

## **Liberalism's *Other*: Analyzing the Emergence of the *Bobotante* Signifier in the Philippines using Chantal Mouffe's Critique of Liberal Political Theory**

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### **Abstract**

This paper is driven by an assumption that the act of tagging others as *bobotante* in the Philippines is problematic and dangerous because it delegitimizes them as democratic actors, thereby justifying or reifying their subordination. Against this backdrop, this paper investigates the mechanism that underpins the existence of the *bobotante* signifier. It contends that understanding the underlying logic that underpins the *bobotante* signifier places us in a better position to address this problem substantially. Drawing upon Chantal Mouffe's critique of liberal political theory, this paper traces the root of the *bobotante* signifier in the rationalism which sits at the core of the current configuration of liberalism in the Philippines. Using Mouffe's ideas, this paper advances the argument that the liberal insistence on rationality – manifested in the calls for wise, neutral, and rational voting in the Philippines – underpins the notion of the *bobotante* in a twofold manner: it postulates, firstly, that “rational” voters make right electoral choices and, secondly, that the “right” electoral choices are politicians who fit the criteria of the liberal subject. In this way, the Filipino voters whose electoral choices do not reflect the “right” choice from the lens of liberalism are concomitantly labeled *bobotante* or dumb voters.

**Keywords:** *bobotante*, liberal subject, Chantal Mouffe, liberal politics, liberal rationalism

## Introduction

Dumb, easily manipulated, gullible, fanatics, blind devotees – these are only a few of the derogatory labels some Filipinos are associated with particularly during election season in the Philippines. Subsumed under the colloquial term *bobotante* – a portmanteau of the Tagalog words *bobo* (fool or dumb) and *botante* (voter) – it expresses a belief in the unthinking or dumb ways some Filipinos participate in politics and elections. Consequently, the Filipinos tagged as *bobotante* are perceived as impediments to the general progress of the Philippines because their presumed unthinking ways of political participation enable corrupt and incompetent politicians to secure political power.<sup>1</sup> However, I strongly believe that calling someone a *bobotante* is not only a problematic act but also a dangerous one. When an individual or group is categorized as *bobotante*, they are also pre-emptively excluded from the realm of legitimacy in the democratic sphere. A *bobotante* is perceived as a nuisance, a voter who is not worthy to be listened to and engaged with. To borrow the words of Carmina Untalan, the individual called *bobotante* “is stripped off of his power to become a participator in the political discussion”.<sup>2</sup> With their voices eliminated in the democratic process, the likelihood is that the figures labelled as *bobotante* are silenced and suppressed, thereby potentially justifying or reifying their subordination.

To combat this, most of the existing pieces of literature on the *bobotante* have concentrated their attention in dispelling the phenomenon as a myth or a misconception. To achieve their goal, they largely argue along the following lines: that the Filipinos categorized as *bobotante*, which they clarify are usually the poor or mass segments of the population, are only misunderstood, that their electoral choices are propelled by a different set of moral and rational calculus, and that

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<sup>1</sup> Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines: Inequality, Democracy and the Urban Poor* (Quezon: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019), 136; Peter Kreuzer, *A Patron-Strongman who Delivers: Explaining Enduring Public Support for President Duterte in the Philippines* (Frankfurt am Main: Peace Research Institute Frankfurt, 2020), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Carmina Yu Untalan, “Philippines 2016: Democracy for the Bobotante,” *Institute of Asia and Pacific Studies*, 24 February 2016, <https://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/asiapacificstudies/2016/02/24/philippines-2016-democracy-for-the-bobotante/>.

contrary to the popular belief “the poor vote is a thinking vote”.<sup>3</sup> While these studies are important in subverting the dangerous belief in the *bobotante*, I have observed that they haven’t fully developed a sustained analysis of the logic that underpins the existence of the *bobotante* signifier in the first instance. They have skillfully critiqued the belief in the *bobotante* without truly explaining why the figure of the *bobotante* exists in the first place. Hence, there is a paucity of research in this domain.<sup>4</sup> This is the gap which this paper will attempt to fill. I am convinced that this is important because understanding the underlying cause why others are deemed as *bobotante* places us in a much better position to address this problem substantially; otherwise, we risk taking actions that do not address the root of the problem but only its surface manifestations or symptoms.

This study aims to dig deeper in order to shed light on the logic that lies beneath the existence of the *bobotante* signifier in the Philippines. Specifically, this study will do so through the lens of Chantal Mouffe’s critique of liberal political theory. According to Mouffe, political liberalism postulates the faulty assumption that universal truth-claims can be reached by individuals observing the proper procedures of neutrality and rationality.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis placed

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<sup>3</sup> See Cleve V. Arguelles, ““We are Rodrigo Duterte”: Dimensions of the Philippine Populist Publics’ Vote,” *Asian Policy & Politics* 11, no. 3 (2019): 417 – 437, <https://doi.org/10.1111/aspp.12472>; Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs* 35, no. 3 (2016): 91 – 109, <http://nbn-resolving.org/urn/resolver.pl?urn:nbn:de:gbv:18-4-10112>; Mark R. Thompson, “Southeast Asia’s Subversive Voters: A Philippine Perspective,” *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* 64, no. 2 (June 2016): 265 – 287, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26621963>; Sheila Coronel and Yvonne Chua, “The Poor Vote is a Thinking Vote,” *Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism*, April 26, 2004, <https://old.pcji.org/stories/the-poor-vote-is-a-thinking-vote/>.

