbance of the Arts may give way to a light of reassurance for the many marginalised in our world, and what seems to be convenience brought by science may later cause overreliance, addictions, or have many side effects.

Also, the arts can reassure us due to its dealing with much of the human psyche, an element more constant from the past till now and definitely more personal – as compared to the sciences, which tend to deal with new innovations, thus introducing a constant element of uncertainty. John Donne’s love poetry, though written in the 16th century, still has the power to evoke in us similar feelings, because of the timeless quality of the human ability to love, over generations. Chopin’s lovely Nocturnes still have the ability to evoke a sense of peace in our hearts when listened to, and the Bible – arguably a work of art – still reassures many human hearts today, especially in the uplifting words of the book of Psalms. In contrast to this, the deceptively constant formula of science are really entities subject to change in the light of new inventions, and the area of science is not completely within our human consciousness – the discovery of a ninth planet and arguments over the existence of Pluto would be a case in point. The ambiguous, unknown quality of outer space, as well as the existence of extra-terrestrial beings have the potential to unsettle us, and more so, the central aim of science, which, possibly is to continually discover new things about our world. This entails a rather ambitious yearning to pin the whole of the world down in our human understanding,

which would be rather impossible due to the complexities of it. In the arts, we are content to accept the ambiguity and the unexplainable, the 'weird and wonderful'. In fact, much focus on the arts has been on its ability to reassure, uplift, and heal – which is why the arts might reassure and the sciences disturb.

In conclusion, neither the arts nor the sciences have the ability to wholly reassure or disturb, just as audiences of *'Black Swan'* cheered when Natalie Portman overcame herself to perform as the incredibly alluring Black Swan onstage. Due to the immensely huge scope of both the spheres of the sciences and the arts, no definite judgment can be made on their ability to either disturb or reassure. Whether each of them do comfort, or unsettle most possibly lies in our human hands – whichever way we choose to harness them, for worse or better.

Marker's comments:

Sarah, this is an excellent piece of work! Thoroughly engaging and well-substantiated. You have very good language skills and have used it to your advantage. Obviously the arts is your forte – a bit more on the ethical/moral issues on the sciences will make this a fantastic essay. You have done well!



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 7

'The arts disturb while the sciences reassure.' How true is this?

Zhang Junyu | 11S06L

In the early 19th century, Mary Shelley wrote '*Frankenstein*', a great literary masterpiece that questioned whether, in the unrelenting gallop of scientific advancement, humans, in their pursuit of knowledge and the quest to harness the Promethean flame, would overstep ethical and moral boundaries. This was at a time when the sciences were just blossoming, and their almost boundless potential seemed like the solution to all the problems of the day. Two centuries on, the same contrast exists between the arts and the sciences, with the arts painting a depressing picture of human nature and the future of humanity, while the sciences express limitless optimism. Indeed, it can be argued that the arts disturb, while the sciences reassure, as the two play starkly different roles in the world today.

Nowhere is this juxtaposition more revealing than in international social issues. Even as the arts over the ages have highlighted issues such as poverty and war, science has repeatedly touted its success in solving these same problems. This may partly be due to the nature of these problems, as they are largely due to social forces, well outside the jurisdiction of the sciences. For example, many art pieces and literary works deal with the social stigma associated with homosexuality, such as the '*Asian Boys Trilogy*' in Singapore, which deals with gay identity in Singapore. On the other hand, there is research optimistically suggesting that homosexuality may be due to genetics (which may lead a casual onlooker to infer that there is no more reason for the lack of social acceptance towards gays and lesbians than there is to one, say, born with a genetic disease). On the issue of inequality and poverty, films such '*Slumdog Millionaire*' and documentaries on slums in India bring to the attention of people in the world the extreme poverty and extreme wealth that exist in the world today. However, news on the scientific front suggests that there is much being done to improve the situation - Golden Rice, laden with vitamin A, which has helped millions of people suffering from Vitamin A deficiency, was made using genetic engineering, the new technology that has been touted as a cure-all medicine for the woes of today's world. The arts, which have taken upon themselves the duty to highlight the social problems in the world today, in the process of questioning the current state of society, indeed shake the faith people hold in the continued improvement of society, a faith founded upon the successes of scientific advancement.

Furthermore, while the sciences continually try to propose solutions for even the most worrying of global problems, the arts continually portray the inefficacy of current measures, shaving off (possibly misguided) confidence that science will always be able to overcome any challenges humanity faces through yet another leap in innovation. Indeed, scientists have come up with radical new proposals for geoengineering, to completely reform the Earth in order to deal with climate change through spraying particles in the atmosphere or launching mirrors out into space to block off the sun's rays. This may lead some countries and governments worldwide to conclude that their continued belligerent stance against environmental protection and carbon emission reduction is, at least in part, justified, as they can rely on scientific technology to pick up after them. Nonetheless, the arts rightly stress the urgency for reform on policies concerning the environment. Works such as Al Gore's '*An Inconvenient Truth*' spotlights the inefficacy of global efforts to cut carbon emissions (just look at the massive failures of the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Summit on climate change), arguably the only truly effective method to halt and reverse global warming. This is a typical example of a case where undue expectation for the sciences to provide the magic bullet for any problems faced by humanity is countered by the arts, which focuses on exposing the inconvenient truth.

However, opponents of this view would likely point to circumstances where the opposite seems to be true – situations in which the arts reassure and the sciences disturb. Indeed, the sciences, and in particular genetic engineering, are currently embroiled in a major controversy, a controversy

highlighted in *'Frankenstein'*. To many, the master in *'Frankenstein'* seems to represent the Faustian nightmare we may find ourselves in if humans continue to “play God”, violating ethical considerations and disregarding the sanctity of life in our pursuit of scientific knowledge. To those who advocate curtailing research into such controversial areas such as cloning and genetic engineering, the unrelenting progress of the sciences certainly constitutes a worrying fact.

Some would also note that not all art is made to rebel against society. In fact, a major role the arts play in the world today is as a medium for culture to be transmitted and understood. *'The Great Gatsby'* was a defining book of American culture, which united the diverse melting pot of American society under a common American Dream. *'The Kite Runner'*, a bestseller that introduced Afghan culture to the world, is another example of a novel that allowed people all around the world to understand a certain culture. As a vehicle for culture, then, it would seem the arts have heightened understanding and unity throughout the globe.

At times, the arts may also allow countries to exert soft power on other countries, calming xenophobic fears. The rise of China has greatly threatened American hegemony in recent years, spawning many books that predict the rise of the Dragon of the East. However, in the same period from 2006 to 2010, the number of Confucius Institutes globally has doubled, showing how China is intent on utilising its traditional literature such as classic Confucian texts and Tang dynasty poems to calm fears of its rise and spread its message of a “peaceful rise”.

Nevertheless, the arts still remain as the primary medium through which controversial views are aired, as artists continue to push against boundaries. It would probably be hard to find anyone who deems Piss Christ, a photograph of a plastic crucifix dipped in urine, pleasing to the eye; however, it remains critically acclaimed for its representation of the cheapening of religion in today's increasingly pragmatic world. As the arts continue to venture deeper into dangerous territory, making use of novel media through which to express themselves, they can only increase their ability to disturb. At the same time, countering this trend is the rise in censorship, which has been enabled through technological advancements, allowing governments to track changes in the artistic society and people of the world to boycott or criticise art works deemed too insensitive or unsavoury. Thus, while modern art experiments with increasingly controversial themes and media, science has allowed censors to remove these from the public eye.

The arts have always taken upon themselves to reflect on society in its time and age, often with great controversy and pessimism. The sciences, on the other hand, often brim with optimism about the advancement of humanity. While both are highly necessary in modern society, and it is impossible to argue whether one has brought more benefit to society than the other, it remains largely the case that the arts disturb while the sciences reassure.

Marker's comments:

An excellent response. Good use of examples to illustrate arguments for the most part. The arguments on how the arts reassure are, however, rather weak & brief!

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 8

'Democracy is not for everyone.' Comment.

Eunice Chiam | 11S06S

A comparison between the lives of people living under the tyranny of Saddam Hussein and the lives of the citizens of Singapore might lead one to conclude that all countries should adopt democracy, as it tends to ensure the welfare of the people while dictatorships tend to lead to the encroachment of human rights. However, one must note that a good and successful democracy requires a transparent and dedicated government, sharp voters and also a level of pragmatism in society. Hence, I believe that currently, democracy may not be a suitable political model for certain countries, but countries should strive towards implementing a democratic government as it can truly engage its people to maximise a country's potential.

A transition into democracy can lead to chaos in a country if people have vastly different viewpoints and are unable to compromise. In such cases, riots and protests by the people would only fuel a country's slide into anarchy, thus destabilising the country. Perhaps with such negative outcomes, such countries are probably not best suited for democracy, hence the saying "Democracy is not for everyone". For example, Thailand's transition from an autocratic regime to a democratic constitution in the late 1990s appeared to be a shining beacon of hope for a region that badly needed such good models. Yet, its upward transition was dogged by riots and unhappiness such that many people have wondered if an autocratic regime was perhaps better. In 2008, yellow-shirt protestors in Thailand took control of the Bangkok airport as part of their riots, upsetting business activities in the country. Such a case is also evident in post-Saddam Iraq, where many of Saddam Hussein's former militants have banded together to cause trouble in the country and oppose government forces, exacerbating the problems Iraq already faces in its transition to democracy. With stubborn citizens who are unwilling to bring their dissent to proper channels (such as forming proper political parties instead of causing social instability), democracy may not be suitable for such countries. Democracy would definitely not ensure peace and welfare of the citizens when such groups band together to disrupt government activities.

Many countries seek to achieve democracy as it is said to ensure liberty and equality for its citizens. Yet, democracy can never guarantee equality in countries where its politicians are corrupt. Democracy may not be the best for such countries as it is no different from autocratic regimes whose dictators are corrupt – meaning that it might not be necessary for everyone to adopt democracy in order to achieve equality. One can look at Taiwan, where many of its politicians accept bribes and use personal relations to get deals. Also, in Iran, President Ahmadinejad rigged its 2009 elections, causing his main rival, Mir-Hossein Mousavi to lose the elections and allowed him to continue his reign as the President of Iran. Hence, it is evident that while democracy is said to promote equality, as citizens can vote out tyrants and venal officials, rigging of votes may occur, which would hinder a country's march towards equality. Democracy can only maximise its potential in a transparent government, thus perhaps leaders should ensure transparency before adopting democracy so that the country can be more suited for it. After all, what is the point of wanting a democratic government, when it is unable to achieve the tenets of democracy?

Additionally, democracy is definitely not for countries with politically apathetic citizens. Winston Churchill definitely emphasised this point where he said, "The best argument against democracy would be a five minute conversation with the average voter." A politically apathetic population would not be able to make perspicacious judgments as to which political party can ensure the progress of a country and may simply choose good-looking or famous candidates. This is the case in Indonesia, where the past elections led to the voting of many celebrities into the government. Due to the low literacy rate in Indonesia, many citizens lack the skills to analyse the potential of future leaders, or the policies they plan to make. Voting such celebrities into the government threatens true progress of the country, as what do these celebrities know about policy-making? In Russia,

94 percent of people interviewed by BBC said that they would not bother to vote and merely 3 percent believed that the elections were not rigged. In Iraq, the case is worse, with voters voting for politicians because they are able to “provide” or bribe them with colour television sets, rice cookers or washing machines. Hence, countries with citizens who are not bothered about politics or lack proper skills to understand politics may choose to vote carelessly. This might lead to the downfall of a nation, when its politicians are unable to implement proper policies to protect national interests.

Furthermore, democracy may not be for everyone, as it may cause inefficiency in the government when opposition parties oppose the ruling party just for the sake of it. Filibustering in the US House has led to the delays in the implementation of several policies, such as the healthcare scheme. With opposition parties that do not truly understand the meaning of being an opposition party but instead seek to disrupt governmental procedures, democracy is pointless. Thus, democracy should only be for countries with a mature opposition that understands its role to act as a check against tyranny, corruption, poorly made legislations and also as a voice for minorities that the government may neglect.

However, if we follow the criteria listed above, it seems to be the case that many countries would not be suitable for democracy. Should autocratic countries with tyrannical leaders remain as such then, since they are not considered ready for a democratic constitution? This should not be the case as no country can always be totally suitable and ready for democracy. Looking at Germany, Switzerland and Britain, it is evident that it takes years for a truly mature democracy to develop. Even Britain today might not be considered ready for democracy if we use the set of criteria above, as corruption still prevails there, with the recent British Special Expenses scandal. As aptly put by Amartya Sen, “a country does not have to be deemed fit for democracy; rather, it has to become fit through democracy.” Thus, it perhaps should not be a question if democracy is for everyone, but a question if countries are willing to undergo changes to allow democracy to maximise their capabilities. While these countries may not be suited for a democratic government at present given their state of affairs, they still can adopt democracy and ensure that over the years, they become increasingly suitable for it.

Democracy, if applied properly, has the capacity to allow freedom, equality and progress in society. These characteristics of democracy are what most individuals hope to be able to possess in a country, and on a personal level, democracy can prevent the abrogation of fundamental human rights. Hence, democracy can be said to be the best political model for countries to adopt. However, this is still not done so in many states as they are believed to be unsuitable for it. Yet, I believe that there is no question of suitability and countries should not be hindered by the notion that “Democracy is not for everyone”, but aim to achieve the tenets of democracy.

Marker's comments:

Excellent, insightful essay. Well-informed and with a voice of your own!



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 9

‘Democracy is not for everyone.’ Comment.

Lin Sen | 11S06K

“With the best of hopes, we would like to bring the blessings of democracy to Iraq and its people”. George W. Bush’s optimism was unfortunately, in retrospect, misguided, given the years of bloodshed and disorder Iraq was, and still is, mired in. The debacle of America’s war in Iraq has led many to question the legitimacy of imposing democracy and indeed, the readiness of any country for democracy. I firmly believe that the suitability of democracy as a form of governance is dependent on numerous factors of consideration, and thus, democracy, it seems, is not everyone’s cup of tea.

Ardent proponents of democracy have argued that democracy, together with the rights accorded to its citizenry, is a fundamental entitlement for all. This argument indeed holds water if one is a firm believer of fundamental human rights. The functioning of democracy necessarily dictates the upholding of well-recognised rights, such as the freedom of speech, right to life and property, et cetera. Conversely, it is argued that the full accordance of these rights leads inevitably to democracy as a natural mode of governance. Foreign Affairs recently provided extensive coverage of the role of social media and mass communication in bringing about, and sustaining the revolution seen in Egypt. It was evidently true that allowing people to communicate ideas freely provided a form of empowerment for the people of Egypt – for them to congregate and participate in collective action. People’s empowerment is indeed synonymous with democracy, to a large extent. It seems that with the recognition of the universality of human rights, the all-encompassing right to democracy is a natural and logical corollary.

In addition, many are of the view that the very suitability for democracy must be cultivated within democracy, and hence the notion of suitability for democracy outside of a democratic system of governance is irrelevant. For this case, South Africa may serve as a shining example. The functioning of democracy requires certain conditions within participating masses, such as an ability to accept the results of elections and to make informed decisions. In this aspect, such a condition cannot be cultivated in an authoritarian regime, where political power has been denied to citizens. Only through practice, and perhaps even failures, can countries truly build a fecund environment for democracy to flourish. The transition period may be nothing less than choppy waters, just as South Africa wrestled with apartheid in its earlier days as a democracy, but it is all in hopes of a greener pasture. Today, South Africa may boast that it is one of the strongest democratic nations in the region. If one’s aptness for democracy comes from being in a democratic nation, then democracy is not exclusive for a select group of “suitable candidates”, and is indeed universal.

However, though optimistic, the aforementioned propositions for the universal adoption of democracy may face realistic challenges that may lead one to scepticism. Are the fundamental human rights themselves all-encompassing? What price may countries have to pay in their transition period just to obtain democracy? Although many real-life cases can be congruent with the ideas put forth above, there are certain scenarios that warrant the realistic reconsideration of the suitability of democracy. I believe that the following three main factors should be assessed, and that it is evident from this assessment that democracy is not the right fit for certain societies.

First and foremost, the consideration of efficiency is a crucial factor, and for countries that require high bureaucratic efficiency, the cost of time imposed by a democratic process may just be too high. The ideal democracy consists of three branches of government, each serving as a moderating check on the others. For any policy to be passed, it must survive the scrutiny of the Executive branch, the Legislature, and sometimes even the Judiciary. If disagreements should arise, progress for urgent policies will be stalled. Take for example, how the proposed \$700 billion bailout package for United States in 2008 was stuck in limbo for more than a month while banks

and business institutions collapsed around them. When it was finally passed, it was “too little, too late”, as Nouriel Roubini aptly described. In contrast, China, with its consolidated power introduced a huge stimulus package the moment it smelled trouble, leading to a quick recovery from the global economic slump. Countries like Singapore need this level of efficiency for survival. Being highly exposed to international economic climates, Singapore’s economic survival is based on its ability to adopt fast responses to fluctuations in the volatile trade markets. Policies cannot wait on politics to deliver, and the ideal form of democracy is intrinsically not suited for Singapore. This predicament, whereby bureaucratic efficiency is of utmost importance, is shared by numerous countries, such as China, and, most recently, Sri Lanka. In cases such as these, the contrived enforcement of democracy only serves to undermine the nation’s interests, and it is hence best left outside of its borders.

Also, the country’s historical development and current societal paradigms raise the cost of a country’s transition into democracy, and in many cases, even impede the possibility of success. Ideas, such as plurality, must permeate the social fabric of the nation, lest the enforcement of democracy brings large detriment to the country. Yet in many countries, such as the cited Iraq, such a fundamental basis is absent, and the level of sectarian violence that arose was more than sufficient to convince many that the country was not ready for democracy. In Iraq, there is a huge chasm between the Sunni and Shiite Muslims, a cultural nuance neglected by the US workers who were setting up the infrastructure for democracy. The violent power struggles between these two ethnic groups led to a meltdown in Iraq’s democratic process in late 2008. Given these circumstances, it is prudent to conclude that due to the ingrained culture of certain societies, the cost of transitioning to democracy far outweighed potential gains. Accordingly, many countries, including Rwanda, Sudan, and Pakistan, were ill-suited for democracy and this mode of governance is simply not everyone’s choice mode of governance.

Finally, the acknowledgement and respect of the democratic process is essential, and in this aspect, many countries fail to fit the bill. Democracy is then highly unsuited for operation within these societies. The citizens may often view the process as frivolous and even farcical, and this lack of respect and civil purpose would go on to worsen the state of democratic affairs in the country. Taiwan’s democracy is notorious for this, as its citizens may reportedly vote for a candidate simply because he spoke their dialect. The electoral decisions of many individuals are totally out of sync with an informed assessment of the leadership acuity of candidates, and the problem becomes perennial. The problem stands today uncorrected and barely addressed. Also, in countries such as Thailand, the motto is: a fair election is one in which the candidate I voted for is elected. As such, we see a vacillation between the protest groups as each side refuses to acknowledge and accept election results. The persistent playing out of this attitude has more than once stalled the country’s progress. These two anti-examples of successful democracies are representative of the innate limitations that John Locke pointed out – the necessity of an informed mass that subscribes to the ideas proposed by democracy. Admittedly, social trends shift and these citizens may be better integrated into the process in future. But the introduction of democracy in these countries is premature. It is a mode of governance that requires a certain level of enlightenment in its participants and it is just not for these countries currently.

For the past decades, America has always pursued the role of the international pitchman of democracy, and has in some instances resorted to questionable means. Yet the fundamentally flawed assumption that it held was that democracy is for everyone, that each “convert” is a step of international progress. But as we have seen, although ideally democracy is universal, its limitations bear heavy on some countries, and it is not applicable to anyone, anywhere, at any time. Perhaps it is high time for democracies to embrace their much touted ideal, pluralism.

Marker’s comments:

Excellent discussion that addresses the question and makes effective use of examples to substantiate argument.



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 10

To what extent does technology facilitate crime?

Clement Chung Bing Cong | 11S06B

In the recent movie, *'The Social Network'*, Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook, hacked into a Harvard newsletter site to retract a defamatory statement issued by a rival. How he managed it was surprisingly simple. No, there was no furious typing on the keyboard as depicted in movies, nor were there any mathematical algorithms dancing across the computer screen. Zuckerberg simply guessed that the passwords used on Facebook by the editors were the same as those they used for their email. He then pulled out his database of passwords and voila, he was in. What this demonstrates is not the flexible morals of the Facebook founder, but that the increasing concentration of information and sensitive data available to people due to advancement in technology makes it increasingly easy to commit crime. Granted, recent technological advances like the security camera and car alarm do deter crime as well; however, I feel that technology facilitates crime, but only if the flaws within technology remain unaddressed, and if it falls into the wrong hands.

Detractors may argue that recent surveillance technology and crime deterring advancements make it harder for criminals to actually commit crime. With the increase in the amount of protection one can install in one's home, ranging from password encoded locks and fingerprint recognition software, it may seem that physical crime like burglary and housebreak may be deterred. However, this is based on the assumption that everyone has access to such technology and that everyone is willing to go the extra mile and fork out extra for such advancements. If that is not the case, crime generally does not decrease. What these advancements do is actually to divert physical crime away from that particular household, leaving others to seem more attractive to criminals. Crime has simply been diverted to another place.

Furthermore, with the onset of online banking and online financial transactions, criminals with an understanding of computers and technology now do not have to be physically present at the scene of the crime in order to steal money: there have been fake websites of OCBC bank, and even automated teller machines have been tampered with before. Criminals now can steal and rob someone from the comfort of their homes.

Again, detractors might argue, that passwords and safeguards are there to keep all this under control. Actually, the presence of passwords and safeguards increases a person's vulnerability to online crime or identity theft. Recently, Sarah Palin's twitter account was hacked. The hacker simply guessed the answer to Sarah Palin's secret question to gain access to the account. How? The hacker simply searched Wikipedia for personal information about Sarah Palin and, with a certain amount of guesswork, he was in. While there is merit in online banking and financial transactions, people have simply traded one hazard for another. They have traded the physical vulnerability of carrying cash for the online vulnerability of being phished, scammed or hacked, at any time. It can thus be seen, that technological advancements actually expose a person greatly to crime, and facilitates crime.

Technology does not only facilitate crime in these few ways; it also facilitates crime through online anonymity and through the influence of violence on impressionable minds.

With online anonymity, potential criminals may hide and disguise their identity, facilitating crime. An example from Singapore would be the two students arrested for posting racial slurs against Malays. The sense of security that comes from the anonymity of the Internet makes it increasingly easy to stir up racial tensions with a few strokes of the keyboard. Paedophiles also enjoy this online anonymity. This shows the increasingly dangerous world the Internet is. Paedophiles and people with criminal intent, can slip on a mask and commit crime easily. It is this ease that encourages

crime as it separates us from what we do and the consequences of our actions. In this way, crime is encouraged through technology.

