



Book Preview

Building a Theory from the Ground: The Davao School of Radical Democracy

Layne Hartsell, Ph.D.

Chulalongkorn University – Bangkok, Thailand

3E Program: Energy, Economy, Environment, Asia Institute, Tokyo, JP

Bioregional Letters & 3E, North Valley College, Kidapawan City, PH

Email: h.layne@pm.me

Christopher Ryan B. Maboloc, Ph.D.

Ateneo de Davao University

Email: ryanmaboloc75@yahoo.com

Abstract

In this paper, we trace the roots of radical democracy as interpreted by scholars in the Philippine South. For the longest time, theorizing on Philippine politics is rooted on the moral reformism of liberal progressives. Using interpretive analysis, we seek to understand the background, context, and insights that provide the theoretical basis of the framework used by its proponents in analysing the rise to power of President Rodrigo Duterte and the struggle against elite rule that the people have been forced into by its colonial history and subsequent urbanism. Almost ten years after the first paper on the subject matter was published by a local author, the discussions have grown into other areas as the Philippines continues its struggle against social and political oppression. More importantly, the study situates Mindanao scholars in terms of their unique contribution in making possible the rise of a new movement in political discourse that is grounded on Chantal Mouffe's agonistic philosophy.

Keywords: Radical democracy; Davao school; elite democracy; Mindanao; agonism, urbanism

Introduction

In a recent TV interview, Karen Davila, an anchor for the TV Show Headstart, asked former political affairs secretary Ronald Llamas about the most critical thing that former President Benigno Aquino III did to ensure the conviction of the late Chief Justice Renato Corona by the Senate in his impeachment trial on grounds based on the claim that he misdeclared his assets which, as a result, caused his removal from office.¹ Llamas was hesitant and did not offer any sane or rational explanation. He was actually laughing; but what is the significance of his actuation? It goes on to show that the former President, while portrayed as a reformer and the epitome of moral virtue, was not actually insulated from the practical side of politics. Reports indicate that the senators who voted in favor of convicting CJ Corona were allegedly given 50 million pesos worth of projects from the Development Acceleration Program (DAP), another controversial action by the Aquino administration, as some form of bribe.

The above is a showcase of the hypocrisy and moral posturing of some progressive liberals in the country. Beginning in 2017, a group of scholars from Mindanao initiated what came to be considered as an alternative view to the dominant political narratives in the post-Marcos era. They wanted to explain the alternative brand of leadership of an unknown figure at the time in national politics although international media have begun to portray him as “Dirty Harry” or “The Punisher” for his no-nonsense approach to illegal drugs and criminality. Nevertheless, there was actually no venue for such discourse. Philippine political discourse is defined by the liberal progressives in Manila who use the typical language of accountability, transparency and human rights, all Western-bred and patterned after successful democracies in the world. However, despite their erudite explanations on the nature and eventualities in the type of politics in

¹ Headstart, “Political analyst Ronald Llamas on Senate coup, VP Duterte impeachment, Dela Rosa warrant.” May 12, 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UznekrV18Kg>

the country, there is a failure to provide a clear path forward in terms of finding solutions to the country's many problems.

At the outset, it can be argued, as suggested by Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, that Philippine politics is contested.² This is because of its colonial history. Mindanao is largely excluded from the picture in all aspects of life, including academia. Manila or urbanist scholars have provided the liberal explanation when it comes to the pathologies that define the course of events in the country since its colonial period. However, the works of Renato Constantino, Paul Hotchcroft and Joel Rocamora, and Patricio Abinales did not really close the door for radical approaches to political theorizing in the country. Meanwhile, the important works of Wataru Kusaka, Karl Gaspar, and Jeffry Ocaj started to inspire locals to come up with their framework from the ground, inspired by the lived experience they have shared with ordinary folks. Kusaka lived for a while in Tondo, Manila. Gaspar spent time with the indigenous peoples of Surigao and Bukidnon. Ocaj also lived with the Ati tribe and indigenous folks in Negros Oriental. They all examined the reality of exploitation and the oppression of indigenous peoples, noticeably the structural and cultural violence against those in the margins of society.