<sup>4</sup> To my knowledge, only Carmina Yu Untalan’s work has proposed a theoretical explanation of the cause some Filipinos are perceived as *bobotante*. For her, the close to 400 years of colonial subjection of the Filipinos have implanted an elitist attitude in their consciousness, especially among the economic middle class, that prompts them to privilege the rationality and cultural identity of the elites and denigrate those whose rationality and identity fail to reflect the elitist criteria. Thus, she writes, “we find in the *bobotante* the perfect image of the colonial subject seen from the viewpoint of the colonizer: ignorant, docile and foolish.” See Untalan, “Democracy for the Bobotante.”

<sup>5</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (1993; London & New York: Verso, 2020), 121.

on rational procedures leads liberalism to create a sharp division between the rational and the irrational, that is, between those who accept the rules of the liberal language game and those who do not. I posit that Mouffe's criticism of liberalism is an apposite heuristic device in the analysis of the emergence of the *bobotante* signifier especially once we take into account the fact that liberal ideals, particularly the liberal conception of the neutral and rational subject, dominates electoral discourse in the Philippines. Indeed, the public discourse every election season in the country is saturated by liberal terms – such as the “rational,” “wise,” and “neutral” voter – that are often juxtaposed against the *bobotante*.

For the various reasons mentioned above, this study proposes to look at the role of liberalism in the emergence of the *bobotante* signifier in the Philippines. It will argue, by way of Mouffe, that belief in the Filipino *bobotante* is underpinned by liberalism in a twofold manner: it postulates, firstly, that “rational” voters make right electoral choices and, secondly, that the “right” electoral choices are politicians who fit the criteria of the liberal subject. The Filipino voters whose electoral choices do not reflect the “right” choice from the lens of liberalism are concomitantly labeled *bobotante* or dumb voters. In this regard, as I will fully explain later, the *bobotante* can be considered as liberalism's *Other*, the surplus of the liberal regime's rational structure.

To achieve the modest aim of this study, its discussion will be divided into three main parts. The first section will reconstruct the emphasis liberalism places on rationalism as a core component of their ideal subject. This section will also expound the manifestation of this liberal subject in the Philippines. The second section will explicate Chantal Mouffe's critique of liberal political theory. Finally, the third section will lay down the main argument of this paper: that the *bobotante* is a signifier whose existence is underpinned by the assumptions of liberalism.

### **The Rational Subject of Liberal Theory and its Manifestation in the Philippines**

Rationalism has long been one of the main preoccupations of liberal theory. By and large, liberal thinkers assume, whether implicitly or explicitly, that liberal actors are rational in the sense that

they consciously seek the advancement of their preferences and the maximization of their interests. Rationality, in this matter, is understood as a necessary characteristic of the subject to make choices, rationally justify them, control its fate, overcome obstacles, attain the truth, and progress to a more enlightened or perfect state.<sup>6</sup> In a nutshell, liberal thinkers view liberal individuals as “subjects,” that is, “each as a point of origin of consciousness, choice, and action”.<sup>7</sup>

It is generally acknowledged that the root of this liberal-rational subject can be traced to the onset of Western modernity in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Francis Fukuyama, for instance, has observed that since its inception modern liberalism was inextricably linked with the scientific mode of reasoning.<sup>8</sup> This mode of reasoning is characterized by the belief that the external world is accessible by the human mind and manipulable by the methods of science. As Fukuyama argued, this scientific mode of thinking is the foundation for the liberal commitment to rational and free discourse.<sup>9</sup> A similar thought is expressed by Elizabeth St. Pierre who observed that “the chief tenets of liberalism coalesced and flourished during the Enlightenment”.<sup>10</sup> As we are well aware of, the Enlightenment (18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) was a period when man’s belief and confidence in his ability to reason and understand the “truths” of the world reached its peak. At that time, man was viewed as a subject in full control of his thoughts and actions.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it is observed that from the modern period onwards the liberal-rational subject became the “sole protagonist” of the world.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, “A Critique of the Rational Individual of Liberal Democracy” (Paper presentation, Annual International Qualitative Research in Education Conference, Athens, GA, January 9-11, 1997); Ji Young Choi, “Rationality, norms and identity in international relations,” *International Politics* 52, no. 1 (2015): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1057/ip.2014.41>; Frank I. Michelman, “The Subject of Liberalism,” *Stanford Law Review* 46, no. 6 (July 1994): 1812, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1229171>.

<sup>7</sup> Michelman, “The Subject of Liberalism,” 1813.

<sup>8</sup> M. Anthony Mills, “Saving Liberalism from Itself,” *American Enterprise Institute*, October 24, 2022, <https://www.aei.org/articles/saving-liberalism-from-itself/>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> St. Pierre, “Rational Individual”; see also Mills, “Saving Liberalism”.