Furthermore, with technology, wrong messages and violent content now can be transmitted to a greater number of people worldwide, with an even greater impact than before. Violent and bloody content in video games like Grand Theft Auto, where players can rape then kill prostitutes, desensitises youths to violent acts. Studies have shown that there actually is a positive correlation between the amount of violent games a child plays and the crimes he might eventually commit. The Columbine shootings were committed by two teenagers who were inspired by the film, *'Natural Born Killers'*, with its graphic footage of violence. These violent messages have an even greater impact and more wide-ranging influence than ever before, thanks to technology.

Granted, technology does help to deter crime. The local show, *'Crime Watch'*, encourages citizens to be alert and also broadcasts photos of criminals at large. Surveillance systems at museums deter theft of property. There is merit in technology, and to a small extent, it does deter crime. However, there are a few flaws in technology that inherently are easier to exploit and thus facilitate crime. As discussed before, online transactions are one flaw of technology; another flaw of technology is also its cost. More than one-third of the cameras in the Louvre museum are dummy cameras. Armed with the knowledge of where they are, criminals can easily commit theft. These two flaws of technology can only be addressed by an advance in technology. This leads to a never-ending cycle of crime prevention and crime, doomed to end in failure.

In fact, what technology has provided us with is a paradigm shift. With the increasingly efficient services that technology brings, security must be compromised in some way. This trade-off is the most fundamental flaw in technology today. As we move to a world increasingly dependent on technology, crime has adapted to exploit this fundamental flaw present. Unless this flaw can be addressed, perhaps by installation of biometric security systems everywhere, technology is vulnerable. But even this has flaws. There needs to be guidelines on what can be compromised and most importantly, technology has to be wielded in the right hands. Technology is just a tool that can be used for good or bad. Despite all its flaws, whether it can be used to deter crime all depends on what we do with it.

Marker's comments:

Intelligently interpreted. Good knowledge of technologies that was skillfully woven into analysis. You could have connected the concept of anonymity with community. It's not only deception but also the cloak of safety that brings perverts and fanatics together, encouraging and feeding the sharing of information and hate, or perversion.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 11

To what extent does the media create mediocrity?

Kang Shiyi | 11S03F

The media is perhaps the most powerful entity on earth today. Everyone from celebrities to politicians to the average Joe next door attempts to harness its immense power and make an impact on the community or even the entire world. Indeed, the media is becoming more influential, yet more accessible since the advent of the Internet. For better or for worse, every individual can find a platform to make himself heard. Some critics argue that this is detrimental to society as it promotes a culture of mediocrity due to the lack of “quality control” of material that the media publishes today. However, this argument is flawed because it assumes that selectivity no longer exists. The media is creating more opportunities to discover talent and genius, rather than creating mediocrity.

It seems difficult to deny that the greater accessibility of the media is creating mediocrity when so much of media offerings are undeniably mediocre. YouTube has certainly provided an irresistible opportunity for anyone wanting to get their 15 seconds of fame by showcasing their various talents, imaginary or otherwise. Pop singer Rebecca Black gained widespread attention after her first single “Friday” went viral and received more than 60 million views on YouTube in less than a week. The song received negative critical reviews for its poor lyrics and singing. This highlights the potency of social media – Facebook, YouTube, Twitter – to create overnight sensations based not on talent but the obvious lack thereof. As Brendan Behan remarked, “there is no such thing as bad publicity”; the negative reviews are secondary to the disproportionate attention given. In this sense, the media, especially the Internet, is promoting mediocrity as it gives their efforts acknowledgement, making them temporarily famous and encouraging others to do the same. Even beyond the online community, talent seems to have taken a backseat. Reality TV series such as ‘*Jersey Shore*’ and even ‘*The Bachelor*’ are far from “reality” and more of an opportunity for contestants to cause as much drama as possible. While it may be shocking that only one Bachelor couple eventually got married, perhaps it is more of an inevitability as the show is primarily aimed to create tension, catfights and an altogether unrealistic expectation of romance. On such shows, contestants are chosen for their capacity to cause drama, attracting many desperate aspiring actors. Mediocrity, indeed. Even with professional actors, the media’s insatiable appetite for scandals has overshadowed the industry. Charlie Sheen gained more attention, or notoriety, for alleged drug abuse and charges of domestic violence than his Emmy-nominated role in the popular sitcom ‘*Two and a Half Men*’. With the media’s desire to over-expose gossip and scandals, and to a certain extent glamorising such lifestyles, the media is certainly promoting mediocrity. By giving attention, and hence credit, to things bad and undeserving, the media encourages mediocrity.

However, in reality the above criticism is perhaps too scathing, and a little biased in ignoring the good, actual talents the media has discovered. Indeed, as the media became more accessible to everyone it opened up many opportunities for gems of real talent and gifts to be discovered, an alternative entrance to the previously exclusive club of celebrities. Susan Boyle, who lived in a small English village, would never have received the recognition she deserved for her prodigious singing ability if not for the talent search ‘*Britain’s Got Talent*’. More importantly, YouTube was the catalyst to her global rise to fame as people round the globe watched her touching rendition of Les Miserables’ ‘*I Dreamed a Dream*’. Media publicity gave her the opportunity to record a multi-platinum debut album. As much as the media gives attention to people who are hilariously without talent, it has also unearthed gifts and genius – Darren Criss secured the much coveted role in the hit musical-comedy show ‘*Glee*’ as his viral online videos ‘*A Very Potter Musical*’ caught the attention of the show’s producer, Ryan Murphy. Such forms of positive attention do have key differences from negative ones – they last longer and make a greater impact. While we may have a little fun laughing at someone, it is a passing fascination. But true talent, the ones we admire and respect, will be rewatched and placed on our iPod’s playlists. Ultimately, the audience is able to

discern good from bad, and while both may receive initial publicity by the media, eventually only true talent stays – talent that would have gone unnoticed if not for the media.

Some have also levied the accusation that the media is losing its objectivity and by extension, its credibility. All over the Internet, nameless “experts” give advice on every topic under the sun from politics to healthcare. By quoting such experts, the media tends to report rumours, speculations and projections as facts, misleading the public. Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, is known for its impressive repository of knowledge but also for its unreliability, due to the ease with which anyone can add or edit information. Errors range from a benign grammatical error or misquotation to cases of outright vandalism, such as the case where a hacker regularly replaced sections of Gordon Brown’s bibliography with a single word “tax”. Questionable individuals lurk on online health forums giving dubious advice to patients. Sometimes there need not be a nefarious purpose, but the person might just not have been qualified to handle such queries. As such, instead of receiving information by experts or people well-versed in the field, one is bombarded with a myriad of information, much of which is unreliable or simply untrue. The media is providing everyone a voice for their opinions; however, there exists a pertinent concern to ensure that such opinions be informed ones. The media has not been able to make this distinction, and creates an open platform where a well-considered piece of information is drowned out by many more ignorant remarks, decreasing the quality of information the public receives.

While it is true that online sources of information can be unreliable, it should not automatically follow that any platform for discussion for the general public is a bad idea. Rather, it would be an exceedingly dangerous thing to restrict the media to a privileged few deemed “experts”. Rather than dismissing such non-expert opinions outright, they should be examined for providing new perspectives and insights, even if they express views against the social norms. The power of the media in the hands of many has never been more apparent than the recent Middle East uprising, where young people took advantage of the influence, and anonymity offered by online social media such as Facebook. However, it must be acknowledged that insensitive remarks can be hurtful and have a disproportionate impact when spread through the online community. After the Tohoku earthquake and tsunami and the following nuclear accident, some Chinese bloggers posted comments that the impending nuclear disaster was “retribution” for World War II atrocities. Such ignoble comments gained notoriety, and whilst these were panned by the community, the damage was done and is rather detrimental to China’s image. As such, to maintain a level of integrity in the media, there has to be a certain element of control. However, this should not mean wrenching the platform away from the masses, but letting the masses self-regulate the discussion and the media. It is inevitable that factual errors, insensitive remarks and offending statements would be expressed, both online and in the printed media, but the solution should be to allow the discourse to play itself out, which would filter such mediocrity away.

Above all, one must address the assumption that the masses are just a hapless bunch of individuals blindly absorbing whatever the media presents them. This is clearly not the case. As the increased accessibility of the media draws concern over creating mediocrity by loosening the “quality control” of any material published, it has also created an environment where every individual has his own voice to critique everything the media presents him. While it may temporarily cause an influx of negative publicity or unreliability, these would eventually be siphoned away and forgotten as the public expresses its opinions. In the long term, the media does not promote mediocrity. It creates a more accessible form of excellence.

Marker’s comments:

Shiyi, this is generally a very competent piece with valid arguments that are well-substantiated.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 12

Is China a better role model for the world than America?

Emily Liu | 11S03P

Shattering changes in the global world order have emerged in recent decades, with America's halo of power and idealism waning as another giant emerges from the dark. The awakening of the sleeping dragon, China, driven by rapid industrialisation and economic growth has certainly caught most of the world by surprise. As China surpassed Japan in 2010 to become the world's second largest economy, comparison between the US and China inevitably becomes a hot topic of contention. However, although the rise of China is indeed an invigorating affair, prudence must be taken in labelling China as a better role model in our multi-faceted, complex world today.

Certainly, China's phenomenal rise in economic power is an admirable feat for many around the world, especially the developing nations. With the introduction of the open door policy in the late 1970s by Premier Deng Xiao Ping, China has embraced international trade and boasted double-digit growth rates for many consecutive years. In fact, China has successfully elevated more than 300 million people out of poverty from 2005 to 2009 alone. The pragmatic and strategic industrialisation of China to become the world's factory has not only provided millions of jobs, it has also made the "Made in China" label world-famous. Such strategic economic policy is definitely a worthy model for developing nations such as Indonesia and African states who aspire to achieve similar economic growth and prosperity. What makes China's successful industrialisation better than America's stagnant economy, is the effective and strong support of domestic firms and government-linked institutions that invest greatly in infrastructure and education, allowing for not just actual economic growth in the present, but paving the way for potential growth into the future.

Notably, China has announced that it will invest billions of dollars to build an extensive and efficient railway system to support the growth of inland cities and states. The government is also an avid supporter of research and development in China, providing generous grants and scholarships to universities and firms alike.

Such examples of strategic government policy are not only instrumental in promoting economic prosperity, but also crucial in nurturing civic society and as an effective social leveller. Unlike in the United States, where immense government debt has forced politicians to cut down on important investments in education, science and healthcare, China's Communist Party understands the need to implement policies that raise people's quality of life, as evident in the recent discussion in the 12th 5-year plan for 2011 to 2015. Therefore, the pragmatic social policy-making targeted at promoting equity and raising quality of life is evident in China, yet surprisingly lacking in the US, thus making China a better role model for many parts of the world who are seeing the rich get richer as the poor become poorer.

Politically, China may also be seen as "better" in terms of some of its foreign policy strategies. Notably, China largely adopts a non-confrontational attitude in dealing with other nations, as well as a non-imperialistic mindset as compared to the US. As some critics have pointed out, Western cultural imperialism has partly resulted in an anti-American backlash that is partially responsible for the surge in radical Islamism and destructive terrorism. The US also notoriously engaged in the Iraq war, which has only brought further detriment to the lives of the residents in Iraq. Hence, such clumsy foreign policy acts serve as a good lesson and warning against nations new to the global political arena.

Of course, even as China's power grows day by day, the importance of the US as a role model cannot be discarded. Notably, this nation known for the American Dream, of the ideals of justice, liberty and equality, is still the role model of an ideal political system that many look towards. The mission of the US to promote, preserve and spread the ideals of democracy, personal freedom

and justice has made it a role model for societies living under oppression or autocratic rule. For example, the Middle East has seen popular revolts and uprisings against incumbent governments and dictators who have controlled press and individual freedoms. Although the US may not have played a direct causal role in instigating these revolts, it is nevertheless acknowledged that the people behind the revolts are fighting for their freedom and ideals of a better life; among these, many look no further than the US as a role model.

Even in China today, although attempts to emulate the Jasmine Revolution have been limited, increasing popular dissent against the iron fist of the Chinese Communist Party is evident. For example, more netizens today are choosing illegal routes to circumvent the Great Firewall of China, not just to obtain wider access to sources of information, but also as gestures of rebellion against the great press control by the government. Journalists have also become more daring in reporting “sensitive” events in small newspapers that can sneak through the grasp of the state. Hence, the press freedom and personal freedom that democracy allows in the US makes it a role model even for China itself.

Human rights is also an issue that China grapples with as compared to the US. Notably, the refusal of the Communist Party to acknowledge the Nobel Peace Prize for activist Liu Xiao Bo only serves to show the severity of the problem. Workers’ welfare is also a great social concern, with firms exploiting workers with minimal wages and inhumane working hours, as seen in the spate of suicides by employees of Foxconn. The US, on the other hand, often prides itself as the ambassador for human rights, not just in China, but also other parts of the world. For example, the US has been a key proponent for sanctions against rogue nations like North Korea and Myanmar. In these instances, the US would probably make a better role model than China.

However, it must be noted that in our globalised, interconnected and interdependent world today, there can be no one good role model for the world. No country is perfect, and China and the US both have positive and negative characteristics that are worth learning from. In fact, it seems that the roles of China and the US as models are complementary. Individually, neither can be a good role model in every aspect, but together, the world has much to learn from both of them – economic and social policy in China, as well as human rights, democracy and civic maturity in the US.

Ultimately though, role models are just simply that. Each country and society is unique in its own circumstance, culture and people. Hence, caution and prudence must be taken into account when considering and learning from the experiences of any country – not just China and America. Governments must also realise that other countries can also be good role models, and that even China and the US have much to learn from each other and everyone else. Therefore, what is important is not a false dichotomy between China and the US, but interdependence and sharing on a global scale for all, by all.

Marker’s comments:

Emily, this essay has critical insights that were well analysed and the organisation of the ideas was critical in bringing out a cohesive and well-written essay.



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 13

Is China a better role model for the world than America?

Mao Ruijia | 11S06L

Much of global politics today seems to be dominated by the interaction between two heavyweights – one, an unchallenged superpower and the other, a fast-rising regional power that shows promise of challenging the former for global supremacy in the foreseeable future. Indeed, such a seemingly-inevitable conflict brings forth the issue of the superiority in the very different ways these two countries – America and China – operate, especially for developing countries hoping to adopt a tried and tested formula of national development. It currently seems that America is beginning to decay and flounder under its own excesses while China is rapidly growing with few signs of stopping. Such an observation might lead one intuitively to conclude the superiority of the Chinese model. This is because the robust economic growth of China has masked certain inherent weaknesses. However, I believe countries around the world would do better to emulate the American model than that of the Chinese, for both their own national interests and for the common good of all countries.

Some would argue that it is more realistic for countries to follow China's diplomatic policies of minimal intervention in the domestic affairs of other countries, focusing on their own interests, than to burden themselves with the world's problems like America, especially since few countries have the resources to match that of America. It does seem that America has overcommitted itself in various issues all over the world – from ousting dictators in Iraq and fighting Taliban insurgents in Afghanistan to applying pressure on authoritarian regimes on human rights issues like Myanmar. These efforts have not only created a heavy toll on American resources – financially, America is heavily in debt and its fiscal deficit is staggering – but also earned the ire of countries all over the world, who resent America for infringing upon their sovereignty and meddling in their domestic affairs. Countries like Britain, which have followed in the footsteps of America, and participated actively in Gulf War II and the fight against the Taliban, have seen a loss of influence in the global arena and a rise in domestic dissatisfaction, which eventually contributed to the fall of the incumbent Labour government. In contrast, by adopting a non-interventionist policy, China has gained respect and warm relations with many countries – ranging from Myanmar to Belarus to Brazil – whilst not having to bear heavy diplomatic burdens. As such, it certainly seems as though the Chinese model is preferable for countries to follow as it advances their interests.

However, such a view fails to see the broader perspective of international cooperation. The generous donations in foreign aid that America pours out each year to disaster-struck countries like Haiti and poverty-stricken countries like Yemen help in their development and allow them to develop. Although the effectiveness of development aid to poorer countries is arguable, it is certainly better than nothing. American efforts to arbitrate disputes such as between Israel and Palestine also contribute to regional stability and hence, development. While it may seem preferable for countries to adopt a policy of self-interest, it is certainly better for the world if more countries took on responsibility for global problems and help ease the uneven development that has occurred so far.

The liberal and democratic system of governance in America is also preferable to the authoritarian Chinese government as it allows for the country to better serve the interests of the people by giving them a voice in politics and promoting accountability in China. While China has liberalised socially and economically in recent years, the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) maintains a tight grip on political power, crushing all and any dissidence with an iron fist. This monopoly on power can be said to have led to the many examples of incompetent and corrupt officials, who have definitely held back the country's development. One example would be the recently deposed Rail Minister, who was able to hold onto power despite his many failures – such as a catastrophic railway accident in Shandong in 2008 and the deteriorating situation of the yearly Spring Rush when

large numbers of migrant workers return to their hometowns for Chinese New Year. Alas, it was not his incompetence but a power struggle within the CCP that brought him down. Such incompetence would not hold onto power for long in the American model – for example, the Chairman of the Federal Reserve was replaced after failing to prevent the catastrophic financial crisis of 2008 – which limits the harm they bring to the country.

Some may point to the messy politics of American elections as a sign of political instability, and claim that the Chinese system is better for it promotes stability, which is a key factor in fostering business confidence and hence economic growth, which benefits everyone. However, such stability tends to merely be a façade covered by economic prosperity. It is unsustainable because problems will surface as soon as the economy halts, which is inevitable as even China cannot sustain such a high rate of economic growth forever. Some faultlines already visible are the repression of ethnic minorities and the rural-urban divide. Egypt serves as a good case study of what could happen – once economic growth stagnated, an uprising erupted, leading to the ousting of the top leader, President Mubarak. On the other hand, the democratic process in the American world serves as a safety valve in relieving tensions and promoting long-term stability, which could explain why America still stands after 200 years and varying economic prospects – such as the Great Depression of the 1920s.

It would be unfair to say that the Chinese model is without its merits. Its economic policies are definitely better than America's growth based on credit. America is now mired in debts and this is definitely not an economic model for the world.

Ultimately, it is a matter of balance, as both models have their pros and cons. In general, it would still serve the world better if more countries came to see America as their role model rather than China, especially in the light of the increasingly globalised world today. Although China's model allows it to benefit tremendously in the short-term, in the long run it must ultimately give back to the international community. The global spread of ideas through the Internet also tends to work against authoritarian regimes. Therefore, America is a better role model for the world, and not the opposite in the name of national and international interests.

Marker's comments:

Excellent arguments – well illustrated by recent and relevant examples. Impressive!



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 14

How important is history in shaping a country's future?

Chua Shan Jee | 11A03A

The fierce resistance that met French President Nicholas Sarkozy's proposition to raise the retirement age and postpone the age at which the French can receive pensions (from 65 to 67) in 2010 sparked widespread international criticism that his move to save the debt-burdened French pension system was too little, too late. After all, the political backlash that would accompany any attempt that is perceived to undermine the age-old French welfare system has deterred many past politicians from attempting reform. From this example, one can see that history is inextricably intertwined with the present and the future, and hence is important in the sense that it should always be considered. However, in examining this issue from a social, political, economic and moral standpoint, while history may be influential in determining a country's priorities, it is sometimes a necessary but insufficient condition for real change. In addition, a dogmatic adherence to history without making necessary adjustments for changing contexts can only reduce history to an irrelevance in shaping a country's future.

History is significant in shaping a country's future by reminding a country of certain priorities that can never be compromised in the quest for economic progress. In Singapore, our history of being forced into a state of independence after being spurned by Malaysia, and our subsequent struggle to establish ourselves as a nation has ingrained a mindset of alertness in our government, and an awareness of our vulnerability. This acute sense of vulnerability is the reason we continually seek to develop a source of homegrown water supply, through research into NEWater and desalination technologies, in order that Malaysia can never hold us hostage or gain an upper hand in our bilateral relations by virtue of our dependence on their water supply. The role that history plays in the governance of Singapore both today and for the future is best summed up by Minister Mentor Lee, in an interview for his latest book, *'Hard Truths'*, in which he reiterated the importance of youth in Singapore realising the fact that we can never afford to rest on our laurels.

In addition, history serves as an important marker that guides the direction of a country's future growth. In Germany, there is a strong sense of collective guilt over the atrocities the Germans committed during the Holocaust, and this desire to never repeat the mistakes of their elders is manifested not only in the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin, which occupies prime land and is fully funded by taxpayers' money, but also by strict Holocaust Denial Laws. This consciousness of the need for inclusiveness and integration is exemplified by German Chancellor Angela Merkel's admission that "multiculturalism has failed" in Germany. Merkel's frank admission, the first among leaders of the European Union (EU) states, marked the start of genuine national soul-searching over this issue, a necessary prelude to any political change in the future. In this instance, history serves as a reliable guide by which countries can chart their future growth.

Moreover, historical events legitimise certain modes of societal action that are often instrumental in influencing the policies a country adopts. This is most clearly seen in France, where the ability of both public and private workers to go on strike without having their jobs threatened is a constitutional right. The success of the famous May 1968 strikes, which were driven by the youth's discontent with the state of affairs under General Charles de Gaulle's regime, cemented the reputation of strikes as both a legitimate and effective way to show one's discontent and advocate policy changes. In spite of the arguably hit-and-miss nature of mass protests in France, they have indubitably contributed as a form of check-and-balance for government policies, and played a part in France's robust civil society. The example of France shows that history often has a part to play in the development of societal actions that serve as avenues along which current and future government policies can be contested.

However, historical occurrences and contexts may sometimes prove necessary but insufficient in motivating citizens' efforts to effect change in their country. Dictatorships in Arabic nations such as Tunisia, Egypt and Libya enjoyed decades of relatively peaceful rule despite their questionable treatment of their citizens, and it was arguably the advent of technology and the Internet that first generated the spark of discontent that eventually resulted in a successful, full-fledged revolution. Similarly, North Koreans endured decades of deprivation and suffering under Kim Il-Sung's and Kim Jong-Il's rule, but it was only when some in North Korea managed to gain access to foreign television broadcasts and, a minority, the Internet, that they began to harbour thoughts of defecting to South Korea. As these examples show, the oppressive histories of the Arabic and North Korean people required the availability of comparison that technological advancement provided in order for there to be discontent and for genuine change to be started.