<sup>11</sup> Michelman, “The Subject of Liberalism,” 1809.

<sup>12</sup> Stefano Guzzini, “A Reconstruction of Constructivism in International Relations,” *European Journal of International Relations* 6, no. 2 (2000): 151.

Furthermore, this association between liberalism and rationalism is more than just a contingent link. In the minds of many liberal thinkers, there is a strong association between rationalism and liberalism to the point that the former is seen as the latter's *condition sine qua non*. This is expressed perfectly by the liberal thinker Karl Popper's famous phrase: "*Man can know: thus he can be free*".<sup>13</sup> For Popper, the notion that men possess rationality demands that all individuals must be treated as equally autonomous agents. Thus, for him, rationalism and liberalism (or what he called the "open society") are inherently connected: "rationalism is linked up with the recognition of the necessity of social institutions to protect freedom of criticism, freedom of thought, and thus the freedom of men".<sup>14</sup> This suggests that a liberal rationalist is someone who, by virtue of his reason, freely submits to the political ideals of liberalism. He is seen as someone who, in the absence of coercion, believes in the legitimacy of free discussion and the absence of will-imposition by one over the others.<sup>15</sup> In this light, the existence of the rational subject in liberalism is not accidental but immanent.

The liberal conception of the subject was further amplified in modern liberal democracies wherein the choice of leaders rests on the vote of the people. Indeed, the rational choice model in voting behavior is widely accepted in liberal circles. In general, this model envisages the ideal liberal-rational voter as someone who can accurately predict the future economic performance of the incumbent based on the "looseness" or "tightness" of his past economic performance; who can deliberate and use his reason to distinguish the best qualified candidates who will most likely steer the nation towards its goals; and a voter who can process the political relevance of an information efficiently.<sup>16</sup> For many liberal thinkers, this rationality in

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<sup>13</sup> Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* (New York: Basic Books, 1963), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, New One-Volume Edition (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 1994), 443.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Kahn, "'Fondly Overcome': Revisiting the History of the Liberal Subject," *Acta Poetica* 25, no. 2 (2004): 30, <https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/ap/v25n2/v25n2a2.pdf>; Felix E. Oppenheim, "Rationalism and Liberalism," *World Politics* 16, no. 2 (January 1964): 357, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2009512>.

<sup>16</sup> See Motoshi Suzuki, "The Rationality of Economic Voting and the Macroeconomic Regime," *American Journal of Political Science* 35, no. 3 (August 1991):

electoral voting is crucial for the well-being of liberal democratic states.<sup>17</sup>

The same image of the liberal-rational voter is popular in the Philippines. Each election season in the country, especially since the surge of social media use among Filipinos, stands witness to a gush of calls for Filipino voters to observe liberal ideals of rationality and neutrality in the act of voting. Indeed, a cursory glance online reveals a multitude of articles and news columns calling for Filipinos to vote wisely or rationally.<sup>18</sup> Even some religious personalities, like Bishop Broderick Pabillo, inculcate calls for rational voting during their sermons.<sup>19</sup> For liberal thinkers in the country, voting requires a lot of research: the history, skills, and competencies of an aspiring politician have to be dissected and carefully rationalized. This is best illustrated by the eminent Filipino sociologist Randy David who sees the ideal voter as someone, in his own words, “who bases his/her choices on a careful scrutiny of candidates’ qualifications, personal integrity,

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626-627, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2111558>; James A. Gardner, “Protecting the Rationality of Electoral Outcomes: A Challenge to First Amendment Doctrine,” 51 U. CHI. L. REV. 892 (1984): 895 – 898, [https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/journal\\_articles/674](https://digitalcommons.law.buffalo.edu/journal_articles/674); Aaron Edlin, Andrew Gelman, and Noah Kaplan, “Voting as a Rational Choice: Why and How People Vote to Improve the Well-Being of Others,” *Rationality and Society* 19, no. 3 (2007): 305, <http://rss.sagepub.com> DOI: 10.1177/1043463107077384; I-Ching Lee et al., “Are we Rational or Not? The Exploration of Voter Choices during the 2016 Presidential and Legislative Elections in Taiwan,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 8, no. 1762 (October 2017): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01762>; I-Ching Lee et al., “Voting Intention and Choices: Are Voters Always Rational and Deliberative?,” *PLOS ONE* 11, no. 2 (February 17, 2016): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0148643>

<sup>17</sup> Lee et al., “Voting Intention and Choices,” 2; Anthony McGann, “Voting Choice and Rational Choice,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics*, August 31, 2016, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190228637.013.79>; Lee et al., “Are we Rational or Not?,” 1.