Furthermore, the dogmatic insistence on certain policies as a result of history may actually impede a country's progress rather than contribute to its vision of the future. In Singapore, in the post-'65 years, the government justified its crackdown on Communists, through programmes such as Operation Coldstore by saying that Singapore, being a nascent state, needed political stability in order to survive. In the same vein, the government defended its paternalistic approach to governance with the claim that Singapore was only a democracy in its infancy, and hence required such 'heavy-handed' governance for its economic growth. While Singapore may indeed have been a fledgling nation-state in its post-'65 years, there is a need for both the government and the public to recognise that now that Singapore has attained economic prosperity, being ranked 2nd on the 2010 Legatum Prosperity Index for Per Capita GDP, it is time to allow our civil society to correspondingly mature. The withdrawal of political freedoms, such as the act of gazetting The Online Citizen as a political organisation, can no longer be excused as being for the good of our nation; it is important for formerly cherished mindsets to evolve alongside Singapore's growth as a nation. In this respect, history can be said to be unimportant to a country's future if our mindsets do not align with societal changes over the years.

Ultimately, history can serve as either a driver of or an obstacle to economic restructuring for the future. Compare the economies of Germany (the loser of World War 2) and Britain (one of the winners of the war): While Britain's economy is currently languishing due to the fact that much-needed structural reforms have not been adopted, Germany's economy is flourishing, with an unemployment rate of 7.3% that is the envy of most EU nations. Losing the war opened all the economic and social institutions in Germany to change, as nothing was deemed untouchable. Conversely, Britain's victory nurtured a culture of complacency and many necessary reforms were not enacted due to bureaucratic red-tape. These two examples illustrate that history is important in shaping a country's future, as the outcomes of history served as enablers or obstacles for economic restructuring that would eventually have ramifications for the countries' futures.

Indeed, history has proven to be instrumental in formulating a country's priorities, legitimising new and effective modes of societal action and driving or inhibiting economic restructuring. However, one must bear in mind that in some instances, history is a necessary but insufficient condition for societal change, and that an over-fixation on history without consideration of the evolving state of society can render history irrelevant in shaping a country's future.

Marker's comments:

Shan Jee, I enjoyed reading this. Good discussions here. You are a mature writer and you have provided a holistic picture of the topic. One point to consider: governments who cling on to the past can bring a country down. E.g. Japan: the economy was in the doldrums for the past ten years, and too many changes in leadership resulted in no set directions and Japan not adapting to global changes.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 15

How important is history in shaping a country's future?

Yeow Yuet Cheong | 11S03G

The historian E.H. Carr once said that "history is an unending dialogue between the past and the present," with the people of the present constantly looking back to the path once trodden by their predecessors or themselves for inspiration or guidance for their actions today. Indeed, it is these very actions, shaped by our past experiences, that affect our future. Similarly, we often see pockets of history manifested in a country's governance and the worldview of its people. From the individual to communities and to the nation, the past constantly leaves its imprint and plays an essential role in the moulding of a country's future.

Detractors may say that a country should never dwell too long on its past, but focus on current trends to decide its future course of action. In fact, many events that took place in the past can no longer be applied to the present due to the contrasting socio-political, economic and even cultural contexts between the past and the present. For example, Singapore would not be wise to parallel its highly successful racial integration policy in the 1960s to 1980s with its policies today by virtue of the fact that the current population is made up of a larger number of foreign workers, who need a different kind of integration with the rest of the Singaporean citizens as compared to the integration policies Singapore undertook when it was attempting to gel the Chinese, Malays and Indians together at the start of post-war Singapore. Many critics also claim that a country should always live in the here and now, making decisions in the light of people's demands and in consideration for the people's welfare in the future. Indeed, history does not play a part in certain decisions that shape a country's future. The Singapore government's decision to adopt the 'first-past-the-post' system as opposed to proportional representation was one that was made when Singapore had no experience running a government for an independent country; the decision to adopt such a system was born more out of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his team's political astuteness and their ability to pre-empt future scenarios than any learning from history, as there was "hardly any other nation in the world at that time which had a political system of governance that could suit a unique country like Singapore, what with its population demographics, racial makeup, and geographic space," as written in Lee's biography, *'From Third World to First'*. As such, it is evident that history is not omnipresent in the making of certain decisions that would shape a country's future.

Yet history, being a black-and-white record of the many events that occurred in a country's past, serves as a constant reminder of the good and the bad decisions made, the mistakes and how we should go about correcting them. Germany, for example, can never forget its grotesque past of the Nazi regime, and will forever live in the shadow of the heinous acts of crime and bloodshed committed by Hitler and his Nazi party. Today, Berlin is coming to terms with its ugly past, the country immersing herself in a sense of collective guilt seen tangibly in numerous memorials, such as the Jewish memorial located on prime ground in the city of Berlin, and intangibly in the mentality of Germans today. The school syllabus constantly reminds students of the gruesome acts committed in Germany. In the case of Germany, history serves as a powerful tool in moulding the country's worldview and their collective progress in the world. As a reminder of the authoritarian regime under Hitler, the country now adopts a political system which is made up of five constitutional bodies, including the Bundesrat and the Bundestag, each acting as a check and balance against the other. Policies are carefully formulated and the government is constantly on its toes to prevent the seizing of power by an individual in the party, having been reminded of how Hitler once did so years ago. This contributes to the democracy present in Germany, where every citizen has a voice in politics. By imprinting itself firmly in the minds of individuals and leaders of the nation, the ugly history of Germany serves as a beautiful lesson for the people to avoid making the same mistake and approach the world with collective remorse, acknowledging the sins of their predecessors and ensuring that these crimes do not repeat themselves.

Past events also determine many of our actions today in more direct ways than expected. In China, the burning of books and killing of teachers and intellectuals during the Cultural Revolution have led many to speculate that it was this event in history that led to the loss of morals in modern-day Chinese, as seen in the unethical use of melamine in milk powder for babies, placing cardboard in buns, all for the sake of maximising the profits of their businesses and earning quick money. The wave of protests in the Middle East that followed after a Tunisian man burnt himself to death in the streets after allegedly being harassed by a policeman could not have been ignited without the history of oppression the people had suffered under their authoritarian leaders - Mubarak of Egypt, Gaddafi of Libya, etc. The protests have marked an unprecedented revolution in which many nations in the Middle East are overthrowing their governments and heading towards a brighter future and a fledgling democracy, where people will have their rights represented and no longer face the opposition and human rights abuses that marked the many years under authoritarian regimes.

In conclusion, history manifests itself in every individual. The common events that took place in the past leads to the present mindsets of people, which in turn affect the country's future and the direction it heads towards ahead.

Marker's comments:

You clearly ran out of time – which is a pity because you appear to have more to say with regard to this topic. Good attempt, nonetheless.



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 16

To what extent is nature valued in your country?

Soh Sze Hui Brenda | 11S07B

Nature has always been portrayed as a gift to mankind, and is seen as something we should treasure and appreciate. However, as the world progresses at such a rapid pace, the perception of nature in many countries has changed: once seen as a blessing, nature is now viewed as something disposable, and often, even something to be exploited or harnessed for some sort of practical gain. In a country like Singapore, where land is scarce and resources limited, the notion of conserving nature and its beauty is still of great importance, but it is only valued to the extent that it does not hinder but instead spurs economic growth and brings value to our nation.

In Singapore, there have been considerable efforts by the government to protect our natural environment. The presence of well-maintained nature reserves, parks and green areas such as reservoirs proves that Singapore does indeed value nature and is willing to pour resources into conserving it. There are also existing organisations such as the Singapore Environmental Council (SEC), which oversees our local environment, and the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA), which ensures the welfare of the animals in Singapore. It would be ludicrous and naïve to believe that the sole, genuine purpose of the government in such efforts is merely to preserve nature. In actual fact, it is a ubiquitous view that the Singaporean government, consisting of intelligent leaders who have produced a globally recognised “economic miracle”, would definitely keep in mind the economic gain that the act of preserving nature can potentially bring to Singapore. Nature reserves such as the Sungei Buloh Nature Reserve are developed and maintained for the primary purpose of attracting tourists and maintaining our image as a nature-loving, environmentally-friendly nation. Furthermore, the conservation of nature in Singapore also has much educational value. Besides tourists, many of the visitors to the nature reserves in Singapore are students who are brought there to study the flora and fauna. Yes, it is undeniable that nature is valued and hence protected, but it would be more accurate to say that it is valued only to the extent that it brings practical gain, in this case educational or economic worth to society.

Some may defend Singapore’s seemingly pragmatic and inauthentic treatment of nature by arguing that the fact that Singapore is willing to expend funds and sacrifice precious land space for the sake of nature, regardless of the real intent, is commendable in itself, and could even be even considered a great feat for a resource-limited country like Singapore. Yet, these supporters have failed to look at the bigger picture and realise that the amount of money and resources spent on conserving nature is peanuts compared to the large amounts of time, effort, labour, land and financial resources that have been channelled towards other projects that are more economically profitable. For example, the cost of setting up the Integrated Resorts works out to be a rather sizeable figure, but the government had no qualms about building it despite some expression of disagreement by the public, due to the financial returns it would bring. As compared to such economically viable areas, what is spent on conserving nature is nothing. Therefore, comparatively speaking, our country values nature to a small extent.

When determining the extent to which nature is valued in Singapore, analysing the efforts of the government is insufficient; efforts by the government in valuing nature will be stultified if Singaporeans do not also treasure the value of nature. Admittedly, there are notable incidences where Singaporeans have demonstrated their dedication and passion for nature. This includes nature activists such as those who petitioned against the capture of a blue whale to be held captive for public viewing, as well as those who fought adamantly against the destruction of Chek Jawa. Even young people have stepped up and started to advocate environmental causes, for instance, the protection of wild monkeys in local parks and reservoirs. While these individuals should be applauded for their significant contributions to the natural environment in Singapore, it is unfortunate that a large proportion of Singaporeans do not share a heart for nature, or at

least do not show it in their daily lives. Having grown up in a highly pragmatic, individualistic and materialistic era, the value of nature has diminished for many, and many Singaporeans have a natural propensity to put themselves over the environment, and disregard the consequences that their actions may have on nature. This is elucidated by the amount of litter scattered across beaches and within canals and drains in Singapore, which has caused much pollution that is detrimental to nature. Apparently, Singaporeans in general are apathetic towards nature and thus, with the exception of certain groups of people, most do not perceive nature as something of value.

On the whole, it is an indisputable fact that nature is valued in Singapore by the government and also by individuals. However, this only holds true to the extent that valuing nature does not pose an obstacle to economic success, and can instead be of pragmatic use to Singapore. Also, currently, nature is only valued by a few individuals; the vast majority of Singaporeans have shown otherwise. In a fast-moving nation like Singapore, there is perhaps a greater need to appreciate and value nature not just for its potential benefits, but more importantly, as part of our home, Mother Earth, and seek to champion more environmental causes and translate our concern for nature into concrete actions to preserve the beauty of nature.

Marker's comments:

Brenda, this essay shows that you don't have to write an excessively lengthy piece to do well. Your arguments show logical development, balance and maturity of thought from start to finish. Keep it up!



General Paper Year 6 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 17

To what extent is nature valued in your country?

Tan Wen Yun | 11A03A

Recalling the public criticism of the Singapore government's plans to clear Chek Jawa, (a wetland area rich in marine biodiversity) for military development purposes, as well as the recent Saturday spread in The Straits Times on the situation of trees planted along roads and buildings, nature is certainly not far from this concrete jungle of buildings and more buildings. Nature, in fact, holds far more significance for Singapore, not only as a fundamental aspect of our "Garden City" image, but also as a part of Singapore life, and its value is manifested in various forms.

Critics say that nature is hardly valued at all in Singapore due to Singapore's emphasis on economic development, which has indeed taken a toll on our natural environment. Like the aforementioned Chek Jawa (which could have been destroyed if not for immense public concern and criticism), large areas of primary forests, swamps and wetlands have been cleared to give way to residential and industrial development as Singapore experienced her rapid transformation from a small sleepy port to the bustling financial and services hub she is today. Such development has paid little or even no heed at all to the devastating impacts inflicted upon the biodiversity, endangering certain species native to Singapore that are of great research and historical value. In addition, economic activities left unchecked have left an indelible mark on the natural environment. For example, due to extensive water pollution off Jurong Island – a global petrochemical hub developed to great success as a collaboration between Jurong Town Corporation and the Singapore government – the rich offshore marine biodiversity has been badly harmed, resulting in the loss of many corals that used to thrive there. As such, the insignificance of nature in view of the pursuit of economic development and its benefits can be said to justify views that the value of nature in Singapore is little or even non-existent.

On a more individual level, the amount of litter that dots the natural landscape in parks, beaches and nature reserves is a startling reminder that Singaporeans have little concern for the impact of such irresponsible actions on the natural environment. Not only is such littering an eyesore, it also poses dangers to animals that may unknowingly consume plastics or Styrofoam bits, choking to death. Apart from the direct harm such acts may cause, the act of throwing a piece of tissue paper or plastic wrapping into the bushes, or even into the waters at a mangrove forest, seems to suggest that nature, to most Singaporeans, is simply a "dumping ground", a detached entity that does not matter, or even more bluntly, just a mixture of living organisms that are of less value than human beings. Such mindsets drive even further the point that nature is simply not valued in Singapore.

However, I believe that nature is indeed valued in Singapore, and this can be seen in active conservation and preservation efforts on the part of the government and many passionate volunteers who seek to protect and enhance nature in Singapore. Various organisations like the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity, Nature Society and the National Parks Board work together on initiatives that build on existing nature conservation efforts, such as the various public parks (Botanic Gardens, for example) and nature reserves, like the Sungei Buloh Wetland Reserve. Another recent addition to the list of nature conservation areas is the green corridor that runs alongside the railway from Tanjong Pagar station to Malaysia. Discovered to hold a vast variety of biodiversity, the government is now collaborating with various nature conservation organisations in planning the development of a nature reserve there. This move by the government does counter critical views of the government shelving nature for economic development as it did in the past, and demonstrates just one aspect of how nature's value is not only significant, but has also increased over time.

In addition, such conservation efforts are well-matched by education about the natural environment and biodiversity, that serve not only to widen knowledge of the biological field, but also to further reiterate and share the value of nature to all. The act of nature education itself is already a clear indicator of the value of nature held by Singaporeans. Nature enthusiasts aside, schools frequently organise field trips to the Singapore Zoo, Jurong Bird Park, the various nature reserves and even the recently established HortPark at Kent Ridge that features state-of-the-art research facilities specifically geared towards horticultural research. Volunteer-guided tours are also made available to the general public at nature reserves, aiding in the appreciation of Singapore's natural environment.

Even in the highly urbanised environment in Singapore, there has been an increasing demand for nature to be integrated as part of structural development. Nature is now increasingly viewed as essential to a quality living environment, be it the work place or home. Aside from the decades-old practice of roadside tree-planting and flowers at overhead pedestrian bridges implemented by the National Parks Board, recent residential developments such as the Punggol waterfront-living themed residential estate or the Sengkang boardwalk show a greater integration of nature into urban environments beyond the minimum requirement of having at least one public park per estate. The greater use of vertical planting, an obvious example being the School Of The Arts located in the city area, and the increased inclusion of sky gardens in building design, such as the well known Sky Park that sits atop the Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort, are also other prominent ways in which urban planners, architects and engineers have tried to bring real nature back into the concrete jungle. Though some may dismiss these acts as part of a soon-fading trend arising out of the growing awareness of eco-friendliness, I believe that it is more of a growing realisation and appreciation for the value of nature and its forms as a crucial and welcome juxtaposition to the steel, reinforced structures of human creation that surround us every day.

The economic value of nature, in particular tourism, cannot be denied as well. In upholding Singapore's image as a "Garden City", the government has undertaken much effort in the greening of various areas beyond active nature conservation initiatives, in a bid to reshape the definition of "Garden City" beyond decorative roadside nature to one that is more wholesome, one that encompasses nature as part of culture and lifestyle. One instance of this is the complete devotion of a large area in the Botanic Gardens to the development of an orchid garden, which exhibits the many species of orchid around the world and most importantly, our national flower, the Vanda Miss Joaquim. In addition, the orchid garden also regularly features hybrid orchids or new species of orchids developed by local researchers, some of which are created to mark special occasions such as visits from distinguished political figures of the international community. Singapore is also a key player in the horticulture industry, in particular pertaining to orchids and various species developed locally.

A more pertinent example that marries nature and urban environments as a reflection of an area's history is Orchard Road. Also perceived as a strategy in reimagining the shopping district, glass panels depicting various natural images of flora and fauna, the installation of poles that utilise vertical planting on pedestrian walkways, as well as the choice of trees on Orchard Road (such as nutmeg) are seemingly distinct initiatives that have been put together as a means of representing the history of Orchard Road as an area with many plantations in the past. Not only have the additional greens provided aesthetic delight, their successful integration into the Orchard Road scene represents yet another step forward in the enhancement of nature's value in Singapore.

Singapore was not always a concrete jungle – the coexistence of nature and people formed a huge part of the childhoods of many Singaporeans of the older generations. On the other hand, young Singaporeans, despite a decreased exposure to nature, are not detached at all from nature but are even more attached to nature due to the perceived lack of it in the modern Singapore we see today. It is this combined yearning for the presence of nature that further reinforces its value in society, not just as roadside trees or public parks but also as part of architecture, enriching the structural fabric of Singapore's development with rich hues of green, that signal a greater integration of natural

and human environments. The significance of nature penetrates all aspects of Singapore, be it the physical environment, economic initiatives or the historical and cultural context of places. Thus, I strongly believe that nature is greatly valued in Singapore, and its value will only be enhanced and increased as Singapore transforms into a more all-rounded, beautiful and competent “Garden City” that catches the attention of all on the international platform as a liveable city of vibrancy and colour.

Marker's comments:

Thoroughly discussed. Relevant examples used – from buildings, architecture to nature reserves. Good job.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 18

‘Women in the developed world have never had it so good.’ Do you agree?

Tiffany Seah | 11S03E

“Not until the woman takes her rightful place as an equal beside man, not just by the fireside but in council of the nation, will the world see the perfect union between man and woman and true gender equality achieved.” This statement by leading feminist of her time, Susan B. Anthony, may have seemed but an unattainable ideal in the past, mocked by men as sheer daydreaming. Yet, today, as a product of the feminist movements Anthony and other like-minded feminists led in the past, we are seeing a paradigm shift in society, from an authoritarian, patriarchal society, to a more egalitarian, democratic one. Some hail this age as one in which women are accorded equal rights and privileges as their male counterparts, commenting rather loosely that “women have never had it so good”. On the other hand, those in relentless pursuit of female empowerment, while acknowledging that blatantly sexist laws and practices have been abolished, opine that gender inequality still persists as a subtle undercurrent in our society today. Indeed, while amendments to constitutions worldwide have made it seem that women today are better positioned than their peers in the past to live life as man’s equal in the economic, political and social spheres, this essay argues that the principles of gender inequality and female discrimination are so deeply entrenched in the workings of even modern society, that the claim that women in the developed world have it better today than at any other point in history, is a highly debatable one.

Shifts in cultural precepts allowing the emancipation of the woman from the domestic sphere make it seem as if women in the developed world today are better off than they were in the past. Undeniably, the pains taken by feminists to promulgate the concept of female empowerment through history is bearing fruit today, as women enjoy an expansion in their roles in society. Once under oppression by a repressive patriarchal society, women today have fought against subjugation in the domestic sphere and triumphed, rendering the proverb “a woman’s place is in the home” seemingly obsolete. Yet, closer analysis of the division of labour in the household between men and women reveal another side of this fairytale ending. Maternal instincts, the natural biological inclination of women to be the nurturers of the home, still largely predominate the mindsets of modern-day women, and guide the way households in developed societies are run. It remains unquestionable for men to assume the role of breadwinner, responsible for bringing home the bacon. Women of the developed world today can do so too, but on condition that they are able to juggle the demands of household chores and nurturing of the children at the same time, revealing a deep-set bias against the role of the woman in the home, as one primarily responsible for managing chores such as cooking of the aforementioned bacon for her husband and children. Studies have shown that in dual-income families, women are still subject to a large majority of the household chores, doing an approximated twenty hours of household chores as compared to the measly ten that men are wont to do. Sociologists have also pointed out that the nature of men’s chores, such as washing the car or tending to the yard, is sporadic, with an element of leisure. In contrast, women remain responsible for the backbreaking work such as cooking and cleaning, which these sociologists have labelled as “repetitive, routine and mundane”. Given such a juxtaposition of the division of labour between men and women in the households of the developed world today, those who prefer to see it as the “accumulation of labour” can be forgiven. The fact that women’s role in the household has evolved negligibly from the past, albeit with the added benefit of being allowed to work, make the claim that women have never had it so good a dubious, and perhaps myopic one, in light of the fact that women of today may be suffering more than ever, given the added burden of being employed.

Some claim that the breaking of the revered glass ceiling by women such as Doris Fisher, CEO of GAP Inc., signals the rise of the woman in the labour force, as never seen before in the past. Amendments to the US constitution that state that “on no account will anyone be discriminated against in the course of employment on the basis of gender” compound the widely held opinion that women of today are enjoying an impartiality in terms of employment, that essentially makes them equal in the eyes of the employer. By extension, this indicates that the door of the labour

force that was once tightly shut to women has been opened, and women of today now have access to opportunities to succeed in life like no other. Sadly, these changes to the law and constitution may be but amendments made in black and white, and are in actuality ineffectual in taking gender equality in the workplace from the legal statutes of society to the real lives of women in the labour force today. Women today still face subtle discrimination in the workplace, from hiring practices to ease of promotion. The term “women’s work” is still being used to refer to occupations such as nurses or secretaries, implying a devaluation of occupations typically associated with women. Such devaluation is condemnable, as it depresses women’s wages and circumscribes their opportunities and scope. Women today still face implicit societal pressure to take on roles deemed suitably feminine, in order to be able to succeed in society. Employers in traditionally “masculine” sectors such as engineering and science, still adopt discriminating hiring practices to prevent women from invading these sectors. An example of the inequality still manifest in the workplace of developed society may be this striking statistic: Ninety percent of the world’s billionaires are men, and only a few are women of self-made (versus inherited) fortune, Doris Fisher being one of them. Yes, women have been granted access to the management and contribution to the economy, but in between homemaking and deal making, juggling the stresses of the workplace, it is no wonder that women today remain resigned to their inability to penetrate top-earning sectors of the economy, throwing doubt upon the claim that women today have never had it so good.