<sup>18</sup> See Tony Samson, “Our duty to vote wisely,” *BusinessWorld*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.bworldonline.com/opinion/2021/08/11/388618/our-duty-to-vote-wisely/>; Sara Soliven De Guzman, “Your vote is your choice,” *Philstar Global*, May 9, 2022, <https://www.philstar.com/opinion/2022/05/09/2179659/your-vote-your-voice>; Siegfried Bueno Mison, Esq., “Vote wisely, choose God and country!,” *Business Mirror*, May 6, 2019, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2019/05/06/vote-wisely-choose-god-and-country/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Voting wisely as a Sign of Patriotism – Bishop Pabillo,” *The Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Manila*, May 10, 2021, <https://rcam.org/voting-wisely-as-a-sign-of-patriotism-bishop-pabillo/>.

relevant experience, past performance, and political platform”.<sup>20</sup> For David, this rational approach to voting is requisite for voters to be able to choose the best and most qualified candidate.

Oftentimes, this liberal demand for Filipino voters to be rational is conveyed through the popular slogan “vote wisely”. For Filipino political scientist Carmel Abao, voting wisely means that:

[W]e, Filipino voters, have to examine “everything” about the candidates: platform and messaging (especially priorities), character (integrity issues), track record in politics and governance, alliances, business interests, and personal background (educational attainment, family background, views on religion, gender, class, etc).<sup>21</sup>

Moreover, she asserts that voting wisely involves examining what type of political regime the candidates will likely create if they become president – whether it is democratic or not. Such calls for “voting wisely” signify the liberal plea for Filipino voters to be “rational” in their political choices. It implies that for liberals voting goes beyond the actual shading of the ballot and the appeal of various personalities. Choosing a candidate requires not only studying the past of each aspirant but also thinking carefully about the future of the nation’s democracy. For liberals in the Philippines, voting requires a high degree of rationality, that is, it demands rigorous research and the ability to juxtapose a candidate’s potential against the rest of the field.

As we can see, the notion of the liberal-rational subject is prevalent in the Philippines. This is obvious particularly during election season in the country where liberal ideals of rationality, neutrality, and informed decision making saturate its political and electoral discourse. In theory, the liberal call for neutrality and rationality seems to be truisms for making sound political and electoral choices. However, it would be remiss not to point out the problems it introduces. Let me then shed light on these problems by

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<sup>20</sup> Randy David, “Why Filipinos vote the way they do,” *Inquirer.net*, May 01, 2022, <https://opinion.inquirer.net/152534/why-filipinos-vote-the-way-they-do/amp>.

<sup>21</sup> Carmel V. Abao, “[Opinion] Choose your democracy wisely,” *Rappler*, February 9, 2022, <https://www.rappler.com/voices/thought-leaders/opinion-choose-your-democracy-wisely/>.



providing an exposition of Chantal Mouffe's critique of liberal rationalism.

### **Chantal Mouffe's Critique of Liberal Political Theory**

Liberalism, as Mouffe would have us believe, rests on the fundamental principle that the source of power of society is the independent individual.<sup>22</sup> With individualism at its heart, she contends that pluralism inevitably becomes the cardinal principle of liberal politics, a principle which states that "there cannot be a sole conception of eudaimonia, of happiness, which is capable of being imposed on all, but that each one must have the possibility of discovering his happiness as he understands it, to fix for himself his own proper objectives and to attempt to realize them in his own way."<sup>23</sup> Starting from the fact of pluralism, the fundamental liberal predicament is the attainment of social harmony and coexistence in a society composed of individuals with different conceptions of the good. In Mouffe's analysis, this is the problem which thrusts liberal thinkers to inject a rationalistic viewpoint into their system. Liberalism, she argues, envisions the formation of a political order wherein different individuals detach themselves from their particular interests and, guided solely by their reason, agree on a rational consensus, that is, principles which everybody, despite the plurality of their interests, can accept.<sup>24</sup>

This is what she observed in John Rawls, whom she thinks developed the most elaborate formulation of liberal politics. According to Mouffe, Rawls' liberalism advocates a moral, albeit minimal, consensus on political fundamentals which all reasonable citizens can accept despite possessing different comprehensive doctrines.<sup>25</sup> She narrates that Rawls proposes his principle of Justice as Fairness as an acceptable basis for a rational consensus since this is non-partisan and transcends the particularity of interests.<sup>26</sup> For Mouffe, Rawls is

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<sup>22</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 95.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 121-123.

<sup>25</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "The limits of John Rawls's pluralism," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 4, no. 2 (2005): 222, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X05052539>; See also Peter J. Steinberger, "Rationalism in Politics," *American Political Science Review* 109, no. 4 (November 2015): 756, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055415000489>.

<sup>26</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 143.

convinced that once we accept liberty and equality as basic and reasonable premises, “a process of neutral, rational reasoning leads to the formulation of a theory of justice that all reasonable and rational people should accept”.<sup>27</sup> Again, this is acceptable to all reasonable and rational people since this rational consensus on justice is a product of reason and is neutral with respect to comprehensive doctrines.