Another way in which the women of today seem to have it much better than their counterparts in history can also be found in terms of the education that women now have full access to. Once treated as chattel or as mere goods to be traded by marriage, women today now find themselves being bestowed the opportunity to be educated, the same way men have been for ages past. No longer in the position of the yearning girls at the window watching their brothers leave for school, women today have received the right to education and are using it to their advantage. A survey by the University Colleges and Admissions Services (UCAS) in the UK showed that females did almost thirty percent better than their male counterparts in science and math, subjects traditionally perceived as “male strengths”. However, one should not be so quick as to pass this off as an absolute improvement in the position of women in the education sector today. It was recently revealed that Ivy League universities in the United States have been practising affirmative action for American males, in order to maintain certain gender ratios in faculties such as medicine and engineering. Even in Singapore, a country considered developed by a majority of indices, our esteemed National University of Singapore practises an unwritten rule of selecting more males than females in the medical faculty to create a gender ratio in favour of males. When questioned, the administration of the medicine faculty defends its approach, citing the reproduction status of women as liabilities in their future as doctors. Such blatant sexism undermines the advancements made by women in achieving rights to an equal education, as it deprives women of the very opportunities that they struggled for years in the education system to attain – entry into prestigious courses once considered exclusively for men.

Judging from superficial trends observed in the domestic, economic and education spheres of the developed world today, it would indeed seem as if modern women are at the peak of the fight for gender equality. However, the waters of female discrimination run deep and are much harder to eliminate than is widely perceived. Social and cultural stigmatisation of women remains arguably rampant in communities, thus making a case for modern-day feminists. Indeed, their job is not done. That improvements have been made can constitute encouragement to these people, for the labour of their ancestors for the empowerment of women has not been for nought. Beyond the question of whether women today have never had it so good, we must go on to question if women can have it even better. Just as there have been triumphs in the fight against racism, apartheid and other Goliaths of discrimination, the end of gender inequality is one definitely not out of reach, and is one that we should all continually strive towards, in hope of achieving that “perfect union of man and woman” that Susan B. Anthony speaks of with such hope.

Marker’s comments:

Tiffany, I enjoyed reading this mature discussion. Relevant context and good use of personal voice. Great job! Well written, though at times a little dismissive of the progress made.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 19

'Retirement is a redundant word today.' To what extent is this true?

Amanda Tai | 11A01C

Famed economist John Maynard Keynes once said, "When the facts change, I change my mind, what do you do sir?" Indeed, the world we inhabit today is vastly different from that of the past in which retirement prospects were nearly a given. All around the world the age of retirement is being raised, instead of lowered, thus accounting for the increasing sentiment on the ground that "retirement is a redundant word today". In my opinion, that is a harsh and unfair statement to make, as while we do see a decreasing trend in the instances of retirement, retirement cannot be said to be obsolete.

Governments worldwide have put measures in place to facilitate their citizens' retirement plans. This is perhaps best illustrated by Singapore's establishment of the Central Provident Fund, otherwise known as CPF. Every month, a certain percentage of an employed citizen's salary is channelled into his personal fund so as to allow him to accumulate sufficient 'reserves' to tide him through his years of retirement. The fact that the government has instituted this scheme seems to suggest that the government has its citizens' retirement plans in mind. There is a general consensus amongst Singaporeans that the CPF is to their benefit, as reflected by the lack of sustained backlash towards this paternalistic initiative, because to them, retiring in the future is not merely an option, but a very real destination.

However, it is not difficult to see why retirement might be thought of as an increasingly "redundant" concept in this day and age as more and more people choose to extend their working years and postpone their retirement.

The world is still recovering from the worst economic recession since the Great Depression, which affected all economies all around the globe. In our world of scarcity, this can only mean one thing – rising costs of living. Surely in the face of such circumstances, retirement would be a dim, shadowy prospect in the heads of middle-aged employees with families to feed. Furthermore, age brings with it medical ailments, like rheumatism, high blood pressure and weaker immunity to assorted germs and diseases. Therefore, curative medicines then become a necessity in the lives of these people, an additional expense. Should they give up their job, they will put their families' financial security as well as their personal health and wellness at risk; thus to these individuals, the idea of retirement as a "redundant word" would gain currency as it is a very hazy prospect indeed.

Additionally, the current economic climate has seen governments dole out fiscal measures so as to reduce or remove the deficit incurred by increased government spending in the immediate aftermath of the economic crisis in the years 2008 and 2009. Fiscal austerity would signal bad news for welfare states, like Sweden and Denmark, whose retired citizens depend on monthly payouts to get by. Thus, in Denmark, we see an unusual sudden expansion of the labour market, as ex-carpenters and shoemakers emerge from the dormancy of their retirement and begin to solicit for business again, if only to make ends meet. Government handouts are hence shown to be clearly inadequate to fulfil retirees' living expenditure. Retirement, therefore, is seemingly impracticable if one wants to cement one's survival in these hard economic times.

It is important too to acknowledge that the world is being plagued by the issue of an aging, as well as aged population. In Japan, the ratio of youth to middle-aged people is a startling 9:1. This means that for every nine retirees, there will only be a single youth to support them. Beneath the polished veneer of Japanese society, we see that there are old folks who hold menial jobs as chambermaids and cleaning ladies simply because they have no kith or kin to speak of, and therefore cannot afford not to work. Unfortunate social circumstances are thus shown to relegate the possibility of retirement to the backburners of, in this case, the aged Japanese worker's mind.



On a lighter note, retirement is a less common concept nowadays purely because we see middle-aged workers assuming incredibly important positions in society. In the past, the late fifties used to be the target age for retirement, but in recent decades, people are taking up the mantle of leadership or roles as key personnel upon hitting that very age bracket. Much hype surrounded the fact that President Obama, then aged 47, was one of the youngest in the history of American presidents. This was because most of his predecessors had all been in their fifties or sixties at the time of their presidency. In Singapore, the Cabinet reinstated Lee Kuan Yew as Senior Minister, after his retirement from his role as Prime Minister, and then as Minister Mentor, followed by a role as a senior adviser to the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation (GIC) upon his retirement from his previous position. Thus, because political leaders play such a prominent role in our lives, their relative seniority in terms of age has led us to distance the concept of retirement from that of age, which many feel, is just a number. The same man, Lee Kuan Yew, allegedly remarked that he would keep working till the day he dies. If his views are reflective of that of his generation, then it is no wonder if many hardly consider retiring at all.

In sum, it is blasé and untrue to opine that “retirement is a redundant word today”. The essay has shown that the instances of retirement are reduced because the economic climate simply does not permit them to indulge in such a luxury, and not because they do not entertain that thought. I am not proposing that people have begun to regard retirement as an outdated concept but that there has been a shift in societal perception of this phenomenon. No longer do people conflate the concepts of retirement and age; in fact, their rejection of this generalisation connotes a positive step towards a more inclusive, open-minded society.

Marker’s comments:

Interesting essay: you have taken me on a journey – not a lengthy journey; yet it is relevant and engaging. You have a strong command of the language.

Good use of personal voice and very persuasive too. Very inclusive essay.

Some lack of clarity where definition of “redundant” is concerned.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 20

'Big business cannot be trusted.' Discuss.

Adi Chew | 11A01A

A deep mistrust of large enterprises has existed for a long time, since the Industrial Revolution. The evil corporation has become a significant part of our culture and consciousness, leading many to decry its increasing power, just as people did during the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the near-exclusive focus of these companies on profit maximisation and their ability to get away with unscrupulous practices due to their size do seem to justify a fundamental suspicion of big businesses, both of their products and of their practices. Even so, I believe that the consumers will eventually learn of unscrupulous manufacturing practices, and that big business can be trusted as it is in the interest of profit to be trustworthy, especially if governmental oversight is strong.

Every firm seeks profit maximisation as a key, if not absolute, goal. However, unlike small firms which could conceivably be founded by passionate individuals who consider their desire to meet a need or fulfil some altruistic aim as another goal, large corporations tend to involve a great number of diverse and often dispassionate individuals with profit as their sole venturing goal. Therefore, the motive for large corporations to engage in unscrupulous acts that increase short-run profit is stronger. For instance, the stakeholders of the Sanlu Corporation were not motivated by a certain desire to provide wholesome dairy products to the Chinese. Rather, the panoply of stakeholders, including New Zealand firm Fonterra, were motivated by a desire to maximise profit from the relatively untapped Chinese dairy market. This gave them the incentive to engage in the profit-maximising measure of melamine "enhancement", which lowered the need for protein powder and hence costs of production, and increased profit. This is less likely to happen in a small independent firm whose founder is more likely to consider the altruistic aim of supplying quality milk. This increased emphasis on profit maximisation makes big business inherently untrustworthy.

Big business is not only inherently more motivated to engage in unscrupulous profit-maximising behaviour, but is also more able to evade detection. Its sheer scale enables it to employ more creative and effective means of cover-up and deception, keeping consumers in the dark. Enron was able to maintain its fraud partly because of its ability to use its vast financial resources to employ highly creative accountants to hide it. The creativity of these accountants is only rivalled by that of the financial engineers and consultants employed by CitiGroup and Lehman Brothers, among others, who created collateralised debt obligations and other financial instruments which basically allowed them to sell the same debt many times. This and other financial tomfoolery contributed significantly to the worst recession in eighty years. Of course these firms could not have gotten away with it without pressuring relevant agencies and lawmakers to turn a blind eye, something possible only for that size of company. The fact that big businesses can and do regularly get away with defrauding customers as such gives them impunity to commit whatever untrustworthy act they wish in the name of profit, as opposed to smaller corporations which do not enjoy such impunity. Hence, big business is fundamentally untrustworthy.

There is, however, a limit to the above argument, as it has been proven to be almost impossible to conceal such fraud indefinitely, as some consumers will ultimately sense the suspect quality of their products and blow the whistle. This was the case with Sanlu, whose contamination of milk was discovered by consumers who noticed foul-smelling urine emitted by their children. Despite the aggressive concealment measures taken, such as assault on whistleblowers, the contamination was finally exposed to national scandal. This led to the shaming of the now-bankrupt company. A similar process occurred with the US investment banks, when their customers wondered what exactly they were trading and whether it was overpriced. This led to a crisis in confidence and the collapse of Lehman and Bear Sterns, among others. This acts as a disincentive for dishonesty, as fraudulent actions result in the possibility of short-run profit but also of long-run loss of reputation and collapse.



Building upon the previous paragraph, the long-run profit motive is actually congruent with trustworthiness, as the long-run profits from good reputation act as an incentive for honesty, just as the converse is true. Trustworthiness in product quality and actions may lead to the forgoing of some short-run profit in return for a good reputation and sustainable long-run profits. Many corporations have based their business model on trustworthiness, to great success. For instance, Mercedes-Benz has touted the unsurpassed reliability of both its cars and its after-sales service, such that it was the car of choice for both Hitler and Adenauer, and remains so for countless VIPs and upper-middle class professionals in Germany and worldwide. Big businesses recognise the usefulness of this trust in maximising profit and act trustworthily to maximise their long-run profit, as Toyota has done at the lower-middle spectrum of the same market. This incentive makes big businesses likely to be trustworthy precisely because of their focus on long-run profit.

The trustworthiness of big businesses can be further reinforced as there are sound processes in place to oversee their operations. Big businesses can be trusted if the governments supervising them can be trusted as well. Strict control and harsh penalties make it unfeasible for companies, big or small, to be dishonest. For instance, Singaporean banks are relatively more trustworthy than US banks due to their capital adequacy ratios and other stringent regulations, which make it harder to engage in “creative” investment banking, and the penalties for fraudulent behaviour, such as that paid by DBS due to the “High Notes” fiasco, act as disincentives to such fraud. Similarly, Singapore’s food and beverage brands such as Prima and Khong Guan Food are regional leaders in both revenue and trust due to stringent regulations on food production. Thus big business can be trusted if government can be trusted as well.

In conclusion, it is untrue that big business cannot be trusted. While the increased profit motive and ease of escaping detection makes large enterprises more likely to commit fraudulent acts, the unlikely nature of eternal concealment and the long-run profit that can be derived from being trustworthy gives big business numerous incentives to be trustworthy, especially if government oversight is strong. Given that most big businesses are concerned with both sustainability as well as high profits, big businesses are fundamentally likely to be trustworthy as that benefits them in the long-run.

Marker’s comments:

You have made a very compelling case in this essay. Insightful ideas presented and articulated clearly and effectively. Many relevant and appropriate examples. Do bear in mind that Toyota may be an example where big businesses cannot be trusted, given the number of recalls in recent years, all because of its desire to overtake GM to be number one carmaker.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 21

'Big business cannot be trusted.' Discuss.

Dora Heng | 11S06U

The proliferation of technology and increased flow of information and people across borders has resulted in the growth and expansion of major corporations. In today's world, we see the far-reaching effects of these large companies in our everyday lives, be it the shoes we wear (Nike) or the food we eat (McDonald's). Some may argue that, given corporate social responsibility that features prominently in the ethos of big companies and how these same companies have seemingly built their businesses around consumer interest, the growth of corporations is advantageous to the public, and thus they can be depended on and trusted. However, I am of the belief that the profit-maximising objective that major businesses seek to achieve renders them untrustworthy.

Firstly, as many big businesses seek the profit-maximising objective, their pursuit of the lowest cost of production is often achieved through unethical means. Nike, a renowned multi-national corporation famous for the sports shoes it manufactures, allegedly operates numerous sweatshops in poor, developing countries like Nigeria. To produce shoes at the lowest cost possible, it has been reported that Nike pays minimal wage and forces workers to operate in terrible conditions that are often characterised by poor ventilation and lighting. Another example is the fast food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken, which employs growth-enhancing hormones to accelerate the growth of chickens. In doing so, KFC is able to increase its revenue by decreasing the length of time it takes to rear a chicken. However, this is done at the expense of the welfare of animals. These chickens that have growth hormones injected into them can grow to gigantic sizes, to the extent that their legs are unable to carry their weight. These two examples highlight how big business should not be trusted as they often employ unethical means such as exploiting workers in developed countries or abusing the rights of animals to increase their business turnover.

Secondly, to protect their industry and business, many influential firms will use their power to sway political agenda to pursue their selfish vested interest, mostly at the expense of the consumer. In the United States, political parties tend to be heavily financed by major corporations. As a result, these corporations have tremendous power over politics and they tend to influence political agenda in their favour. In the late 20th century, when the issue of climate change was brought to light by scientists, many major oil companies like BP and Exxon Mobil lobbied against the pursuit of a green agenda, questioning the validity of scientific data and discrediting the truth of global warming, so as to protect their business of providing non-renewable energy sources. It took more than a decade for global warming to be officially recognised as a threat (despite the availability of clear scientific evidence) and by then, the problem of global warming had worsened. This shows how big business should not be trusted as they often sway political agenda to protect their own selfish interest instead of working to benefit the public.

In addition, in a bid to increase demand for their products, many big businesses employ heavy advertising that aim to manipulate the public's desire for their goods. Many firms rely on extensive market research to understand the profile of their customers. At times, this information is obtained through underhanded means. There was a controversy over the privacy issues on Facebook: advertisers were able to obtain personal information and preferences from Facebook users without their knowledge or consent. Aside from intruding on individuals' privacy, advertisers also manipulate the masses by creating a construct of reality that tricks consumers into desiring their products. The materialistic society that exists today is a result of how advertisers have persuaded consumers that what they have is never enough. The use of heavy advertising that intrudes on privacy and manipulates the mindset of consumers by major corporations demonstrates the fact that most of big business cannot be trusted.



However, critics might suggest otherwise. They believe that major corporations can be relied on given that many have pursued acts of corporate social responsibility that contribute to society. Critics may cite examples such as Unilever, the world's largest producer of soap and food products, that has contributed to society by financing a school in Ghana, a poor African country. Closer to home, we have major banks such as HSBC doing their part to conserve the environment by supporting the Tree-top Walk near Henderson that allows the public to enjoy and appreciate nature. Critics argue that these acts of social responsibility demonstrate how big corporations have the welfare of the public at heart and can be depended on. However, to believe that companies are altruistic and perform these acts of kindness with absolutely no ulterior motives is too idealistic a view to adopt. Instead, I believe corporations practise corporate social responsibility, not purely out of moral obligation, but to achieve their profit-maximising objects. These charitable acts will greatly increase their publicity, and can be seen as an alternative form of advertisement. For example, oil company BP extensively invested in social projects after its disastrous oil spill off the coast of Mexico so as to improve its damaged public image. Hence, the notion that companies pursue corporate social responsibility with an ulterior motive renders them untrustworthy.

Critics may also argue that not all big corporations are necessarily profit-seeking but rather, may exist to achieve a social aim. Companies like The Body Shop are good examples. The Body Shop champions many social causes – it supports fair trade by purchasing raw materials from disadvantaged communities in Africa although it might reduce its own profit margin; it also supports putting an end to human trafficking by displaying such messages on product wrappings although doing so might incur extra costs. Undeniably, there may be social enterprises that do not pursue profit-maximising goals; however I feel these are simply exceptions to the rule, and these social enterprises often are the minority.

In conclusion, big major conglomerates cannot be trusted given their profit- maximisation objective, which result in unethical means of production, placing the interest of the company before the well-being of consumers and manipulating public mindset. Although there exist businesses that do good, they may be performing good acts with ulterior motives, or are part of the minority group of social enterprises that is not representative of most major businesses.

Marker's comments:

Fluently, convincingly written.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 22

To what extent does your country challenge the current state of affairs?

Ong Zhi Song Vincent | 11A01C

“Disneyland with the death penalty” was the damning judgement by foreign press on the state of Singapore’s affairs in 1994, in the wake of American teenager Michael P. Fay’s vandalism charges. To date, Singapore, known both from within and without as a rigid no-nonsense nation with little tolerance for dissent, has continued to garner bad press for its iron grip on national issues. Despite this, its leaders have often exhorted the need for change, contrary to popular opinion that Singapore is set in its ways. While it is indeed notable that Singapore has continued to redefine itself by changing the status quo or going against conventional wisdom, the impact of this is only limited. Changing the current state of affairs in some cases can be seen as farcical, while successful changes to the current state of affairs have, at best, only resulted in incremental differences.

Some point to the recently concluded Singapore General Election 2011 to attest to the fact that Singapore does indeed challenge the current state of affairs. This election resulted in the incumbent People’s Action Party (PAP) garnering only 60.1% of the popular vote, its lowest since independence in 1965. More significantly, the opposition Workers’ Party drew much attention by finally managing to win a Group Representative Constituency (GRC), and winning by a respectable 54% against the PAP. Considering the fact that parliamentary elections have been relatively tame in Singapore, and that the opposition only managed to garner 2 elected Parliament seats in the previous elections of 1997, 2001 and 2006, the 2011 election saw significantly more active involvement by the people in politics, taking to rallies and following discussions online, and the victory of securing 6 elected seats by the opposition. The dramatic change in voting patterns and outcomes in the political arena suggests that Singaporeans are not afraid of making themselves heard through the ballot box, resulting in relatively large changes to the status quo of politics here in Singapore.

Moreover, some also argue that Singapore is quick to challenge the current state of affairs in terms of managing the economy. Since independence, Singapore has been renowned for its tight budget position and fiscal prudence. Even in times of crises like in 1973-74 where inflation hit nearly 25% due to OPEC’s decision to triple the price of oil, the 1987 Black Monday crash, the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis where the Singapore dollar depreciated by 20%, or the global slowdown after the 2001 World Trade Centre bombing, Singapore has staunchly refused to back down from its stand on balancing the budget. Yet the 2008-2009 financial crisis prompted the slashing of a “sacred cow”, by dipping into the reserves for the first time, using S\$20 billion to strengthen the economy for long-term capabilities. Similarly, while the first Central Provident Fund (CPF) policy of 20% employer contribution rate and 20% employee contribution rate was implemented in 1965, the Singapore government has shown that this is not cast in stone, instituting changes, notably in 1998 where the employer contribution rate was slashed by 10 percentage points. Furthermore, Singapore has shown itself to be ready to challenge this current state, when it increased the employer contribution rate in 2009 after a period of economic boom. It is with such nimble deftness that Singapore operates its economic and financial policies, which lead people to believe that it challenges the current state of affairs, having no qualms of changing the status quo.

Yet the changing of the status quo is at best farcical in Singapore, primarily in the area of politics. A first-past-the-post system in Singapore has seen the ruling PAP occupy 81 out of the 87 seats after the 2011 elections, and 82 of 84 previously in 2006. Despite change, one can argue that this is extremely limited, as the PAP not only retains its grip on the government, but also, with significantly more than two-thirds of the seats, it can pass legislation unilaterally. In the same vein, the opposition’s five additional seats translates to only a tiny proportion of seats in Parliament, and, even considering their GRC win in Aljunied, it ultimately represents a tiny step in the direction of change.



Moreover, apart from election statistics, political policies have shown that challenging the current state of affairs in Singapore is farcical. The addition of the Non-Constituency Members-of-Parliament (NCMP) seat in 1984 has arguably only diluted the legitimacy of Parliament, by including election candidates who lost, though they are not allowed to vote on legislative or budget supply bills. Similarly, the introduction of the Nominated Member-of-Parliament (NMP) scheme in 1991 has the same effect, using the illusion of diverse voices as a counterweight against real political progress by opposition parties in Singapore. Such policies have, as statistics show, only buttressed the PAP's power, given its relatively high vote shares since the introduction of NCMPs and NMPs. In view of the state of politics in Singapore, especially after the token increase of 3 to 9 NCMPs in 2009, one can say that challenging the current state in Singapore is but an illusion.

Furthermore, beyond politics, Singapore has shown inertia to change in liberalising the social sphere for discourse. It must be noted that Singapore has historically maintained a tough position on civil liberties, and is unwilling to give it up even till today. Apart from overt measures like the 1963 Operation Cold Store and the 1987 Operation Spectrum over the so-called 'Marxist conspiracy', the unflinching and unyielding Singaporean view is seen through legislation like the 1963 Sedition Act and the 1974 Newspapers and Printing Presses Act. Even at present, social discourse is arguably limited, discouraged by libel suits against Chee Soon Juan and J.B. Jeyaretnam and public warnings against an assembly of five people at City Hall MRT in 2006 for gathering without a permit. The continuation of such trends lends credence to the fact that in some cases, Singapore has not challenged the current state of affairs at all.

In other areas such as education policy, even with frequent changes to the status quo, this cannot be categorised as a "challenge". In Singapore, changes to the education system are characterised by a more gradual and slight alteration, rather than a singular and epic paradigm shift. This is seen in the introduction and enforcement of our bilingual policy, by Education Minister Ong Pang Boon under the direction of then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1965. In the 1960s and 1970s, bilingualism was implemented strongly, mandating that all students required a pass in both English and mother tongue at the GCE 'A'-Level to gain admission into universities. In response to calls that these requirements were too harsh, the policy was relaxed, first by allowing those who obtained passes for Higher Chinese at the 'O'-Level to bypass the previous requirement, and by allowing those who failed Chinese at the 'O'-Level to take a less rigorous Chinese B course. Singaporean universities at present have even allowed students who do not do well in mother tongue to gain admission, on the basis of fulfilling language courses in their studies at the respective universities. Yet this does not change the reality that Singapore has adhered steadfastly to the policy of bilingualism, and that these changes have only been implemented over a period of almost fifty years. To this end, Singapore does not challenge the current state of affairs as much as it merely facilitates its painfully slow evolution.

Even in its swift economic policy, Singapore has demonstrated its resistance to change. Most famously, Singapore is against the concept of a welfare state with generous unemployment benefits, and the implementation of a minimum wage. Despite calls for the latter, as argued by Professor Tommy Koh in an article published in the Straits Times in 2010, Singapore clings on to the view that welfarism breeds sloth, a belief that has persisted for fifty years.

In conclusion, there are certain aspects in Singapore where the current state of affairs has been challenged, like in the economy. Yet this is not uniform across all economic policy, as demonstrated above. In most other areas, the status quo is either maintained or changed gradually. The incidence of change across different sectors in Singapore also suggests that challenging the current state is often motivated by the interests of the state. As the Civil Service in Singapore becomes increasingly larger, it is inevitable that the status quo will be challenged less in the future, to the detriment of Singaporeans.

Marker's comments:

What about the citizens and youth? Is there any way to challenge the current state of affairs? An engaging piece. You are a well-read student, Vincent. Interesting viewpoints and discussion here. The conclusion sounds ominous – hope it will not be the case for us in the future.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 23

‘We have no permanent friends, only permanent interests.’ Is this a good principle to follow in conducting relations between countries?

Bryan Cheong Sui Kang | 11A01C

Any casual reader of history will notice in the narrative of international relations the curious phenomenon of former allies turning enemies, and vice versa. Prima facie, realpolitik seems to be the predominant force governing the interaction between states, and the statement “we have no permanent friends, only permanent interests” sounds less like truism and more like truth. Yet a more careful observer of geopolitical developments – particularly in the last century – might care to disagree. In reality, neither “friends” nor “interests”, neither allies nor concerns of the state are ever truly permanent although there are relationships and strategic concerns that do last a rather long time; adopting such a principle may therefore seem cynical and unproductive.

Those cynical of alliances and amity between nations seem at first to have good reason to be so. Even from the very beginning, in the history of the Peloponnesian Wars penned by the Greek writer Thucydides, stories of fragile alliances and back-stabbing partners abound amongst Greek states despite their cultural similarity. More recently, in the Second World War, Japan, a former ally of the United Kingdom in the First World War that had given aid and donations to help in the war effort against Germany and her allies, became a member of the Axis powers, and fought against former friends within a brief span of decades. Japan betrayed its amicable relationship with the Allies in order to invade their colonies in Southeast Asia for the obtaining of raw materials and resources for its industries. Such, one might suppose, is the fickle nature of friendships among nations: the immediate reality of material advantages and economic benefit triumphs the façade of mutual amicability.

Certainly, one cannot deny the many so-called “marriages of convenience” between states that had fallen apart into pieces once strategic interests required their dissolution. The two most politically influential and militarily powerful states of the twentieth century, the Soviet Union and the United States, were once allies in the Second World War, cooperating to subdue what they perceived to be a common enemy in Nazi Germany. That this alliance was able to erupt within just two years of the conclusion of World War Two into a full-blown Cold War that refused to be resolved for 50 years testifies in favour of the brevity of friendships in the international arena. The ideological and cultural incompatibility between different nations, some might argue, such as that witnessed in the Cold War, preclude the existence of enduring, and much less permanent friendships between states.

But this is not entirely the case, particularly in the modern world, where politicians and diplomats stress the importance of maintaining mutual cooperation and understanding between countries – certainly, with the establishment of international organisations and platforms for the expression of international friendship. In ASEAN, we see representative nations that had but decades before disputed with each other over territories, and antagonised each other with foreign policies such as Indonesia’s military-backed Konfrontasi, seated next to each other in forums to promote mutual development and economic progress. In the European Union, cultural and historical differences among the British, French, German and other states that did not traditionally trust each other were set aside for the establishment of special diplomatic relationships between their nations. But these examples only demonstrate the new friendliness and amicability in the diplomatic circles of modern age and do not quite demonstrate the permanence of these friendly relations. Certainly demonstrating permanence in anything will prove procedurally to be rather difficult, yet there exists special relationships between states that have endured for decades, and even centuries. From the very beginning of Israel’s independence (and even before then in 1947) the United States had been a largely consistent ally, strategically, diplomatically and militarily. The US had always cheerfully vetoed any resolution in the United Nations Security Council that was against its ally for the last fifty years, and even amidst the recent strains between the Obama and Netanyahu governments, both politicians are always quick to emphasise how friendly Israel is to the US and vice versa. In a very

recent state visit to the United Kingdom, US President Obama recalled, like every other president before him, the “special relationship” between the UK and the US that had lasted for nigh a hundred years, describing it as a reliable “cornerstone of Western Civilisation”. While half a century and a full century might not quite prove the possibility of permanence of friendships between nations, it is interesting to note how the amicable rhetoric of Obama contrasts with the assertion that “We have no permanent friends”.

Some might however argue that such special relationships only exist for the sake of fulfilling permanent strategic interests. The United States, for example, could be accused of maintaining its enduring friendships with Israel only to gain a reliable partner in the volatile Middle East. In conducting its relations with the United Kingdom, the US might arguably be accused of using the UK as a strategic ally in Europe, and in the era before 1989 as a partner in NATO against the Soviet Union. Is it viable to posit that “permanent friends” only exist to satisfy more fundamental “permanent interests?”

Such a perspective, however, ignores the dynamism of the political environment in the world. The amicability between states, such as the US and UK, such as Austria and Germany, such as Russia and Ukraine have endured despite changing circumstances and fluctuating interests, for strategic interests are rarely permanent. After the collapse of the USSR, containment of Communism became a moot concern, and yet, the US still maintained its close relationship with Britain, inviting its prime ministers on visits specially to the White House, unlike for any other country. The Middle East had undergone massive amounts of restructuring, and Israel is no longer the US’s sole ally. Jordan, Egypt and even Saudi Arabia have declared themselves aligned to the US, and Israel has lost much of its strategic importance to US security concerns in the Middle East, and yet this friendship between the two countries continues.

It is not intellectually viable for any country to think of any of its interests as permanent. The most important resource and economic fuel of the recent years – petroleum and oil, never concerned any of the states of the world prior to the twentieth century. Yet, it now dominates the dialogue regarding strategic interests of almost every country in the world, whether they are developed or developing, oil-importing like the US or oil-exporting like Iran. Human beings need change, and with these changes, the interests of states shift too. Any politician who stresses the interest of the age, specific to its era and irrelevant to our time, would not make a very good statesperson.

One of the most important features of the geopolitical landscape of the world is its dynamism. Another important feature the new globalised environment is now confronted with is the impossibility of isolation and the necessity of mutual cooperation between states. With the political structures of states and the needs and ideals of people so dynamic and volatile, it is not practical to adopt any principle asserting the permanence and unchanging nature of national interests. Similarly, with global economic production lines scattered all over the world, in order to take advantage of comparative advantages in production, in a world where no country is metaphorically an island, it is not helpful to assert that there can never be any reliable friends. Even North Korea, the most isolated country on the planet, has had a consistent partner in China for the last 50 years. In the end, nothing in a changing world filled with peoples who pride themselves for the constant progress they make would ever have ever-enduring and unchanging interests. Similarly, the relationship between countries may fluctuate with changing circumstances, but the spirit of international cooperation dominating modern diplomatic dialogue might not take too kindly to the cynicism of countries unwilling to make long-lasting friends.

Marker’s comments:

Bryan, you have a consistent argument throughout this essay. This, in my opinion, is a brilliant essay. Interesting perspective as you disagreed with both – “permanent friends” and “interest”. A novel idea, have yet to see an essay like this. Great job Bryan! Well read and mature.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 24

Do you agree that the barriers to scientific research in the 21st century are more ideological than technological?

Tan Yi Jie Gifford | 11S03R

In the 20th century, when mankind took his first step into the “final frontier” of space and landed an astronaut, Neil Armstrong, on the moon, it seemed as if there was no barrier that scientific research and technology could not break. The scientific research required for everything from the trajectory of the space shuttle and the likely problems a man would experience in space manifested itself as seemingly impregnable technological barriers, but gradually, with brains and computers, mankind set foot on the moon. If we fast forward to the 21st century, where kilometres of underground chambers spanning France at the Large Hadron Collider promises not only particles at light speeds, but also the story of how life began, it would seem to many that scientific research in this century would only face ideological potholes, rather than technological ones. Whilst I agree there are many moral, ethical and spiritual grouses that could throw a spanner into scientific research, I believe we cannot discount the formidable technological barriers; in fact, there are even cases where both obstacles seem more alike than distinctly separate barriers.

There are many who argue that the sanctity of life should be regarded with utmost respect and that mankind cannot desire to experiment with God’s creations without dire consequences. In America, the religious cause behind the discontent is palpable, as some sections of the American population are already against the use of contraception as it is deemed unholy in strict biblical implications, much less the experimentation and research on possible methods to create life outside a “family unit” of a husband and wife. The cacophony of disapproval against scientific research on reproductive cloning has led to the stagnation of research in this area. The repercussion of jail terms and a lack of any organisation willing to extend legal grants to this form of research are prime examples of how ideological objections have grounded scientific research to a halt in certain places, like some states in America, widely regarded as one of the leaders in pioneering and innovating new methods of scientific research.

There are also many who try to assume the moral high ground by championing animal rights against the advances of scientific research. In many laboratory settings, the use of animal test subjects to test the effects of a wide array of concoctions ranging from cosmetic potions to potentially life-saving medication is pervasive. Viral YouTube videos of how rabbits are used to test dermatological products or eye drops, only to suffer obscene eye conditions resulting from unsafe and dangerous test products have led to a public outcry against the scientific research into the effects of chemicals on animals. They argue from ideological vantage points of animal rights and cruelty against the economic efficiency of using rabbits as test subjects. These obstacles have been gaining traction, as animal activists have tried to take action by filing lawsuits against these cosmetic companies, and spreading videos of animal cruelty with the intent to boycott such products. Hence, there are considerable ideological barriers to scientific research in other more commercial industries as well.

There are also many critics of scientific research areas like stem cells, citing the oft-quoted moral and human rights arguments. Modifying the gametic stem cells of humans is illegal, meaning that parents are not able to modify the traits that their children will inherit. A world where the rich can pay to endow their children with supernatural strength or unparalleled intelligence is a future that many cannot stomach. Hence, stem cell research, which hold the possibility of finding cures for life-threatening diseases and ensuring that children will not inherit debilitating diseases like Parkinson’s or Huntington’s disease, is not possible in the near future. Even in the face of such promise, the steadfast ideological barriers still remain, and are a testament to our resolve to uphold moral and ethical concerns so that scientific research in these controversial areas can never take place.

However, I believe that there are also many technological barriers that cannot be overlooked. The Large Hadron Collider (LHC) may have promised us the ability to research and understand the origins of “dark matter” and its link to the creation of our universe and the world as we know it; however, what it has really yielded is just months of maintenance work. The LHC has only been able to undergo a few test runs, but has spent months on end in the hands of technicians as they struggle to fix and overcome the mammoth technological task of maintaining its kilometres of vacuum-sealed chambers. Even with the current crop of precision engineering equipment, the



mechanical difficulty of making sure that the entire length of the system is running at optimal conditions remains an as-yet insurmountable task. Hence, it would be unfair and ignorant to believe that the technological barriers to scientific research on the atom is a small problem with our improved engineering expertise, and I believe that the technological challenge will play as pivotal a role as the outcry condemning the research into the creation of our world as against the biblical interpretation that God created the world. Without functioning equipment, scientific research will have little means by which to conduct itself.

Furthermore, there are many areas where scientific research has reached a roadblock because of the limitations of our technology. Even with the advent and growing ubiquity of Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans on the brain in the 21st century, there are many areas in the field of neurology that mankind is unable to break through. While we are increasingly able to detect changes in electrical and brain waves, humans do not have a machine or process that can accurately measure and objectively quantify less tangible things like our emotions, our memories and our character. The inner workings of our psyche have proven to be elusive to any machine that our current level of technology can build. Hence, hallmarks of scientific research, like the accuracy and precision with which data is stored, cannot be carried out as we are as yet limited by our technological means to do so. Hence, I believe that there are many technological limitations that have confined the boundaries of our scientific research, even in the 21st century with our current state of hardware.

In addition, there have been cases where ideological barriers have been circumvented or eroded in our quest for scientific knowledge in the 21st century. Increasingly, the Body Shop brand name has been gaining recognition and support by a growing fan base. It distinguishes itself from other cosmetic companies by proclaiming that they are against animal testing. This also means that they conduct their research of their products without using animals, which pacifies the animal rights activists, giving them no reason to campaign or set up a blockade hindering the company's research and business. Hence, we can see that there is a growing erosion of supposed "ideological barriers" in the way of scientific research, especially in the 21st century where aggressive advertising promoting its "against animal testing" slogan is sold to the public and consumers.

There are also many instances where the line between an ideological barrier and a technological limitation blurs. The discordant voices against stem cell research also partly stem from the fact that current stem cell techniques are primitively undeveloped and potentially unsafe. They argue on ethical grounds that no human (or animal) should be subject to the whims and "ifs" of the scientist in the laboratory, and are immensely concerned about the potential detrimental effects of an experiment gone wrong. Hence, many object to such research, which in turn prevents scientists from receiving grants from sympathetic or earnest governments to conduct research and make headway into the techniques. But underlying this unease is a technological limitation of the equipment and methods used to carry out the procedures like implanting neural nerve cells to cure Alzheimer's. With unproven techniques, there is the real risk of something going wrong, like the growth of tumours and cancer as a result of a botched gene implant job. Hence, I believe that apart from some strong ideological and technological concerns, there are also cases where the barriers blocking us from knowledge and truth are not as distinct and clear-cut between these seemingly disparate disciplines.

Hence, while I agree there remains significant barriers to scientific research in the 21st century, technological advances like MRI machines have made the mechanical limitation less apparent, especially when the increased media attention has turned up the volume of the very public and very loud moral outcries against scientific research. However, these walls, ideological barriers included, are eventually being scaled, and to say that some barriers are strictly ideological would be unfair. Hence, I believe that the barriers to research have both entwined ideological and technological roots.

Marker's comments:

Well argued. Interesting angle to consider the difficulty in distinguishing between technological and ideological barriers in some cases! Very comprehensive, informed discussion. Too much of a listing of ideological vs technological barriers. Better if you evaluated which holds greater sway.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 25

Would you agree that the world needs more order than it needs freedom?

Joel Lim | 11A03A

The Arab Spring has caught the attention of states and nations throughout the world. The struggle of Arab peoples in nations as influential as Egypt or in more peripheral countries such as Yemen is seen by many as justified in the name of freedom. While few would argue that more freedom is a bad thing for these previously oppressed peoples, interim administrations in both Egypt and Tunisia have exhorted the people to retain a sense of order, such that a smooth and successful transition can take place. This exemplifies the trade-off between the imposition of certain necessary constraints against the human craving for self-determination. The extent to which a more rigid framework is required for a successful outcome, compared to a loosening of one's fetters, then depends on the unique state of affairs in any particular situation. There can be no absolute rule governing the compromise between the twin concepts of order and freedom. In fact, order and freedom can at times be complementary, leading to a successful resolution of any problem.

In terms of politics, one can argue that the world requires more freedom, especially in countries whose political systems have been rendered ineffective by a lack of plurality. Such sub-optimal political outcomes have been seen in countries such as Syria and Egypt, where a lack of freedom in terms of varied political discourse has resulted in the state pursuing policies that are either not beneficial or even harmful to the citizens of the respective nations. For instance, the massive youth unemployment that was one of the factors that caused the Arab Spring was partially a result of the poor government policies that distributed economic benefits to political cronies, marginalising the man in the street. This was the case in Tunisia, where a lack of meaningful political checks and balances on Tunisian President Mr Ben Ali allowed him to pilfer state funds for the benefit of his family members. If Tunisia possessed more open political institutions that encouraged accountability, such crimes would probably have been curbed. Therefore, in such countries with repressive political spheres, more freedom is clearly needed.

At the same time, one also recognises that in other cases, the problem of political institutions leading to adverse results lies not in a lack of freedom, but in the excessive abundance of it. The political freedoms possessed by the opposition or by the general populace are not merely able to act as a check-and-balance of possible state misbehaviour, but instead are so extreme that they can flippantly hinder perfectly reasonable policies from being enacted. The issue, one discovers, is not that the political mechanisms in place are fundamentally flawed, but that they are too often exploited. Essentially, there is too much freedom afforded. An example of this is the filibuster rule in the US senate, where once it is put into play, the passage of the bill in question requires the vote of a super majority. It is because the threat of filibuster is so often used, often carelessly, that politics in Washington is currently deadlocked. Also, the lack of order in the Taiwanese parliament has resulted in the now infamous scenes of fighting in Parliament. Such actions clearly hinder the efficacy and expediency of state action. It is therefore the case that in circumstances akin to those above, curtailing certain excessive freedoms and imposing a semblance of order will benefit rather than harm society.

Such circumstances are not merely limited to political institutions. The social sphere is also subject to instances where a glut of freedom based on ideas of inalienable rights can be detrimental. One such "right" that can be carried too far is that of the freedom of speech. One cannot deny that the freedom of speech has the potential to greatly encourage societal progress and aid the formulation of state policy. However, enshrining this "right" without due consideration can perpetuate societal divisions. One recent example is that of fundamentalist Christians, who turned up at the funeral of a recently deceased soldier in the US and denounced him for his supposed homosexuality, declaring that he deserved death. The right to engage in such insensitive, hurtful, even hateful discourse was upheld by the courts as a "freedom". Clearly, such freedoms are unreasonable – order needs to be



imposed. Another right is that of the right to bear arms. Again the right can be disaggregated into the right to “bear arms” and the right to possess magazines with over twenty bullets. In the wake of Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords’ tragedy in Tucson, those who argued for a law to ban such gun magazines were shot down by gun activists for whom the “freedom to bear arms” was essentially believed to be a divine right. Thus, one can clearly see that in many situations, the excessive allowance made for freedom in the social spheres should actually be reduced.

On the other hand, sometimes liberation is essential in the social sphere, as unjust practices need to be eradicated. The existing order imposed upon society is so abhorrent, that greater freedom is absolutely required. The unjust segregation of African Americans from the rest of the white population in the US was the epitome of such “order”, which was, in fact, no order at all. The Negro yearning for equal rights and social parity with the white American was a freedom that had to be granted. Thankfully, it was. However, there are other social systems that similarly confine and restrict citizens into a rigid caste – such as that which still exists in India. The plight of the lowest caste, the “untouchables”, can be deemed even more distressing than the conditions imposed on the African Americans by the Jim Crow Laws. Indeed, with reference to these deplorable social systems that have been maintained for centuries, freedom is an urgent call that the world cannot ignore, as opposed to the order that is required of situations elsewhere.

Even in the realm of the economy, the world may need freedom in certain circumstances. The centrally-controlled and ordered Communist system that existed in the decades preceding 1990 through much of the world imposed great economic and material suffering on the citizens of those countries that subscribed to such beliefs. The per capita income and living standards of these countries largely stagnated throughout their time as communists, once the benefits of factor mobilisation were exhausted. The dynamism of the private sector is clearly required for improvements in economic prosperity. Only after the liberalisation of prices and the monolithic state economic planning infrastructure could the economy recover its vibrancy, which then led to improvements in the financial and material state of the people.

Of course, complete freedom in economics without the order that the relevant institutions provide can also be disastrous. Indeed, this was seen in the Russian economic collapse that followed the liberalisation of its economy. The point about the Russian state default and high inflation that resulted in a near 50% fall in average real incomes is testament that pure unbridled capitalist freedom is not the remedy to all economic ills. Instead, a more orderly restructuring of the Russian economy would have led to more desirable results. This is the path followed by the Chinese, who now have seen their per capita income rise from US\$46 in 1980 to over US\$10,000 in 2000. This positive trend stands in stark contrast to the Russian debacle. It is thus manifestly clear that just as with politics or social issues, whether more order or more freedom is needed crucially depends on each individual instance – one can make no generalisation.

In conclusion, one can see the competing calls for order and freedom with the context of Egypt’s Arab Spring. Egypt’s most pressing concern at the moment is to resolve the issue of political governance. To foster a pluralistic yet stable democracy, which is what the Egyptian people desire, one requires both order and freedom. One needs the latter so that the will of the Egyptian people will be adequately reflected in Egypt’s new political system. Concurrently, one also desires the former so as to ensure that chaos or the vested interests of a few do not hijack and subvert the will of the Egyptian people. It is therefore impossible to conclude one way or the other; whether a situation requires either order or freedom is for the stakeholders at the point in time to decide. After all, it is their world.

Marker’s comments:

Very comprehensive discussion with breadth of apt substantiation. Well-informed response overall. Good.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 26

Would you agree that the world needs more order than it needs freedom?

Ren Zhaolin | 11A03A

“Man was born free, and he is everywhere in chains.” Indeed, Rousseau’s emphatic opening line in his seminal work *‘The Social Contract’* makes clear the dreary totalitarian nature of life in both 18th century France and the rest of the world. Arguably, the world today is a much more liberated place; many, such as Thomas Friedman, argue that the inexorable force of globalisation has truly “flattened” the world through rapid increases in global trade and migration. Moreover, the triumph of democratic governance over authoritarian governance in much of the world has also granted people more social, economic and political freedoms than ever. However, detractors posit that the increase in liberty, both on a global and national scale, could engender divide and deleterious consequences. They believe that greater supranational oversight on a global level and more government regulation on a national level are required to stabilise the world in an era of increasing unpredictability. While I do sympathise with their fears, I believe that having greater freedoms is ultimately a force for good and that far from being contradictory, freedom and order are not always mutually exclusive.

First, many pundits feel that in a world of increasing geopolitical complexity, it is imperative for global institutions such as the United Nations (UN), the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank to have greater powers to regulate and intervene in global affairs. While a corollary of this is an infringement of countries’ national sovereignty, such pundits assert that this loss of national freedom is a small price to pay for peace and stability in the world. This argument is particularly valid in the case of rogue nations, such as Iran and North Korea, many of whom engage in clandestine illegal military trade in order to support each other both financially and militarily in the face of global ostracism. Whilst the restriction of their ability to carry out military trade might constitute a violation of national sovereignty in the eyes of some, it is undeniable that such a move is necessary to prevent these rogue nations from engaging in belligerent military, possibly even nuclear, attacks on other countries. Indeed, while it has previously turned a blind eye to military trade between rogue nations in the past, the UN is now ever more vigilant in detecting and stopping such trade. In fact, just last year, the UN managed to stop a North Korean navy vessel that was carrying long-range ballistic missiles to Iran. Therefore, despite concerns about national sovereignty, it is vital for supranational institutions to snuff out the ever-present threat of rogue nations in ensuring global stability.