The emphasis placed by liberals on a rational consensus is what ultimately incited Mouffe's ire. For her, a rational consensus is an “empirical illusion” because a total agreement on a given principle is impossible to attain in modern democratic societies which are specifically characterized by the absence of a substantive common good.<sup>28</sup> She thinks that the pluralism and division in modern democracies can never be transcended since the formation of an identity and a discourse necessitates a relational difference with a constitutive outside – an “us” can only exist if there is a “them”.<sup>29</sup> This Mouffean principle, which she calls antagonism, denotes the tension in the formation of identities: while the “other” is necessary for the emergence of identities, the necessary differential relation between them also means that an identity cannot fix itself as full positivity, as something which exists in-itself. Since this antagonistic division is irreducible, identities, in the words of Anna Marie Smith, “will never be able to occupy a space that is beyond power, every political decision will necessarily entail the exclusion of alternatives; a power-

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<sup>27</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 143; Mouffe, “John Rawls's pluralism,” 223.

<sup>28</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 46; See also William Kakenmaster, “Articulating Resistance: Agonism, Radical Democracy and Climate Change Activism.” *Millennium* 47, no. 3 (June 2019): 382, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0305829819839862>; Paulina Tambakaki, “The Tasks of Agonism and Agonism to the Task: Introducing ‘Chantal Mouffe: Agonism and the Politics of Passion,’” *Parallax* 20, no. 2 (2014): 2-3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13534645.2014.896543>.

<sup>29</sup> Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, preface to *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2001), xiv; Christina Neumayer and Jakob Svensson, “Activism and Radical Politics in the Digital Age: Towards a Typology,” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 22, no. 2 (April 2016): 134, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856514553395>; Helge Schwiertz, “Radical Democratic Theory and Migration: The Refugee Protest March as a Democratic Practice.” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 48, no. 2 (February 2022): 293, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453721996398>.

free rational consensus is simply impossible.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, the liberal notion of the neutral and rational position is a conceptual impossibility. Every discourse, therefore, is limited and no social agent can have a claim to a total mastery of society’s foundation.<sup>31</sup>

For Mouffe, what liberal theorists fail to realize is that any consensus, even one that is produced by their process of neutral and rational deliberation, is already a hegemonic act that necessarily involves the exclusion of others.<sup>32</sup> She asserts that any criteria that counts as “rational” is highly political and is a product of power. Indeed, the promotion of a “rational” process is already the drawing of a frontier between what is “reasonable” and what is not.<sup>33</sup> She thinks that we can see this clearly in Rawls’s system wherein reasonable persons are seen as those who accept the fundamental tenets of liberalism. In consequence, Rawls unwittingly proposes that those who do not accept the consensus are unreasonable. To this end, Mouffe views the liberal notion of a rational consensus as an attempt to suppress differences and exclude the claims of those whose discourse do not reflect the standards of the dominant liberal regime. As one Mouffean scholar puts it: a “consensus is potentially hostile to deviant opinions, especially if those opinions are backed by epistemologies that are not acceptable across the community, or at least the dominant part of that community”.<sup>34</sup> Mouffe again refers to Rawls to deepen this point. In the Rawlsian system:

If an unreasonable or irrational person happens to disagree with that state of affairs and has an intent to disrupt the consensus, she must be forced, through

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<sup>30</sup>Anna Marie Smith, *Laclau and Mouffe: The Radical Democratic Imaginary* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 130.

<sup>31</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *The Democratic Paradox* (London and New York: Verso, 2000), 21.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 49; See also Marie Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy: Rethinking Political Institutions in Pluralist Times* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 10; Van Buren et al., “Agonising over Industrial Relations: Bringing Agonism and Dissensus to the Pluralist Frames of Reference,” *Journal of Industrial Relations* 63, no. 2 (April 2021): 184-185, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022185620962536>.

<sup>33</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 142-143; See also Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Govert Valkenburg, “Consensus or Contestation: Reflections on Governance of Innovation in a Context of Heterogeneous Knowledges,” *Science, Technology & Society* 25, no. 2 (2020): 343, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971721820903005>.

coercion, to submit to the principles of justice. In a rather disingenuous way, Rawls claims that, given that the persons over whom it is exercised are 'unreasonable', this is a type of coercion that does not entail oppression. This allows him to conclude that liberals can coerce people who disagree with them while remaining, as he puts it, 'beyond reproach'<sup>35</sup>

The ingenuity of liberal politics, therefore, is that it ties its approach to a principle of rationalism which is taken as a prerequisite for organizing human coexistence. Their strategy is predicated on a clever flipping of the switch – it is not their discourse that is exclusive; rather, other points of view are excluded as a result of the natural dance of reason.<sup>36</sup> Thus, liberal politics can hide the act of exclusion presupposed in their deliberative process behind the veneer of “rationality” and “reasonableness” purportedly possessed by citizens of liberal democracy. Concomitantly, it leads to the establishment of a frontier that separates the reasonable from the unreasonable: the reasonable are the ones who comply with the rationality of the consensus while those who do not comply are associated with “irrationality” or “unreasonableness”.

This poses a great threat to democracy. Mouffe avers that once the “unreasonable” are excluded from the realm of legitimacy in the liberal regime, they actually do not disappear.<sup>37</sup> They remain as the “constitutive outside” – in the margins of the polity – who experience the rationality of the liberals as a kind of coercion – either you conform in order to be included or else remain in the margins. Moreover, Mouffe argues that hiding the act of exclusion behind pretenses to rationality crystallizes a given configuration of power relations and places this beyond the reach of critical inquiry. Indeed, because the rational consensus is framed as the product of the free exercise of reason, it becomes “illegitimate to put into question once it

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<sup>35</sup> Mouffe, “John Rawls’s pluralism,” 226.