Secondly, on a national scale, the freedoms that people enjoy such as freedom of speech, can often be abused in such a way that endangers the well-being of a society. Consequently, governments have to enforce strict regulatory laws that deter such misuse to create a better and safer society. The right to freedom of speech is often said to triumph all other rights; however, the abuse of one’s right to free speech can engender civil strife and conflict. For instance, in Singapore, a multicultural melting pot, the government has enacted strict laws against those who voice insensitive racial and religious sentiments. This policy stems from the government’s deep-rooted fear of ethnic and religious conflict in a society where its different ethnic groups have not always seen eye to eye (as evidenced by the 1964 racial riots). And who could begrudge the government for doing so? Ethnic and religious differences are deeply divisive. The recent blasphemous portrayal of Prophet Muhammad in a Danish newspaper sparked widespread anger in the Muslim world and led to the killings of many innocent Christians in Muslim countries. As such, a government should not be blinded by concerns about the infringement of freedom of speech in its bid to create a more harmonious and secure society.

However, while the above reasons in support of the need for greater order are certainly valid, there are many equally, if not more, compelling reasons to have greater freedom in our world.



Firstly, freedom is intrinsically valuable and thus should be pursued for its own sake. As protestors in the recent Arab Spring can attest to, the pursuit of greater social, political and economic freedoms is inextricably linked with the pursuit of happiness itself. Having suffered at the hands of authoritarian oppression for decades, Egyptians, Syrians, Libyans, Tunisians and Bahrainis alike have had enough of the so-called 'stability' that strong men such as Mubarak and Gaddafi promised. Indeed, while freedom has the potential to be misused, more often than not, the illusion of stability and order is used by authoritarian leaders to garner support from the rest of the world as they line their own pockets with the ill-gotten money from their imperious deeds. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Arab countries, where for countless decades Western powers have turned a blind eye to the coercive rule of dictators in seeking stability in the oil-rich Middle East region. The Arab people, once thought to be in favour of sacrificing their freedom for greater stability, have finally stood up to thunder their human desire for liberty and greater freedoms. Indeed, the need and longing for freedom is one that is deeply embedded in the human condition, and thus freedom should not be sacrificed in the name of preserving order.

Secondly, greater social and political freedoms also play the instrumental role of improving societal wellbeing by allowing people to have a say in how their lives are organised. Through democratic governance and greater liberty in political discourse, it is possible for people to voice their concerns and ensure that politicians are held accountable. An example of this is in Kerala, where increased female political rights has enabled women to play a constructive role in shaping political dialogue and policymaking, thus helping to improve both sanitation and family-planning policies in the area. As such, the infant mortality rate in Kerala is one of the lowest in all Indian states, while its fertility rates have also stabilised close to the natural replacement rate of 2.1. Indeed, through granting people greater political and social freedoms, they can provide valuable feedback that can help to drive societal progress.

Furthermore, while some might think of freedom and order as being polar opposites of each other, I believe that a healthy dose of order can in fact help to bolster freedoms and help a society to progress and flourish. For instance, by having a more effective judicial system and a better-managed police force, a society can provide both stability and ensure that people are free to lead the lives they have reason to value, which is as Amartya Sen argues in his seminal work '*Development as Freedom*' a crucial tenet of human progress. Furthermore, in the economic arena, it is absolutely vital for a free market to be buttressed by well-functioning commercial laws that guarantee property rights and effectively police and enforce business contracts. As such, greater order and stability could in fact be at times vital to enable people to lead free and flourishing lives.

In conclusion, as William Cowper once wrote in his poem, "Freedom has a thousand charms/ That slaves, however contented, never know." Indeed, I fervently believe that the world needs greater social and political freedoms in order for the human race to progress and flourish. However, I do not feel that an increase in freedom necessitates a disruption of order – far from it. Indeed, I believe that there is a compelling need for the world to be a more secure and stable place for only then can the world be truly free and flourishing.

Marker's comments:

A comprehensive, thoughtful and well-informed response with mature comment.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 27

To what extent do you agree that the media has been a liberating force?

Anni Chowdhury | 11S03R

The number of media portals that an average person today has access to is astounding. Cable televisions boast up to 800 channels in countries like Singapore and the United States, and there are countless magazines and informative newsletters available in almost every bookstore, not forgetting the hundreds of newspapers across the globe available to us both in print and online versions. In today's world, the media plays a vital role in providing information, entertainment and most importantly, shedding light on lesser known issues. I feel that the media, being an extremely important tool that has the capability to free people from oppression, voice concerns of the public and enlighten them on issues that are larger than themselves, acts as a liberating force.

Critics always argue that one of the biggest constraints of the media is that it is often censored and manipulated to act as a mouthpiece to promote certain agendas. This is seen in authoritarian governments all over the world that systematically sieve out all potentially controversial or anti-government content from the news and other media forms such as movies and sometimes even music. Due to this, in some instances, the media fails to be a liberating tool as it constrains its viewers and consumers to only one possible viewpoint, restricting the knowledge of the people to solely what the government chooses to make available to its people. For example, the 'Great Firewall' of China blocks out all pro-democratic websites and even search engines such as Google, replacing them with its own censored versions such as Baidu. In this manner, all the exposure that the people receive about events are restricted to what the authorities allow, leaving the people with misconceptions and incomplete information, as seen in the Chinese Xin Hua News Agency's minimal coverage of the devastation caused by the Sichuan Earthquake, which the government sought to downplay. Hence, it is somewhat fair to say that in such instances, the media can misrepresent information when censored, and hence restricts people's knowledge rather than liberates them with access to a range of viewpoints.

However, to a larger extent, the media has become an essential tool that serves to free many people across the globe from oppression by being a voice that sheds light on their predicament. This comes in the form of new media. New media, with its global reach and lightning fast speed of information dissemination, has made possible the rise of a phenomenon known as citizen journalism. Given that everyone with Internet access and the ability to type can now partake in the news dissemination process, new media has given a voice to the common people who are now able to raise issues and garner support and help. From the recent uprisings in Arab nations such as Tunisia and Yemen to the Saffron Revolution in Myanmar, the Internet has been highly effective in bringing global attention to the plight of the oppressed. The protests and riots on the streets of Tripoli against Gaddafi's regime were first made known to the international community through amateur footage uploaded by Facebook and Twitter users, which went on to enlighten the world about the injustice that was ongoing in the region. This even prompted a NATO air raid led by France on Gaddafi's troops, as a sign of support for the people of Libya and their plight. This exemplifies the media's power to liberate the common people from injustice and grant them the freedom to express their opinions.

Furthermore, the media has also played an important role in uncovering the truth that is often intentionally, or not, hidden from the general public. By exposing the truth of many such issues and providing sound and factual representations of situations through the news and documentaries, the media is capable of liberating the masses by enlightening them and equipping them with the truth of the matter. News corporations have the resources and the incentive to carry out undercover reporting and investigations to get to the root of problems and find answers. In the cases of the Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay prison scandals, the media was able to uncover footage of American soldiers abusing the prisoners and hence spark fierce debate and a government investigation of



the issue to preserve the rights of prisoners. Many documentaries such as Discovery Channel's 'Air Crash Investigation' also do the same thing and uncover truths about past and present events in an objective way and hence are capable of extracting the truth behind conspiracies and cover-ups and can equip people with this knowledge, freeing them from deceit and fraudulent theories.

In the realm of the arts, the media has liberated people from both geographical and economic constraints and boundaries and has successfully immersed them in the appreciation of the arts. In the past, the arts, in the form of music, plays and films, were restricted to the rich and wealthy or could be appreciated only by those physically close to a theatre, museum or cinema. But with media coverage in the form of television shows, radio and magazines, these art forms are accessible to anyone with a television or a computer. One no longer has to travel to Cannes to see the year's winning entries because there is an entire channel dedicated to playing art films on cable television. Music is no longer confined to certain regions or countries as iTunes and Billboard magazines, and radio shows are accessible worldwide and open to audiences from every nation. This is an excellent representation of how, even with regard to the arts, the media has freed people from geographical and physical boundaries and allowed them access to an entirely new world and countless different cultures through something as accessible as MTV or a Bollywood movie.

Hence, it can be concluded that although in certain instances where censorship is practised, the media can possibly be an oppressive force that has the potential to mislead the masses, in many other instances, the media actually serves to liberate the masses and free them from their ignorance, misconceptions, and oppression. Thus, I strongly feel that in our world today, the media might possibly be one of the most powerful liberating forces available.

Marker's comments:

Fluently written with a strong sense of direction and focus. Good range of examples and perspectives.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 28

To what extent do you agree that the media has been a liberating force?

Sarah Giam Yi Xin | 11A03A

Ask any Singaporean on the street about the recent General Election and he or she would likely be extremely enthusiastic about relaying anecdotes of the nail-biting excitement in the days leading up to Polling Day, especially the night when the results were released. However, the atmosphere of mounting excitement was made even more palpable by the powerful involvement of new media in this election which washed over the nation with a powerful surge of video clips, Facebook updates and Twitter messages, giving local opposition parties hitherto-unheard-of coverage in a country whose mainstream media is largely under the control of the government. Indeed, the media, particularly new media (with the Internet as a platform for the widespread and relatively unfettered dissemination of information) has accorded Singaporeans liberation from the arguably biased and one-sided reports in mainstream media that favour the ruling party and sideline the opposition. The media has indeed been a powerfully liberating force worldwide, but must ultimately be tempered with personal discretion and harnessed with compassionate intentions for liberation to truly endure. Ultimately, the power lies in our human hands to direct the media as a tool for liberation, or one that perpetuates unnecessary strife and division in society and the world.

Indeed, the rise of the media, and especially new media, has played a huge part in allowing freedom of expression like never before, with the Singapore General Election bearing clear testament to this. In the days leading up to Polling Day, countless videos of both the ruling party's and the opposition's speeches were made available online, giving the opposition, very much sidelined by mainstream media, a louder and more wide-reaching voice. Although the Straits Times provided full-page coverage on up-and-coming People's Action Party (PAP) candidates like General (NS) Chan Chun Sing and Ms Sim Ann, giving the opposition much less coverage or even subtly portraying them in a bad light, the websites online, which made available the manifestos of the various parties, provided a considerably more objective view of Singapore's political scene and the offerings of various parties, hence allowing voters to be more informed – in theory. However, the barrage of hotly angry and polarised views on the various parties plastered over Twitter and Facebook could well sway the judgement of the average voter, influencing people to vote along party lines rather than the quality of the policies proposed by the various parties. Granted, there was also much intellectual discourse on the various parties' proposals made available on Facebook, but human instinct undeniably caused some to be swayed by the emotional outbursts of personal attacks rife online. Hence the media can only be a liberating force when coupled with viewer discretion, or else it is likely to overwhelm uninformed participants with the waves of emotionally-charged but senseless judgements that the indiscriminating and accessible nature of new media allows for.

In addition, there are also instances where the media has been undeniably a liberating force on the global arena. Recent events have seen the power of the media to set free people who are oppressed under corrupt governments and societies. It is the ability of new media to disseminate information widely and rapidly and its hugely accessible nature that render it uncontrollable by dictators. The Iranian Revolution in 2009 is a case in point, where the congregation of voters, fed up with their corrupt government, was enabled by various media platforms like Twitter. Government efforts to control the uprising were futile against the rapidly spreading calls for support, not only among the Iranians, but also in the outside world. The terrifying tsunami in the Indian Ocean, which wrecked the shores of Sumatra, was given coverage largely by the photographs taken by witnesses – material that was then used by mainstream media for its reportage. It was also the media that allowed for the exposing of corruption in the form of slipshod materials used in the construction of schools in China, which eventually led to their collapse during the recent Sichuan earthquake in 2008. China's Xinhua News Agency, controlled by the iron hand of the government, would never have allowed this. All these incidents are not even exhaustive of the great power of media to disseminate information and liberate – there are countless other happenings in recent times that bear testament to this. However, one must note that all these freedoms were spearheaded by people themselves, media being only a tool to facilitate their eventual liberation.



On a more personal scale, the media can be said to be a liberating force for entrepreneurs and artistes, who at present do not necessarily need large monetary wealth to promote their businesses, or make their artistic talent known. Websites can be easily set up, promotion done through social networking websites, and talents made known to the world through the famous video-sharing site, YouTube. As such, the media has levelled the playing field for anyone whose ambition requires the support of consumers by removing the monetary prerequisite and that of social connection that might once have been a stumbling block to some. Zee Avi, a nineteen-year-old from Sarawak, made her debut online with her sultry voice, and local indie musician Inch Chua shot to fame with her YouTube videos. Young entrepreneurs have also found it much easier to set up their businesses – by starting off online. Up-and-coming blog-shop 'Tight', an environmentally friendly enterprise that purchases old T-shirts from customers, tie-dyes them and sells them back for half-price, was set up by a student who graduated from college in Singapore. DamnGoodTees, a T-shirt printing agency, was set up by a student still schooling now, and both sites have received encouraging response from netizens. This is clear testament to the liberation media accords to up-and-coming business people or artistes, now not subject to the limitation of not having enough monetary capital or social connections to realise their dreams.

However, besides the enablement media accords people to realise their dreams, the media is only truly liberating if directed by the compassion of people. The recent generous flow of aid rendered to the Japanese, stricken by a tsunami that cruelly tore their country's infrastructure apart was primarily directed by the compassion of people, and only facilitated by the media. The media raises people's consciousness of what is happening in other countries, but such aid from France to workers in the demolished Fukushima Daichi Plant had to be directed by human altruism. Likewise, the facilitation of the gift box set up by the Singaporean Livejournal users for the Japanese was made possible by the common platform of the Livejournal community, but it was the compassion of the users which was the main driving force of the project. Indeed, the media allows for the faster dissemination of information, and the unity of the people, but whether its results are ultimately liberating depends on the motives and intention of the people themselves.

Lastly, the media, with its ability to proliferate ideas, could well be a liberating force in freeing people from hackneyed or oppressive ideologies in the societal and even religious sphere. Waris Dirie, a lady subject to the inhumane act of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) at a young age, made the global populace conscious of the act through her film, and consequently garnered huge support for the obliterating of the act, even becoming the UN Ambassador for the elimination of FGM. Likewise, many Christians worldwide have been freed from fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible by local pastor Joseph Prince's simple Bible-based interpretation of Christianity made available by television broadcast and sermons broadcast on websites online. It is precisely because the media allows for the discussion between a larger population of people that illogical and repressive ideologies can be stamped out through such discourse, and authentic, sensible enlightenment take their place – which ultimately has the potential to free people from oppressive regimes.

In conclusion, whether the media has been a liberating force ultimately lies in our human hands. Whether we use the advantages of the media, particularly new media, and namely its ability to unite people, disseminate information quickly and allow for greater freedom of speech, to liberate us or suck us into the mire of personal attacks and the proliferation of baseless opinions, is ultimately our decision.

Marker's comments:

Except for the occasional hiccups and language errors, an excellent effort to really demonstrate how liberation takes place with apt illustration. Good sense of engagement with question. A little heavy on local examples.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 29

‘Diversity is divisive.’ Discuss.

Sim Fu-Hua | 11S06Q

E Pluribus Unum or “out of many, one” – this is the unofficial motto of the United States, which suggests that unity can emerge out of diversity. However, is that often the case? Based on empirical evidence, diversity usually gives rise to divisiveness. From cultural to political differences, diversity often drives people apart.

A common argument is that diversity can actually be a unifying force rather than a divisive one. This stems from the perhaps paradoxical notion that diversity produces uniqueness. In a given society of people, differences in culture, language and practices supposedly add a sense of distinctiveness to the populace. This can be seen in several countries with multi-ethnic populations, such as Singapore and Malaysia. Despite a 74% Chinese demographic, Singaporean society differs vastly from that of China. This is a result of the fusion and hybridisation of cultures from the different ethnic groups in Singapore, which in turn generate other societal practices that are almost entirely home-grown. This uniqueness of Singaporean culture is manifested in countless areas, including Singlish (the colloquial variant of Singapore English), the ‘national’ dish Chilli Crab and many more. This uniqueness, which has been brought about by cultural diversity, has generated a strong Singaporean identity that the government is striving to capitalise on to further boost national unity. From this then, it might seem convincing that diversity is not divisive.

However, we must realise that the island nation of Singapore is very much the exception rather than the norm in embracing diversity. Due in part to her small physical size and intense nation-building efforts in her formative years, Singapore has achieved what is in fact an anomaly on the international stage. From the Sunni-Shia conflicts in the Middle East, to the Black-Hispanic tensions in South-western United States, diversity has manifested itself in social division and tension in almost all situations. The bottom-line is that human beings see amongst themselves differences much more clearly than similarities. When a white man sees a black person in his native lands, the first characteristic of the latter he would recognise is his skin colour – and not the fact that this man basically shares the same dreams and desires as him. Most multi-ethnic societies today are simply too large for authorities to successfully foster “unity in diversity” amongst its entire populace – such is the case in the United States. Even in societies that are still undeveloped, the focus is much more on more pressing needs like sustenance rather than social cohesion. Such is the case in places like Rwanda, where impoverished Hutus descended upon the somewhat richer Tutsis with rage. As such, diversity in the world today is often not managed properly or sufficiently, and the result of this is social division.

Next, it might also be argued that diversity is not divisive, as the range of commonalities amongst differing groups of people bond people together to achieve common aims and common interests. This supposedly renders diversity as merely different beliefs that these groups adhere to when they are not together. This is a stand particularly favoured by President Barack Obama of the United States. He acknowledges the differences among the various countries of the world, but often stresses the many fundamental ideals that all humanity supposedly strives for – freedom, human rights, etc. This encourages areas of cooperation between countries, which leads to a better environment for all, and a better environment for all to practise their different cultures.

Is this a possible scenario? Yes. Probable? No. Again, the cooperation between people of different backgrounds fades away along with the fading away of the common beliefs they adhere to. We see this in the classic example of the Soviet Union – a political union of Slavs, Turkic peoples and Caucasians who had little in common except for their faith in communism. Along with the demise of Communism, the Soviet republics broke away from one another and tensions started to grow. Emphasis on commonalities is insufficient to mitigate glaring disagreements between people.

Take for instance, the former Federation of Yugoslavia. All its member states supposedly shared a common belief in socialism and communism, but with the division into independent states in the 1990's, the vast difference in ethnicity between the Serbs, Bosnians and Croats erupted into war and genocide.

The fundamental issue is the fact that people of different beliefs, customs or appearances are viewed as "them" and people of similar background are seen as "us". This "us" and "them" division becomes even more apparent when the different groups come into contact with one another. Diversity without intermingling is perhaps problem-free, but the reality is that globalisation has brought people of all creeds and races together to such an extent that few actions carried out by one party can be carried out without affecting another. In his book *'The Clash of Civilisations'*, Samuel Huntington draws attention to the clash between people of vastly different worlds, especially the Western World and the Islamic World. This is further aggravated by "incursions" into each other's civilisations, as seen by Western interference in predominantly Muslim countries like Iraq, as well as the migration of Muslims into Western countries.

The presence of diversity also creates hotbeds for individuals and politicians who want to stir up issues or troubles that could have otherwise been held at bay. This is assuming that diversity has not already created problems on its own. In Malaysia, relations between Malay-Muslims and the other racial and religious minorities have always been an issue in national politics, with intermittent periods of relative harmony and outright violence. Tensions have been low for some time, but relations have soured again recently, with churches and mosques attacked over the controversial use of "Allah" in Christian bibles. This time, it is over an alleged plot by Christians to make Christianity the state religion of Malaysia. The allegation by the Utusan newspaper turned out to be false, but it has shown how easily the flames of ethnic and religious conflict can be fanned in a diverse society.

Finally, diversity need not lead to divisiveness based merely on culture, ethnicity and religion. Differences in political alignment and ideology can also drive people to not merely suspicion, but even all-out wars. The Chinese Civil War was fought on both sides by Chinese people – an ethnic group that has a rich culture shared by all. United against the Japanese invasion in World War II, the solidarity of the Chinese collapsed entirely when post-war differences in ideology came under the spotlight. The Kuomintang fought against the forces of the Chinese Communist Party for many years, and today, although the war has stopped de facto, mutual suspicion still exists between Taiwan and China. From here, we can reasonably conclude that even people of the same race can be divided by somewhat "petty" differences in ideology.

In conclusion then, diversity is divisive due to the inherent nature of man to identify himself with people of the same beliefs, culture and ideology. Exceptions to this might exist, but we cannot deny the plethora of empirical evidence that point to the fundamental tendencies of man to view difference with suspicion and perhaps hostility. The solution to encourage unity is not to mitigate diversity by harping on what little commonalities different people share – but rather, an acknowledgement of the varied nature of mankind; and over time, develop the political maturity and understanding that for mutual benefit and harmony, we have to accept, or at least tolerate, diversity.

Marker's comments:

Fu-Hua, this is a wide-ranging, very relevant essay that is well-illustrated with numerous examples. Well done! Your stand is clearly argued, with some nice turns of phrase. Perhaps you could have looked at more instances where differences could be overcome.

General Paper Year 6 Common Test 2 (2011)

essay 30

'Diversity is divisive.' Discuss.

Zhang Mengshi | 11S06K

In today's gradually more interconnected world, we are growing increasingly aware of the diversity around us. Diversity, in all its manifestations – social, economic, and political – has often been lauded for bringing vibrancy to our world, yet it has also been condemned as having a divisive effect, impeding understanding and being the source of countless conflicts. I agree that though diversity is often divisive, it may also sometimes have a uniting and cohesive effect, and the impact that diversity brings often depends very much on the context and the values of the people between whom differences exist.

It would perhaps be prudent to first underscore some instances where diversity divides. In many of the ongoing conflicts in the world today, it can be seen that 'too much' diversity may in fact be their root cause, impeding cooperation and harmony among various factions. For instance, there have been many cases of ethnic and sectarian violence in the world arising out of religious differences and the inability to compromise. In Iraq, the Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish groups never seem to be able to forge a stable political consensus, due to their diverse views of how the country should be run, as well as differing interpretations of Islam. Diversity in religious beliefs can arguably be pinpointed as contributing to such antagonism and power plays. Other areas in the world are not free from such ethnic clashes: throughout the 1990's and even in 2008, ethnic Albanians, mainly Muslims, have fiercely contested the region of Kosovo against ethnic Serbs, who are orthodox Christians. One of the main reasons why the Albanians and Serbs found it impossible to co-exist peacefully was due to their racial and religious differences, which led to deep-set prejudices and tension. When diversity prevents people of different nationalities and belief systems from seeing eye-to-eye, or even to agree to disagree, it can be said that diversity divides.

Additionally, diversity can be said to drive a wedge between people from different social classes as well. Within a society, varied socioeconomic statuses often impede people from communicating effectively and empathising with each other. For instance, those who have received higher education, or who belong to upper rungs of the social ladder are generally unable to understand the problems that the underprivileged of the society have to face, giving rise to accusations of elitism. In *'The Disadvantages of an Elite Education'*, a Yale professor pointed out that his students, as well as himself, could often find nothing to say to anyone not as highly educated as they were – plumbers or mechanics, for example. The diversity in the experiences of those belonging to varied social classes thus impedes understanding, as people are unable to empathise with a worldview or perspectives so foreign to their own. This gives rise to a divisive effect, as people would often identify with their own social strata so closely that they cannot bridge the gaps in understanding between themselves and members of other socioeconomic standing. In this, diversity is divisive, causing a sense of alienation between different swathes of society.

Furthermore, on a more international level, it is even more apparent how diversity can be divisive. Nations with diverse interests and factor endowments, for instance, would have various viewpoints on how the world should continue to progress in a way that would complement the nation's own priorities. The failed Doha round of trade talks, as well as the Copenhagen Summit, merely illustrate how difficult it is to come to a consensus when each country has different objectives which, more often than not, are in direct opposition to other countries'. In battling climate change, for instance, the diverse stages of development among nations was a key factor that stalled the formation of a strong consensus – developing countries wanted developed nations to shoulder more responsibility in combating the deteriorating environmental situation, while countries such as the US urged China and India to cut down on carbon emissions, something which these nations were reluctant to do as it was likely to impede their economic development. Thus, diversity in interests and objectives can often engender conflicts on an international level, having a divisive



effect on the world and preventing concrete resolutions from being made.

Nevertheless, diversity should not be our scapegoat for all the divisiveness in the world, nor should it be understood as a quality that can only alienate different factions. In many instances, it is our attitudes towards diversity, as well as our treatment of it, that ultimately determine whether diversity plays a destabilising or cohesive role.

Diversity in beliefs and world views, for instance, can often be blended into a vibrant whole that unites instead of divides. In Singapore, our national identity consists of a blend of elements from different races and religions predicated on the basis of appreciation and understanding of the various cultures in Singaporean society. This gives rise to an identity that is 'uniquely Singapore', a certain fusion of Eastern and Western elements that we can perhaps call our own. Such an identity, built on the basis of diversity, is something that arguably brings together Singaporeans in a common pride and identification with our shared heritage. When diversity is seen and accepted, it need no longer be a divisive factor, as it can be viewed as contributing to the shared societal vibrancy of a country.

Also, though diversity in viewpoints and opinions can sometimes be divisive, it may not be as intractable an obstacle to consensus forging as we may believe. When different perspectives are taken and valued for what they may potentially contribute, diversity may cease to have such a divisive effect. For instance, in many countries' political scenes, many different political parties are present, each holding its own set of ideological beliefs. Though this may result in stalemates and the inability to reconcile diverse viewpoints, it can also spur concerted policy action that meets various interests. Britain's National Health Service, for example, has often been a bone of contention between the Labour and the Conservative parties. Instead of falling out over such disagreements, the Labour Party actively collaborated with the Conservative politicians to craft improvements to the system that would be palatable to both fronts. Hence, rather than letting the diversity of viewpoints impede decision-making and delay necessary action, different parties can also use their diverging views to refine existing policies in a cohesive rather than divisive manner.

Ultimately, though diversity is often divisive, it often has this effect because we let it be so. Whether it is unbridgeable ethnic rifts, rigid social classes, or differing national interests, diversity would continue to be divisive if we do not agree to look past our mutual differences, which is admittedly difficult, if not impossible in many cases. Nevertheless, with ethnic and sectarian violence on the rise – 3.6 million people died in such conflicts in the 1990's alone – as well as the growing need to forge global consensus in many areas, it is essential for us to explore the cohesive, rather than divisive, potential of diversity. Using diversity and differences to refine governmental policies and construct a unique national identity that strengthens bonds between people, instead of weakening them, is arguably a good start, though there are certainly other ways where diversity can have a cohesive, rather than divisive effect. Thus, it is probably dangerous to say that diversity is only divisive – it can bring people together and have a uniting effect as well.

Marker's comments:

Convincingly argued, with clear markers to facilitate flow of argument. Good range of examples and perspectives.

General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 31

'Social media has changed the face of politics.' To what extent is this true?

Tan Yu Ann | 12S03E

We live in a completely different world today. The ubiquitous presence of social media, such as Facebook and Twitter – communication tools that are largely participatory and interactive – have no doubt impacted our lives in several areas, one of which is politics. Indeed, the increasing use and influence of participatory media in how countries elect political leaders and the way countries are governed have no doubt lent weight to those who claim that social media has transformed how we view politics. While such a statement may be justified, to completely agree with it would be a hasty and inaccurate generalisation, as the impact of social media on politics remains very much limited and superficial.

At first glance, it is undeniable that interactive forms of media have transformed the traditional meaning of governance by empowering the individual. Indeed, governments can no longer rule their society via a top-down approach. They have to increasingly acknowledge the presence of the citizen in all they do, since social media has placed power in the hands of the citizen: he can now stand up against what he does not agree with and act on the causes he passionately believes in. One classic example to illuminate how social media has empowered the individual and in a sense, disempowered the state, would be the recent revolution in Egypt, where tyrant ruler Hosni Mubarak was overthrown, not by military forces, but by the collective might of individuals, united by the interactive platform so pervasive in the world today – Facebook. By creating groups and pages to inform people of places and timings of protests and to galvanise support for popular social movements, Facebook united individuals in Egypt to stand up for what they believed in and to fight for it. It has allowed the people to truly have a say in politics, in how they should be governed; politics no longer is just about the government exercising authority over the people. In this way, social media may be said to have transformed the face of politics.

Another argument given to support the view that participatory media has indeed modified the face of politics, concerns social media's impact not only on the individual, but on the government as well, changing the way governments organise themselves. Governments now have to compete with social media when attempting to gain support and acknowledgement of the people, coming up with more innovative ways to achieve such goals. The recent Singapore General Election would be a case in point. Politics is no longer as simple as it once had been – nominees attempting to gain support through mere speeches and Meet-The-People sessions. Candidates now have to campaign online as well to reach their target audience, with prominent politicians like George Yeo creating active Facebook accounts and political parties such as the National Solidarity Party creating pages and groups to connect with the electorate. This is also evident in the United States. President Obama can no longer rely on television speeches to reach out to his people. One of his recent speeches was made into a pseudo-movie trailer and uploaded on to YouTube. This strategy proved effective as evident in the 8 million hits that were registered. With social media, politics is no longer an offline battle to gain support from the public, but rather both an online and offline one, involving a multiplicity of strategies.

However, it is important to note that while social media has indeed had an impact on the way politics is run and viewed by influencing governments and people alike, the inherent meaning of politics remains very much unaltered. At the most fundamental level, politics still means the same thing – that of a relationship between people and their government, as well as the government's ability to fulfil its responsibilities to the people. Social media has changed the way we view politics, but not its essence.

Indeed, one still has to acknowledge that politics is affected and altered by other factors, proving that social media's impact on politics is superficial. For one, people still judge governments by the same criteria, even before social media was popularised. The public regards economic growth and well-being as key indicators of a competent government. The uprising in Tunisia, for example, did not happen solely because people now had access to social media, but rather because citizens as a whole were unhappy about the rising unemployment rate amongst the young and lack of progress in the economy. Politics, in essence, is still about whether governments meet the expectations of the people; social media has only served to provide a wider and newer means for people to remind their governments of this fact, rather than completely changing the essence of governance.

Moreover, the way governments function is affected by globalisation to a much greater extent than it is by interactive media. One can confidently claim that globalisation has also transformed the nature of politics, as governments can no longer function on a local scale, but rather, a global one. Governments have to go beyond addressing concerns of their own community to take into account the opinions of their neighbouring countries and the global community at large in order to stay in power. A prime example would be the widespread global condemnation of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi, the despot desperately seeking to stay in power. He faces numerous difficulties in his quest to regain power, precisely because international organisations such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) do not condone his blatant disregard for human rights. In contrast, governments such as the Japanese government face no such trouble, but instead have received widespread help from nations worldwide when faced with crises such as the recent earthquake and tsunami disaster, precisely because they comply with international standards. Thus, it is obvious that politics is influenced by such factors more significantly than by social media, and these are factors that truly influence and exact change in politics to a larger extent.

In conclusion, the statement that social media has changed the face of politics is one that must be carefully considered. While it is incontrovertible that such interactive platforms of media have had an impact on how we view politics, by allowing for the transformation of governance from a top-down to bottom-up approach and by prompting governments to explore more varied methods to galvanise their people, its influence remains greatly limited and superficial. Politics in itself remains untouched, as with or without social media, it still is about how governments are able to satisfy and relate to the country they serve, and whether they conduct themselves appropriately as members of a wider global community. It is these factors that can effect actual change to politics. Social media has only modified how politics is now run; it has, to a certain extent, altered the face of politics, but it has left its essence largely untouched. It has provided a more efficacious platform to achieve a more desirable form of politics, but what it really does is to serve as a carrier, and not the driver that exacts change to the issue itself. Thus, while participatory media has left a mark in the politics of today, it is important that we bear in mind that its mark remains superficial.

Marker's comments:

A thoughtful and well-supported response to the question. Your arguments are logically developed and substantiated with aptly chosen examples. Your essay is undoubtedly one of the most competent answers. Well done!

General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 32

'Social media has changed the face of politics.' To what extent is this true?

Charmaine Yap | 12S03P

Politics is an age-old game of power struggle, but with the advent of the age of information and technology, a fledgling newcomer, social media, has brought about a fundamental shift in the way politics is conducted. Through social media outlets such as social networking sites, forums and weblogs, there has been an empowerment of the individual, and of the masses, a decentralisation of power from politicians to the masses, where the masses now have control of information, and can easily, too, be players in politics on a platform that boasts a global audience of millions. In contrast to what used to be a top-down approach from the authorities to the people, the people can now engage in politics on their own terms, changing the dynamics of interactions between politicians and the masses. In this manner, it can be said that social media has dramatically changed the face of politics.

For social media to effect change on politics, there must first be an acceptance and allowance for free reign of social media. This is not necessarily true in all cases, such as in China, where social media is largely suppressed through censorship by the government. Through censorship, the government maintains control over the flow of information, and the empowerment of the people by social media is greatly limited. For instance, when Liu Xiaobo, a human rights activist and social critic of the government, won the Nobel Peace Prize in January this year, there was an explosion of discussion on social media outlets such as Weibo, the Chinese equivalent of Twitter. However, these discussions were quickly suppressed by the Chinese authorities, and a forum that discussed the Nobel Peace Prize winner was shut down within fifteen minutes, as the writer was perceived to be a dissident by the Chinese government, and had been jailed for inciting unrest against the government. This is the same approach that the Chinese government has adopted for any politically sensitive material. Similarly, there has been a void regarding issues such as the Uighur riots and the arrest of political artist Ai Weiwei. Simply by suppressing the flow of information on social media networks, the Chinese government has reinforced its authority and prevented any damage social media might have brought about to its political scene. As such, social media remains limited in its ability to bring about changes to politics in instances where it is not embraced but instead suppressed through censorship and control.

However, despite the attempts of government to curb social media, the scale and magnitude of the network renders it difficult to be subjected to the control of any central authority. What we have seen, in fact, is that social media, in the hands of the computer-savvy masses, is capable of circumventing government control and censorship. In many countries, social media is an alternative to state-controlled media such as the television and newspapers. On 13th July 2010, following escalating protests against the Iranian regime of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, social media networks were alive with activity with 'live' updates on the uprisings. In contrast, newspapers carried blank frontlines following a white-out by the government. Social media has allowed for the voices of the masses to be heard in places where a totalitarian government reigns. A totalitarian government imposes its rule by controlling the consensus worldview of the masses – it is, in other words, a monologue by the government. Social media has liberalised the political scene by enabling the responses of the people to be heard. This can also be seen in Tunisia where information about the uprising against President El Abidine Ben Ali was broadcast to the rest of the world through blogs and political websites, with the international media drawing on such resources rather than the official state media. Arab network Al-Jazeera was also able to broadcast this information back into Tunisia. The use of social media here has proved to be very effective in circumventing the government's stranglehold on information, and in organising grassroots protests. As such, we see that social media has changed the face of politics by allowing for the uprisings of previously political suppressed masses.



Furthermore, social media has allowed for greater ease of engagement in politics by the general public as opposed to limited channels such as newspapers and radio. Social media highlights the input of information by individuals, and as such, is an effective channel through which the opinions and thoughts of the public can be expressed. This can be seen during the 2011 General Election in Singapore where political websites such as The Online Citizen and Temasek Review ran commentaries and discussions of the election by the public. This is in contrast to the mainstream media, which tends to be for the dissemination of information and remains a limited platform controlled by a central authority. With greater inducement from the people, the government has been forced to be on its toes and to respond more effectively to the concerns and demands of the masses. For instance, following the General Election, the Singapore government was quick to respond to concerns of the people through a series of radical changes in the Cabinet and a review of the salaries of Cabinet Ministers. As such, social media has enhanced involvement of the people, eliciting responsiveness and accountability by the government.

Lastly, social media has allowed the masses to interact with politicians on a more personal basis, allowing politics to be conducted on a more intimate level. It serves to humanise politicians as we have seen in the political scene of Singapore where Cabinet Ministers have had greater involvement in social media outlets, posting personal information and thoughts on sites such as Twitter and Facebook, which allows for the public to better understand and identify with them. This General Election was also a landmark one as we saw the Prime Minister engaging voters for the first time on social media. As such, social media has personalised and humanised the process of politics.

Marker's comments:

Excellent range of examples, beyond Singapore. There was more than a trace of confidence shown in this paper. You were able to present complex issues in a crisp and fluent way and always within reasonable sense of economy. An enjoyable and thoughtful read. A pity you did not have time to conclude your essay properly.

General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 33

Consider the view that globalisation destroys culture.

Nol Swaddiwudhipong | 12S03M

Advances in communications technology, transport and in a plethora of other areas have made the world today more interconnected than ever before. Much deeper and much more extensive interactions between people from different corners of the globe exist today than at any other point in human history. Globalisation is the process of this integration of various people around the world into a single global network. As diverse groups of people are integrated worldwide, they each bring with them unique beliefs and practices, languages and history, which make up their culture. Critics of globalisation point out that in the integration of various cultures, cultural homogenisation is bound to take place, and along with it, the destruction of numerous unique cultural identities. However, I feel that despite the inevitable erosion of certain aspects of individual cultures, globalisation is merely another step in the evolution of culture, and individual societies are still able to retain their unique cultural identities with the simultaneous creation of an unprecedented global cultural identity brought about by globalisation.

Prima facie, one would find that globalisation allows more powerful countries to wield the upper hand on the global cultural scene, thereby causing other countries to conform to their culture and hence, eroding cultural diversity around the world. Large multinational corporations, of which a disproportionate number is concentrated in America and Western Europe, market products that are a reflection of their own culture worldwide. In marketing brands like Coca-Cola, Nike and Adidas globally, these corporations impose their own cultural products, which are a reflection of say, the sports culture, or food culture back in their originating countries, on other countries. The propagation of these brands globally is hence perceived to be eroding indigenous cultures of countries where those goods are being marketed. Cultural homogenisation also occurs as a result of mass media, which has come about as part of globalisation. It allows broadcasting corporations to transmit cultural values and societal practices of the developed countries these corporations are based in to the developing world and other developed countries. In so doing, members of different societies are all infused with similar broadcasting content and cultural ideals propagated by a single culture. An obvious example of this is how the vast majority of movie releases originate from Hollywood, which, by and large, reflect American ideals and social practices. Another example of cultural homogenisation can be observed in language use in the world today. Virtually all business and academic interactions today are carried out in a common language – English, as we move into a world where it has become increasingly important to standardise communication with people around the globe. This has its consequences in the erosion of other languages, and language experts have found that at least one language goes ‘extinct’ everyday. This apparent loss of cultural diversity, be it in language, or as a result of mass media and corporate advertising, is an undeniable result of globalisation. However, it does not portend the destruction of culture by globalisation, as I will now explain.

Culture has by nature always been fluid and changing. Globalisation does not destroy culture so much as it changes it, albeit at a much faster pace than before. Take modern American culture as an example. It is in itself the product of an eclectic mix of diverse cultures like the native Americans, African Americans, European settlers and more recently, Asians. If we argue that globalisation has caused the global dominance of American culture at the expense of other cultures, we must consider that American culture in itself is a very global identity. Like American culture, individual societies also have cultural identities that have been moulded and shaped by countless forces, be it colonial powers, neighbouring states, and many others. By observing how culture is a fluid identity, as much the product of one’s interactions with others as the development of one’s own beliefs, we can see that the process of globalisation today merely brings about the continuation of cultural exchange and evolution that has taken place throughout human history. Globalisation does not destroy culture; it instead causes a cultural shift in society based on the society’s interactions



in the global village. What detractors observe is not cultural destruction but cultural change that is occurring at unprecedented speed.

To further substantiate how globalisation does not destroy culture, we can observe that each society still retains the essence of its own cultural identity, as societies only accept external cultural influences based on their own terms. This phenomenon, widely termed as cultural inertia, reflects how each society tends to resist change when it first occurs. It is in essence a self-protective mechanism that each culture utilises in order to retain its identity even when interacting with others in a globalised world. The unwillingness of cultures to accept external influences can be clearly observed in McDonald's entry into the Hong Kong market. Its entry was fraught with obstacles, as the Hong Kong residents did not take readily to the fast food culture of America, and viewed McDonald's more as a snack than a complete meal. As such, McDonald's had to adapt its marketing strategy to fit the local culture, to the extent of including rice burgers on its menu to provide a dietary option that was more in sync with the local diet of rice as a food staple. The adaptation of McDonald's in other countries is also evident when we have examples like the Maharaja Mac in India. In all, these examples show how the behaviour of brands, and by extension media broadcasters, is shaped by the diverse cultural groups that they venture into. Far from causing the destruction of culture, globalisation has brought about a unique global cultural scene where each culture manages to retain its individuality even in the face of global cultural movements.

Lastly, globalisation has arguably helped in the propagation of culture by creating a wider awareness and appreciation of various cultures and practices around the world. The increased cultural propagation brought about by globalisation is due to the extensive media network that condenses and makes available information on different places around the globe at one's fingertips. This allows for a greater awareness of individual cultures as various unique cultural rituals are broadcast in documentaries and information of diverse groups are recorded on the Internet. For example, the Songkran Water Festival in Thailand is now a world-famous traditional cultural rite and many tourists flock to Thailand to witness this spectacle. Hence, globalisation has, as we can see, developed a wide appreciation of local cultures. In addition, globalisation has made possible the creation, awareness and development of a new global culture. This comprises global cultural movements where certain ideals are spread worldwide, resulting in greater global integration. Examples of this would be the environmentalist movement, which sees various organisations worldwide cooperate to find solutions to environmental issues. Besides that, even corporations can initiate commercial global cultural movements such as the fast food culture propagated largely by McDonald's and a culture of fitness and sports training propagated by companies like Nike and Adidas. Whether these cultural movements are all beneficial are not as important as they are elements of a new global culture made possible by globalisation, which evidently, does promote greater cultural appreciation and development rather than cultural destruction.

Taking a look around today, one observes numerous cultural products and trends that have come about as a result of globalisation. Globalisation, by driving the breakneck evolution of culture, has produced many new exciting prospects for cultural development, including the creation of a new global culture. Every culture around the world, impacted by globalisation, is changing and developing while retaining essential traits that reinforce cultural diversity worldwide. Taking a step back, we can conclude that globalisation is pushing culture forward rather than destroying it.

Marker's comments:

A persuasive essay that impresses with insightful perspectives and a secure grasp of issues crucial to the topic. It was such a pleasure reading your essay. Excellent work!

General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 34

Education has resulted in only more inequality. Do you agree?

Kwek Mu Yi Theophilus | 12A01B

Throughout the course of human history, the power of education to empower the disempowered and strengthen the weak has not gone unnoticed. Long hailed as the “great social equaliser”, education has also been described by H.G. Wells as an essential part of society and the human race’s only alternative to “catastrophe”.

In this day and age, however, there is some indication that education – here defined as a formal system for the teaching and learning of information and skills (including literacy and numeracy) – has only succeeded in “more inequality”, both in the sense of exacerbating current divides between peoples of different backgrounds, and in the sense of creating new divisions between the educated and the uneducated. This essay will demonstrate that such instances of “more inequality” are due to the unequal implementation of education, rather than education itself, and that education continues to fulfil its purpose as a social equaliser around the world today.

There is no denying that the enhanced personal ability and social mobility granted to the educated have set them apart from the uneducated; if this were not the case, then the entire concept of education as a mode of empowerment would be null and void. It is no accident that two-thirds of the world’s illiterate are concentrated in eight developing nations, some of which also see the world’s lowest economic growth – such as in Ethiopia and Pakistan. Clearly, the skills imparted to those in well-performing nations have not only improved their lot in life, but bettered the situation of their nations as a whole. With more resources, these nations are then able to invest in better education systems, which further boost their economies, and over time, a divide is created between the rich, educated nations and the uneducated poor.

Within many developed nations, the education system is also designed to bring students who do well to a level of “higher” education: secondary or tertiary as the case may be. And in many cases, it is the rich who are able to afford the best education for their children from a young age, allowing them to easily obtain higher education while the poor are left behind. In this sense, within societies, education also amplifies existing divides between those who rise quickly through the system, and those who are, economically or otherwise, disadvantaged.

The problem here, though, is one of unequal distribution and implementation of education. If education of the same quality were made accessible to all, in each and every nation around the world, the above situations would not exist: all members of society would be equally empowered to change their socio-economic positions, and to pull their families (and communities) out of their current plight. But this is not logistically possible in today’s world: insufficient infrastructure, ineffective legislation and deep-seated ways of life are all obstacles to the equal implementation of formal education around the world.