<sup>36</sup> Mouffe, “John Rawls’s pluralism,” 227; See also Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy*, 8.

<sup>37</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 145.; See also Lillian Fougère and Sophie Bond, “Legitimising Activism in Democracy: A Place for Antagonism in Environmental Governance,” *Planning Theory* 17, no. 2 (2016): 163, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473095216682795>.

has been reached,” Mouffe tells us.<sup>38</sup> What transpires is a “dangerous utopia of reconciliation” wherein questioning the existing arrangements is deemed illegitimate because this configuration ostensibly embodies the principle of reasonableness and rationality.<sup>39</sup> As a result, society ossifies and becomes a monolithic hegemony that is resistant to dissent and critique from those who experience it as oppressive.

For these reasons, Mouffe argues that to solve the problems of liberal democratic frameworks, the principle of liberal individualism must be relinquished.<sup>40</sup> We have seen that individualism only leads to the faulty assumption that a rational consensus must be formulated which further breeds subjects who are recalcitrant to difference and pluralism. Instead, Mouffe argues that democratic frameworks must come to terms with the idea that individuals are always part of collective forms of identification – a “we” – that only exists by virtue of their antagonism with other groups – the “they”. Given the ineluctability of antagonism and the division of groups, the primary task of democratic regimes is to domesticate antagonism so that it is not expressed antagonistically – conflict between enemies who want to destroy one another – but agonistically – conflict between adversaries who oppose one another’s ideas but does not question the other’s right to possess and defend those ideas.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, for Mouffe, the formation of subjects who can engage one another agonistically should be one of the main functions of democratic politics.<sup>42</sup> Rather than wishing conflict and antagonism away, Mouffe argues that their safe expression within the bounds of democratic institutions is a sign that democracy is vibrant and healthy.<sup>43</sup>

In this section, we learned that for Mouffe liberal politics creates a caesura between the “rational” and the “irrational,” between those who agree with the rational consensus and those who do not.

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<sup>38</sup> Mouffe, *Democratic Paradox*, 28.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.; See also Paxton, *Agonistic Democracy*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 97.

<sup>41</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London & New York: Verso, 2013), 7.

<sup>42</sup> Will Leggett, “Restoring Society to Post-Structuralist Politics: Mouffe, Gramsci and Radical Democracy,” *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 39, no. 3 (2013): 304. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453712473080>

<sup>43</sup> Chantal Mouffe, “Politics and Passions: The Stakes of Democracy,” *Centre for the Study of Democracy* (2002): 9.

What, in this case, about the *bobotante*? If, as Mouffe presented, liberalism creates a distinction between rational and irrational, how is this related with the *bobotante* phenomenon in the Philippines? Lastly, what would the “rational” and “irrational” mean vis-à-vis the *bobotante* phenomenon? Looking carefully at specific moments in Philippine political history where the *bobotante* signifier is most widespread will give us the clue to solve these questions. Hence, let me begin my analysis by providing a brief account of three different manifestations of alleged *bobotantes*: Erap supporters, *dutertards*, and BBM supporters.

### **Liberalism's *Other*: The Emergence of the *Bobotante* Signifier in the Philippines**

In my observation, there are three moments in the history of the Philippines where the usage of the *bobotante* signifier is most widespread. First is the Joseph “Erap” Estrada presidency (1998-2001) whose supporters were ridiculed for their “blind devotion” and irrational support. As a matter of fact, one text message that circulated during EDSA III – a protest movement of Erap supporters in 2001 – described it as “the largest gathering of fools, idiots and imbeciles ever”.<sup>44</sup> Second is the Rodrigo Duterte presidency (2016-2022) where his supporters were pejoratively labeled “dutertards” (a combination of the words “duterte” and “retard”). This label was used to indicate that his supporters were blind followers whose moralities have been compromised and political retards who irrationally pinned their hopes on a messianic leader.<sup>45</sup> And third is the Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos, also known as BBM, campaign period and presidency (2022 – present). Like Erap and Duterte’s supporters, BBM’s supporters were also regarded as *bobotantes* for their alleged gullibility to fake news and inability to clearly articulate the underlying motivations for their political loyalty to him.

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<sup>44</sup> Frederic Charles Schaffer, “Disciplinary Reactions: Alienation and the Reform of Vote Buying in the Philippines” (paper presentation, Trading Political Rights: The Comparative Politics of Vote Buying Conference, Center for International Studies, MIT, Cambridge, August 26-27, 2002, 10, <http://gsdrc.org/docs/open/po15.pdf>).

<sup>45</sup> Curato, “Politics of Anxiety,” 92.

Looking at these instances vis-à-vis the notion of the liberal subject discussed above, we can slowly piece together the role liberalism plays in underpinning the *bobotante* phenomenon. As I discussed in the first section, liberals in general paint the subject as a rational and calculative individual who can rationally pursue his interests and justify them intelligently. By no means do Erap, Duterte, and BBM fit this description. Indeed, Erap was staunchly opposed by various groups for his subpar skills in public speaking and his lack of a college degree.<sup>46</sup> Duterte was criticized for his refusal to engage in formal debates and for opting for the use of diatribes and “gutter language” against his opponents.<sup>47</sup> Most recently, current President BBM was mocked for not finishing his university degree, for refusing to participate in debates, and for being less articulate as his main rival Leni Robredo.

On the other hand, politicians who are often venerated at the expense of the non-liberal type politicians mentioned previously are those who are seemingly embodiments of liberal politics, such as Mar Roxas and Leni Robredo. Mar Roxas, for instance, was generously praised by the liberal thinker Randy David as the most capable leader based on his prowess in debating and public speaking in the lead up to the 2016 presidential elections. David writes, “IF THE PRESIDENCY were something that could be won in a town hall debate, it would be fairly easy to pick out the next President based on Sunday’s final debate. Mar Roxas would come out on top of my list as the best debater, way ahead of the others”.<sup>48</sup> In the same article, he praised Roxas for his “communicative rationality,” “wholistic mind,” and

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<sup>46</sup> Temario C. Rivera, “The Middle Classes and Democratization in the Philippines: From the Asian Crisis to the Ouster of Estrada,” *Center for People Empowerment in Governance* (n.d.), [https://cenpeg.org/fellows\\_speak/rivera/Rivera%20The%20Middle%20Classes%20and%20Democratization.pdf](https://cenpeg.org/fellows_speak/rivera/Rivera%20The%20Middle%20Classes%20and%20Democratization.pdf).

<sup>47</sup> While Duterte first enjoyed broad support from the civic class during the 2016 presidential election and the early parts of his presidency, this support gradually waned as his presidency unfolded. See Mark R. Thompson, “Middle-Class Remorse: Re-embracing Liberal Democracy in the Philippines and Thailand,” *Global Asia* 15, no. 1 (March 2020), [https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/cover/middle-class-remorse-re-embracing-liberaldemocracy-in-the-philippines-and-thailand\\_mark-r-thompson](https://www.globalasia.org/v15no1/cover/middle-class-remorse-re-embracing-liberaldemocracy-in-the-philippines-and-thailand_mark-r-thompson).

<sup>48</sup> Randy David, “The Last Presidential Debate,” *Inquirer.Net*, April 26, 2016, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/94468/the-lastpresidential-debate>; Cited in Benjiemen A. Labastin, “Two Faces of *Dutertismo*: Two Visions of Democracy in the Philippines,” special issue *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* (December 2018): 34.

“personal integrity” – qualities he believed should be possessed by a president of the republic.

I have now adequately laid the groundwork upon which my main argument shall stand. From the discussion so far, I can reasonably say that liberalism underpins the *bobotante* signifier in a twofold manner. Firstly, it shapes the presupposition that the “right” electoral choice can be determined by voters who observe the ideals of liberalism – rationality and neutrality. As we have seen, this is true in the Philippines where liberal thinkers, such as Randy David and Carmel Abao, preach rational and wise voting as prerequisites for choosing the best and most qualified candidates to run the nation. Building upon Mouffe’s analysis, I assert that such liberal calls for being rational and wise in elections carves the Philippine electorate into two distinct groups: the rational and irrational voter. By presupposing that the “right” or “rational” electoral choice can be determined so long as voters apply their reason, liberalism inadvertently but necessarily creates the opposing belief that not choosing these “rational” electoral choices is caused by a lack in the rational capacities of the voter. Hence, they are called dumb or *bobo*. This brings us to my second point. Liberalism plays a role in the *bobotante* phenomenon by postulating that the “right” or “rational” electoral choices are politicians who fit the criteria of the liberal subject. The fact that Filipino politicians who do not fit the liberal standard of the rational subject – such as Erap, Duterte, and BBM – were summarily dismissed for their “irrationality” while liberal type politicians seem to avoid association with pejorative labels such as dumb, *bobo*, or irrational clearly proves this point. In this case, voters who support non-liberal type politicians – who are seen as the “irrational” choices – are also typically the ones labeled as *bobotantes*.

Taking the two points developed above, this paper advances the contention that the liberal emphasis on rationality in elections is simultaneously an act of inclusion-exclusion: it separates the rational voters from the *bobotante* based on liberalism’s prior assumptions of “right” electoral choice. The liberal insistence that voters who use their reason will inevitably choose the “right” or “rational” choice – which, as I have shown, are none other than liberal type politicians – creates the assumption that voting for non-liberal type politicians is caused by a lack of reason on the part of the voters. I posit that it is this mechanism which underpins the emergence and sustains the



existence of the *bobotante* signifier in the Philippines. Hence, the Filipinos tagged as *bobotante* represent the surplus vis-à-vis the “rational” structure of the liberal regime. They become Philippine liberalism’s *Other*, the constitutive outside whose existence becomes the countertype liberalism uses to negatively define a legitimate democratic actor. Truly, the *bobotante* stands as the concrete manifestation of the liberal mistake which Mouffe has identified: the assumption that subjects can detach themselves from relations of power and from this neutral and rational position choose power-free electoral choices. In reality, however, electoral choices are always a product of particularistic positions given how antagonisms can never be transcended. This means that Philippine politics will always be constituted by division and no single choice will embody the universal-rational will.