Taking a broader perspective, this is not to say that improvements have not been made. Within the last century, the world’s literacy rate (defined as the percentage of people above 15 who can read and write) has risen to 82%, a figure unimaginable even for “developed” European societies in the past. And according to the CIA World Factbook, the world’s school-life expectancy (or, the number of years one can expect to receive formal education) has risen to 11 years, which is higher than in some developed nations today (Singapore’s, for example, is 10.1 years). While the implementation of education has not been perfect thus far, the world is certainly seeing advancements on this front – doubtless a factor for its rising economic performance.

This power of education to create change can be attributed, among education’s many functions, to two main points. Both deal with solving the problem of inequality, and they are, namely, eradicating



illiteracy and innumeracy, and imparting the ability to understand and invoke one's rights.

The twin disabilities of illiteracy and innumeracy have trapped many around the world in what Amartya Sen describes as the "certainty of depravity". Being unable to read, write and count from a young age effectively disconnects one from the information available in today's world, and disqualifies one from white-collar jobs – and increasingly, blue-collar jobs as well – in any society. The limited stations in life available to one from this point represent a restricted social mobility, and a permanently lowered personal capacity. It is also profoundly difficult for the illiterate to obtain access to sanitation and healthcare later in their lives, and this is a key factor in the higher mortality rates of the uneducated. Education provides people with the basic skills required to move ahead in today's world, without which little or no progress – both individual and societal – can be made.

The other key purpose of education, with regard to inequality, is to give people the ability to understand and invoke their rights. As Robert Frost once wrote, education creates a populace that is "easy to govern, but impossible to enslave". In other words, it gives people awareness of the freedoms they are entitled to, and how to go about obtaining them. The capacity to understand and invoke one's rights is the first step towards gaining political and social representation for one's community, without which concrete changes cannot be made (in the field of education or elsewhere) to bring society forward. In this function, education now serves as a means of empowerment, by giving the disadvantaged the necessary pre-conditions to better their lives, and the lives of those around them.

Examples abound of places where education has fulfilled these two ends remarkably well, vastly reducing inequality and creating prosperity for whole nations. Japan is one such example. Following the Meiji Restoration of 1868, many resources were devoted to education and re-education, such that by 1913, the Asian nation was printing twice as many books as the United States. Although at that stage Japan was still vastly underdeveloped, and had a wide rich-poor divide, it was soon able to become the leading economy in Asia, and actually embark on an imperialist programme of its own in 1939. Singapore too, provides us with an example of education's power as a social equaliser. At the point of independence, Singapore was still a backward colony that depended on external trade for its revenue. More than half the local population were uneducated and lived in slums or farms around the island. The past four decades, though have seen tremendous improvements in the education system, and corresponding economic prosperity. Singapore now boasts a 95.9% literacy rate, and is home to the top feeder school in the world for the Ivy League universities. At the same time, Singapore has achieved the world's fourth highest GDP, and 74.4% of Singaporean households live in 4-room flats, larger apartments, or private property.

In both these case studies, the effects of education in reducing inequality – both for individuals and for the entire nation – are self-evident. While it has been acknowledged that unequal implementation of education in some parts of the world has led to greater inequality, this writer sees it as a confirmation of education's potential to change the lot of those who benefit from it. Education's overall results around the world today are testament to its power to reduce inequality by the twin means of eradicating illiteracy and promoting rights awareness, and thus, all things considered, it would be unfair to conclude that "education has resulted in only more inequality".

Marker's comments:

A refreshing big-picture approach to the question – I have enjoyed this response and have also learnt much from it! Well done!

An effective total refutation of given statement. Can it be true though, that all things being unequal (rich and poor children have different opportunities and resources, so people are not "equal" to begin with), even the same education results in "greater inequality"? Go for some 'balance' as well, Theophilus!

General Paper Year 5 Common Test 1 (2011)

essay 35

Education has resulted in only more inequality. Do you agree?

Tan Zi Xiang | 12S06D

In today's modern age of globalisation, countries across the globe that have welcomed the breakdown of borders and increased economic and cultural exchange are now faced with a conundrum – that of further inequality. In the US, the gulf between the income of degree holders and high school diploma holders has been increasing, with the fruits of economic success over the previous few decades going almost exclusively to the top earners, whereas blue collar workers and those at the bottom of the economic hierarchy have seen their incomes stagnate or grow less proportionately to the economy as a whole. Education has been identified as the root cause of this inequality. However, is this indeed the case? This essay will show that, far from worsening the divide, education is in fact the “ultimate equaliser” that is most effective in remedying inequality, and the inequality that we see in our world today is due to the inequitable access to education, rather than the fault of education per se.

Prima facie, the argument that education exacerbates inequality seems true. As a matter of fact, undergoing higher education, such as receiving a Bachelor's degree, or perhaps a Masters or even PhD, has been associated with higher incomes, as compared to those with only a high school diploma or a post-secondary equivalent. Even among those who are highly educated, it has been found that those with even more education – like a PhD holder, as a general rule, command greater income in the labour market, than a “mere” Bachelor's degree holder. To an extent, this inequality has been worsened by globalisation, in what sociologists term the “Matthew Effect”, alluding to the Biblical verse. As highly skilled workers face greater employability in a globalised world, in which their expertise is highly sought after, those who are educationally less qualified face increased competition from newly industrialising countries like China and India, with their large pools of labour supply. As such, the former see their incomes increase and the latter see their income decrease, a sign that inequality has reared its ugly head. Indeed, education can cause inequality to worsen.

Proponents of the thesis argue that education has contributed to inequality not only in terms of earning power, but also in the political arena. Especially in democratic but less developed nations (India comes to mind), the masses do not have access to education and even for those who do, the lack of infrastructure and resources has ensured that whatever education they receive is of minimal use at best. As such, when election season comes, the average uneducated Joe on the street is rendered incapable of making an informed, rational decision, as per the ideal of democracies, but rather falls prey to the demagogic leaning, mudslinging and intimidation rampant in these countries. Furthermore, the situation is worsened by the fact that there exists highly educated, wealthy elite in these countries who arguably have a monopoly on knowledge, thus giving them undue influence in the politics of their country. As detailed in the Man Booker Prize-winning book, *'The White Tiger'*, elections held in India, especially those in rural regions, are hardly fair as local gangsters are bribed to ensure that whoever votes against the favoured candidates are physically abused. In addition, candidates, who are usually more educated, resort to scare tactics and demagogic incitation in order to rile and hoodwink voters into supporting them, usually at the expense of Muslims or untouchables – members of the lower caste. Again, the thesis that education leads to inequality is seemingly upheld, as the masses' ability to effect constructive political change in democracies is handicapped by their education, or rather the lack thereof, whereas the elites who have had access to education are able to steer election results and exert undue influence on political outcome.

That being said, both economic and political inequality are not caused by education per se, but rather the lack of equal access to it.

While income gaps have indeed widened according to education lines, it is arguable that this inequality was precipitated by globalisation and that the capitalist market we live in actually perpetuates this inequality for the greater good of society by rewarding society's most productive members with a larger share of the economic pie. Hence, this inequality is largely inevitable



and to a great extent, a necessary evil. On the other hand, economic inequality resulting from discrimination has, in effect, been combated by education. A classic example of education at work in reducing economic inequality is that of women entering the workforce. Following the feminist movement of the 20th century, women have entered the workforce in ever-increasing numbers. However, it has been argued that inequality exists in labour as women are paid 70 cents for every dollar a man earns. This divide, however, has been dwindling in many modern economies that respect the right for women to work largely due to the fact that women today are receiving more tertiary education than in the past, thus increasing their productivity and becoming able to earn a larger salary as a result. In Japan, for instance, women make up over 60% of the university population. To be sure, gender inequality still exists today, with disproportionately fewer female captains of industries and politicians, but we see that the inequality has been narrowing because education has broadened a woman's perspective to beyond that of the household, such that she can exercise her right to choose whether to enter the workforce or join the political fray.

In addition, education has done more than to merely bridge the economic divide between genders; many social inequalities have been rendered less deleterious by education. For example, in Botswana, a relatively wealthy African nation, women who have received more education have fewer children, an indication of the fact that the power relations between a husband and wife, once tilted in the favour of the man, have now been restored to a more equitable state. This is because educated women, rather than capitulating to their husbands' demands, are aware of their rights and exercise greater influence in domestic relations and family planning. As such, education has resulted in women becoming able to exercise greater autonomy over themselves, reversing a millennia-old trend of unfair patriarchal dominance in many societies.

Lastly, the fact that many forms of inequality still exist today can largely be attributed to the unequal access to education. With regard to the abovementioned point on political inequality, that large swathes of the uneducated are able to be manipulated by a wealthy, highly educated elite is not a point against education. On the contrary, it further fuels the case for education to become more prevalent as the current flaw in the system is due not to education per se, but rather the unequal access to education. In establishing universal, quality education for all, the previously illiterate will then be able to participate in political discourse, hence correcting for former injustices. Similarly, after black slaves were emancipated following the civil war, African Americans still earned a disproportionately lower income and had disproportionately fewer representatives in government. While this could be attributed to persisting societal prejudices, to a large extent their lack of education is to be blamed as well. As education opened their doorway to greater economic opportunities, African Americans have similarly proved themselves to be capable leaders, thinkers and pioneers. The election of Barack Obama, himself a Harvard law graduate, into the White House is testament to the fact that education is indeed the "ultimate equaliser". So, in response to the inequalities of today, the answer can only be more education, not less.

In conclusion, there is a necessity to distinguish between two forms of inequality – inequality of opportunity, and inequality of outcome. In today's globalised, capitalist societies, universal education for all guarantees that everyone, as far as possible, is given an equal playing field and an equal chance to succeed, that is to ensure equality in opportunity. While this has usually led to a correspondingly more equal outcome, education in and of itself by no means guarantees everyone will receive an equal outcome. As such, education can indeed be a fault line by which inequality occurs – the educated earn a higher paycheck and can exercise greater influence in politics than their uneducated compatriots. However, this is not a consequence of education and in fact, can be ameliorated by the promulgation of further education, especially in areas where existing infrastructure fails to deliver quality education. In sum, the thesis that education has caused greater inequality is ludicrous, and on the contrary, education holds the promise of reversing inequality, that education is indeed the "ultimate equaliser".

Marker's comments:

Good examples and clear topic sentences. Your essay shows good engagement with issues pertinent to the question.

Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Common Test 2

essay 36

“Kantian phenomenalism may have its appeal, but for all intents and purposes, we live our lives as naïve realists.” Discuss with reference to knowledge construction in society.

Stacey-Ann Lee Wanpei | 11S03H

While Descartes' maximally sceptical conclusion about the nature of the world around us was that all we could know for sure was our own existence, Kant espoused a different theory. The theory of Kantian phenomenalism relating to our perceptions of an external world turns on the supposition of two divided, irreconcilable worlds: the phenomenal and the noumenal. The world we perceive – or think we perceive – is the phenomenal; the unknown 'true' world beyond our impenetrable veil of perception is the noumenal, which we can never access. Thus, according to phenomenologists, anything we can observe, sense or think about the 'external' world is purely a reflection of things as they are in the phenomenal realm, never the noumenal. This would seem rather odd and absurd to most, who, as the question suggests, are likely to be naïve realists. Naïve realism is an intuitive perceptual understanding; it is the view that whatever we perceive truly exists and that the world we perceive is indeed the true reality that we inhabit. As metaphysical ideas or theories, they both have their merits, proofs and various justifications; however, we are called to examine them in the light of knowledge construction in society, where concerns other than metaphysical weight are brought to bear. In this respect, then, naïve realism appears to have a clear advantage. Before discussing this, let us clarify the nebulous notion of 'knowledge construction in society'.

Knowledge construction in society refers to methods used to construct or discover knowledge, distinguished from simple 'knowledge construction' by the additional consideration that the methods used and knowledge gained must involve the participation, interest and benefit of 'society'. Society here refers not to any particular group of individuals, but to an abstract conception of a human community. In 'society', therefore, it is assumed that progress and development are the overarching motivations, and practicality a foremost concern in achieving these goals. Hence, knowledge that fails to involve, interest or benefit society is hence taken to be impractical – the usefulness of the knowledge gained is the most important criterion here. Therefore, we can see the question as obliquely questioning the practicality of two metaphysical systems: naïve realism and Kantian phenomenalism, as foundations for the construction of knowledge in society. The intrinsic philosophical value (if indeed there is such a thing) is of less interest here than their usefulness as frameworks within which, or based on which, inquiry can be carried out in society.

Naïve realism is, simply, a 'what you see is what you get' approach. By fundamentally assuming that the world we perceive and interact with is real and not misleading, it validates many empirically-based areas of knowledge important to the growth and development of society. For example, science as we know it studies the observable world through experimental methods. From a naïve realist's point of view, the world being studied is real, and theories constructed about it, based on observations of it, constitute knowledge that we have of the real world. As such, science and the scientific method are validated as ways of constructing knowledge in society. By affirming the value of the empirical inquiry carried out in sciences, social sciences, et cetera, naïve realism helps to open up or validate avenues for construction of useful knowledge in society.

Moreover, naïve realism is simply the intuitive way in which humans view the external world. Intuitively, we interpret our observations in a naïve-realist way. To illustrate, when we look at a table, we tend to begin thinking of the physical properties of the table (its blue-ness, its composition, its size) rather than to question the existence of the table. We tend to assume implicitly that it really exists. Any form of doubt in the truth of the external world is a step away from our usual, naïve acceptance – and this is a strong motivation for knowledge construction in society. As this is our primary mechanism for looking at the world, it is no surprise that most of our inquiry is couched deeply in the assumptions and even language of naïve realism. Accepting naïve realism also brings us instrumental benefit, as illustrated above in the example about science, which has undeniably brought about great development in society. Although it may not be the most



well-justified or metaphysically stable system of knowledge construction, it has nonetheless been useful. The majority of our knowledge in society concerns the external world, and though we may not always have good philosophical reasons for accepting naïve realism, tacitly accepting it has given us benefit. Naïve realism, although a rather unsound metaphysical position, is important and useful to knowledge construction in society.

Turning to Kantian phenomenalism, it is less perceptibly useful in knowledge construction in society, but not devoid of use. Kantian phenomenalism provides us with a viable viewpoint for questioning the truth of the world around us and gives us a method of doubt. By introducing the possibility that the world we see around us is in fact only real in our perception, it allows us to question the world. As a theory, Kantian phenomenalism also has important ramifications in philosophical inquiry. For example, Kantian aesthetics incorporates the tenets of phenomenalism – works of art are not to be judged, in any way, on the “truth” of the artwork or as representations of truth. Rather, they are simply to be considered as sensory, aesthetic objects judged on the responses that they provoke in human faculties. Although Kantian phenomenalism in itself seems useless in society, it has implications in areas that are valuable to society.

Furthermore, although the overriding concern for knowledge construction in society is usefulness, it is not limited to that. Society’s interest also plays a role in determining the value placed on certain kinds of knowledge. Interest in exploring the physical, philosophical and otherwise ‘theoretical’ implications of a system such as Kantian phenomenalism can also establish it as important. Although phenomenalism may not bring about as much tangible benefit or usefulness as naïve realism seems to support, it has its benefits, and it would be incorrect to say that it has no place in society.

Phenomenalism is also not wholly incompatible with even the most profoundly empirical disciplines, like the natural sciences. One can accept and use the fruits of scientific inquiry without needing to reject Kantian phenomenalism – and its appeal – wholesale. If we accept the phenomenalist’s perspective, i.e. that the world we experience is not the ‘true’ world, neither the validity nor usefulness of scientific inquiry are diminished. What is affected is that science is removed from the realm of knowledge about the ‘real’ world, since the phenomenal world is not the ‘real’ world – but this does not dismiss it as a legitimate form of knowledge in society. The question is, how important is it that our knowledge is of the ‘true’, noumenal world? In the scope of usefulness, no matter whether the metaphysical conclusion is that “the external observable world is true” or “we can only access the phenomenal but not the noumenal world”, empirical knowledge can and does continue to be useful. When push comes to shove, knowledge in society does not exactly need to be of the ‘real’ world in any philosophically sound way in order to be useful. The value of knowledge in society is not solely epistemological or metaphysical.

Both Kantian phenomenalism and naïve realism are metaphysical frameworks that can give us useful knowledge about the world. However, knowledge in society is not defined completely by epistemological and metaphysical concerns, and can be of benefit regardless of its metaphysical grounds. As naïve realism is simply the most intuitive way to comprehend the world, it must take primary place in our understanding of life as well as our understanding of useful knowledge.

Knowledge and Inquiry Year 6 Class Assignment

essay 37

“It is not fruitful to judge the appropriateness of people’s responses to art.” Discuss this view with reference to knowledge in the aesthetics.

Lynette Lim Xueling | 11AO1C

My understanding of the “judgment” referred to in the statement is that it assumes a standard against which people’s responses can be evaluated. With this in mind, I take the claim that this “is not fruitful” to mean that attempting to evaluate an individual’s aesthetic claims against an external criterion will not produce conclusive answers. I agree, to a large extent, with this statement, due to the nature of any aesthetic knowledge. However, I also recognise that assuming a degree of objectivity is not completely without purpose, for the application of general aesthetic rules may be necessary in making an aesthetic claim, even if it is subjective.

Judging the appropriateness of people’s responses to art is not fruitful in the sense that it does not secure definitive conclusions as to whether a piece of art is aesthetically “good or bad”. This is because the standards assumed in such a judgment are general and supposedly objective, whereas responses to artworks are personal, emotional and subjective.

An individual’s response to an artwork is subjective, as it is an interaction between the perceived artwork and the individual’s beliefs and background knowledge (in other words, the way he perceives things). Much like the taste of coconut, a person can like an artwork, yet not be able to elucidate his experience, nor give objective grounds on which his preference can be judged as better than one of a person who dislikes it. To impose a general set of rules on subjective responses, to proclaim that a liking for Jackson Pollock’s abstract art is “wrong”, is sheer dogmatism. As Curt Ducasse says, the only difference between critics and amateurs is that critics can articulate reasons for their preferences – however, both make aesthetic claims favouring or denouncing a work of art which are no more objective than the other; in other words, they are matters of taste. Critics merely cite aesthetic standards as the ones they find common to the artworks they like. Thus, even those who proclaim criteria for high art rely on circular justification. As such, the appeal to a set of criteria against which to judge people’s responses does not hold credence, as these criteria are general and self-justifying reasons used to warrant the particular preferences of individuals. As taste is subjective and thus cannot be right or wrong, judging the appropriateness of people’s responses to art is not possible. Attempting to impose such a claim of objectivity on subjective judgments merely leads to two competing proclamations of taste impossible to choose between – thus, the attempt at a conclusive judgment will not be fruitful.

Moreover, as most people respond to artworks emotionally or personally, it is not fruitful to judge the appropriateness of their responses, which requires an external criterion. This is because emotional responses cannot be quantified or articulated, and each aesthetic response is intrinsically personal, inseparable from past experience and assumptions. Kant described the aesthetic attitude as detached, meaning the appreciation of an artwork is removed from the complications of an individual’s daily life. Therefore, an individual’s terms for appreciating an artwork are completely different from the terms used in their ordinary sense of daily life, not of utilitarian, nor rational considerations. For example, a spectator’s pure enjoyment of an orchestral symphony can be described as “sublime” or “evocatively tumultuous” and others can agree with this response. Yet so long as this response is attributed to a certain quality of the piece (for example, “the use of C major makes this work sublime”) this is at once individual speculation, and not applicable to all works of art. Moreover, the individual’s experience of the music may be shaped by a particular memory in his childhood that is distinct from other spectators’ experiences, hence his emotional response to the piece is particular and cannot be articulated, nor located as a quality of the work itself. It is impossible to arrive at a general rule making certain responses more appropriate than others, thus any judgment is fruitless in the sense that it is not objective and proves nothing.



Even if a set of rules is agreed upon, like “formal perfection” and “emotional translatability”, people may not agree when it comes to the application of such rules onto particular artworks. What is emotionally evocative to one is informed by the particular work’s elements that relate to his particular body of experience; what is “formally perfect” to one accepting of divergent elements forming a whole in modern art, may be deemed chaotic and random to one informed by classical sensibilities. Judging the appropriateness of the response of either cannot be fruitful as an aesthetic knowledge claim in itself – the judgment is only fruitful insofar as it appeals to the criteria underlying either system or era; in other words, it is only paradigmatically acceptable and thus fruitless in relation to a system of aesthetic generalisation.

Overall, it may be said that judging appropriateness of peoples’ responses to art is fruitless as it does not advance knowledge in aesthetics. This is because such judgment is based on a rigid and unchanging account of aesthetic standards. It uses static, self-affirming general criteria to examine the particular, rather than uses the particular judgments of humans to expand upon an account of art. All aesthetic claims are derived from human responses to art, thus, any appropriate account of aesthetics cannot proclaim objectivity, but must accept the validity of diverse responses to art. Such acceptance of diversity will be more fruitful as it progresses and refines our account of aesthetic knowledge, based upon the criteria of individual perception (upon which any conception of art was informed in the first place).

On the other hand, it cannot be said that judging aesthetic responses is completely fruitless, as this can be seen as useful in organising the diverse plethora of viewpoints and responses to artworks. Although the criteria used may be approximate and not objective (as established earlier), in the absence of any such assumed generalisations, all aesthetic claims would be void, and it would be impossible to differentiate any aesthetic response from another (for example, a response to a Matisse artwork as opposed to a response to a Duchampian found-object). However, aesthetics, like a formal game, is premised on the assumption of such standards. Aesthetics can only operate when critics, or individuals assume the objectivity and universality of a value judgment in response to an artwork. If a personal response to an artwork is allowed to collapse into nihilistic relativism, critics would not proclaim value judgments – there would be no debate on artworks, as there is no debate on the value of coconuts. However, in aesthetics, as in ethics, despite its difficulty and its apparent subjectivity, the debate is not abandoned, because of its gravity. We continue to judge the appropriateness of responses to artworks, we sustain the aesthetic game, in hopes of cauterising the unclear approximations of our aesthetic claims. Perhaps, in the promotion of multiple standards by a diversity of individuals, in subjectivity some sort of objectivity can be realised. Kant spoke of the continuities in the human perceptual system, certain universal qualities that compel people towards a position on art (despite other influence from cultural systems affecting this judgment). To the extent that claims are not dogmatic, and forcefully imposed upon others, it is fruitful for individuals to judge the appropriateness of people’s responses to art. Their conflicting standards can perhaps aid us towards the understanding of a synthesis that will refine existing aesthetic knowledge, advancing the man-made, formal game of aesthetics.

Hence, value judgments of people’s responses to art are fruitless to the extent that they will never reach complete objectivity or come to unshakeable conclusions according to external, transcendent criteria. This is due to the human-based, subjective quality of aesthetic knowledge. However, within this system of approximation, such judgments can be made, for they are the very suppositions needed to sustain the aesthetics game.

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