But if our liberal political framework remains blind to this, Philippine democracy is fraught with danger. By insisting that liberal type politicians are the only rational choice, liberalism in the country makes no room for conflicting and different rationalities in the political field. It forces Filipino voters to agree on the same electoral choice and discourages different and conflicting political alternatives. Liberalism, thus, blocks the emergence of Filipino subjectivities that can engage one another agonistically. This explains the emergence of antagonistic moral politics in the Philippines where mudslinging, *ad hominem* attacks, and accusations of evilness are characteristic features of political engagement between opposing camps.<sup>49</sup> What makes this even more dangerous is that by inhibiting others from voicing their dissent – by delegitimizing them as dumb or as their choices are irrational – they do not magically disappear. Rather, those who are called *bobotante* remain in the margins of Philippine society and experience the liberal status quo as coercive or oppressive. This, as Mouffe observed in different contexts, makes the excluded susceptible to “join fundamentalist movements or become attracted to antiliberal, populist forms of democracy”.<sup>50</sup> This is why explosions of illiberal sentiments recur in the country ever since its liberal democracy was restored in 1986. Freshest in our memories is the rise of the illiberal Rodrigo Duterte who, as multiple scholars pointed out,

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<sup>49</sup> See Kusaka, *Moral Politics*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 6.

gained immense popularity because of the people's dissatisfaction with the liberal democratic status quo of the Philippines.<sup>51</sup>

The brutal irony, therefore, is that the liberal assumption that democracy becomes healthier if rational deliberation is the only game in town is fueling the abhorrent act of dismissing others as *bobotante*. As long as this bias towards liberal-rational politics remains rigid, the pejorative image of the other Filipinos as *bobotante*, as voters whose decisions are always misguided and distorted, will always continue to haunt them. Their political behavior will never be thought of as harboring genuine democratic demands, except perhaps in the narrow walls of the academe, and they will never be treated as legitimate adversaries whose ideas are worthy to be engaged agonistically. Therefore, instead of enriching and improving the democratic process, the rationalism which liberalism espouses as the *sine qua non* of democratic and electoral participation encourages a dangerous antagonistic attitude against groups whose political behavior, preferences, and bearings do not reflect the purported "rational" standard of liberal politics.

## Conclusion

This study aimed to understand why some Filipino voters are regarded as dumb voters or *bobotante*. As I have indicated, this study was propelled by the concern that calling others *bobotante* is problematic because it could potentially eliminate their voices from the democratic process, thereby justifying or reifying their subordination. For this reason, I suggested that understanding the underlying cause of the *bobotante* signifier is important because it places us in a much better position to address it more substantially.

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<sup>51</sup> For further discussion of Duterte's antagonism with liberalism, see Labastin, "Two Faces of *Dutertismo*," 50; Janjira Sombatpoonsiri, "Manipulating Civic Space: Cyber Trolling in Thailand and the Philippines," *GIGA Focus Asia* no. 3 (June 2018): 3; Kreuzer, *Patron-Strongman who Delivers*, 25-28; Julio Cabral Teehankee and Yuko Kasuya, "The 2019 Midterm Elections in the Philippines: Party System Pathologies and Duterte's Populist Mobilization," *Asian Journal of Comparative Politics* 5, no. 1 (2020): 70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057891119896425>; Julio C. Teehankee, "Was Duterte's Rise Inevitable?" in *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, ed. Nicole Curato (Quezon: BUGHAW, 2017): 52-53; Christopher Ryan Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte* (Cotabato City, Philippines: ElziStyle Bookshop, 2022).

In particular, I argued that the *bobotante* signifier is underpinned by liberalism's emphasis on rationality. To support my argument, I analyzed the rationalism which sits at the core of liberalism and showed that this emphasis on rationality leads it to the assumption that the right electoral choices will be made by individuals as long as they observe the liberal ideals of neutrality and rationality. Using Chantal Mouffe's ideas, I explained that liberalism's call for neutrality and rationality in democratic voting divides the Filipino electorate into two camps – the wise voter who supports liberal politicians and the *bobotante* who supports non-liberal type politicians. In this way, the Filipino voters whose electoral choices do not reflect the "right" choice from the lens of liberalism are labeled *bobotante*. The *bobotante* are therefore democratic actors excluded from the sphere of legitimate liberal rationality. In short, they are liberalism's *Other*.

Making this argument, however, does not mean that I am advocating anti-rationalism. Instead, critiquing liberal politics by locating it as the source of the deplorable maligning of divergent rationalities as *bobotante* is pursued with the hope of instigating a radical reexamination of our basic political categories and arguments. Instead of having a resistant political theory, this paper hopes to point us towards the development of a political framework that does not treat divergent rationalities as irrelevant deviations, that fosters respect for difference, and which envisages a Philippine democracy that is open to the polyphony of competing views and interests that emanate from its pluralistic political terrain.

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