In 2022, albeit in a different path as a philosophy researcher, Christopher Ryan Maboloc published his book, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, as an offshoot of his research about the rise to power of the first President from Mindanao. For Maboloc, the rise of Duterte into power is the response to the elite type of democracy that has dominated Philippine politics, criticizing the Manila-centric type of governance that has excluded Mindanao and undermined its growth. Mindanao is the other when it comes to Philippine politics. Maboloc saw Duterte as a manifestation of a communal politics that was rooted in the experiences of the people, citing the critical contributions of lesser known but important figures in the country such as Julian Montalan and Miguel Malvar who exhibited the qualities and admirable traits of a leader who was loved by the masses. Maboloc writes:

Structural injustices in our midst systematically exploit and take advantage of the powerless. When a state is

² Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, *Contested Democracy and the Left in the Philippines After Marcos*. (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2008), 10.

dysfunctional and poorly governed, the element of favoritism in politics will define the kind of relation people have with their government. The consequence is that millions of people will be excluded from the benefits of progress. In this regard, the linear approach to nation-building simply reinforces the biases that Filipinos have been subjected to. If the leaders that Filipinos elect are nothing but recycled politicians who come from old clans, then it is a kind of democracy that will not be able to endure for the ordinary man.³

The concept of history from below, inspired by Heidi Gloria who wrote an alternative treatise on Philippine history from the viewpoint of Mindanao.⁴ This work, together with the ethnographic studies of Gaspar in Mindanao, has moved scholars and researchers to reflect on Philippine politics and society. With a background in applied ethics, Maboloc desired bridging theory and practice. Romulo Bautista must be credited for this progress with his work on the concept of *bayanikrasya* (bayan + demokrasya).⁵ Using the agonistic philosophy of Chantal Mouffe, scholars from the South came to develop a unique concept of radicalism, anchored in the strong leadership of then-President Rodrigo Duterte, whose brand of politics caused a ripple effect, shaking Philippine society and the grip of oligarchs on the economy.

In his work, “An Analysis of the Philippine Church’s approach to Duterte’s Drug War,” Maboloc writes that the War on Drugs is a disturbing reality that the Catholic Church in the country must confront.⁶ The allegation that the same author supports the alleged human rights violations in the drug war is nothing short of preposterous. What critics do not understand is that the rise of Duterte has been a result of people being fed up by the inability of the national government to redistribute the goods of society equally due

³ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*. (Cotabato City: Elzstyle Publishing, 2022), 5.

⁴ Heidi Gloria, *History from Below*. (Davao City: Ateneo de Davao University RPO, 2014), 16.

⁵ Romulo Bautista, “What is Bayanikrasya?” Mindanao Inter-Ateneo Conference, October 29, 2010.

⁶ Christopher Ryan Maboloc, “An Analysis of the Catholic Church’s Approach on Duterte’s Drug War.” *IBMR Journal* 46:3 (2022): 357.

to the elite type of democracy practiced in the country. The use of Mouffe's theory is not out of convenience nor an excuse for pitting the rich against the powerless. It is about the struggle of the underrepresented voices in the margins of Philippine society. Duterte's win in 2016 was emblematic of that symbolism. The charge of populism is simply a type of misunderstanding, often rooted in the inferiority complex of Manila's dominant position.

Elite Democracy and its Effects

According to Ian Clark Parcon, "the elitism which has dominated the country's way of proceeding has led to the marginalization of a significant portion of the population primarily those who are economically disadvantaged, the regionally disregarded sectors from the south."⁷ It was Menelito Mansueto who introduced the important writings of Mouffe to his colleagues in Mindanao. For Mouffe, there is a basic difference between politics and the political, a distinction first introduced by the jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt.⁸ Mouffe thinks that Rawlsian liberalism is infatuated with the idea of a consensus or agreement, the basis of the Rawlsian social contract. The starting point of society, Mouffe argues, is conflict, not agreement.⁹ The reality of politics is all about struggle and technically speaking it is about the management of power from urban centers, hence the foundational point. Therefore, the context of the Philippines, this struggle is attested by the divide between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

Kusaka presents an agonistic view in his *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, saying that structural injustice has resulted to political conflict in the country between the rich and the poor. In a populist struggle, society is divided into two – the ruling class who oppresses and the poor who are powerless.¹⁰ A populist leader is projected as someone who sides with the weak. For liberals, Duterte personifies such populist stance. Nicole Curato, in this regard, connected the

⁷ Ian Clark Parcon, "Complexity, Agonism and Solidarity: The Kaleidoscopic Picture of Philippine Politics and Society." *SES Journal Special Issue* (2024): 2.

⁸ Chantal Mouffe, "Liberalism and Modern Democracy," in *Democracy and Possessive Individualism*, ed. Joseph Carens, (New York: SUNY Press, 1995), 186.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 189.

¹⁰ Wataru Kusaka, *Moral Politics in the Philippines*, (Singapore: NUS Press, 2017), 6.

meaning of populism to the War on Drugs, calling it “penal populism.”¹¹ For her, populism divides society into two types of people – the virtuous and the scums of the earth (drug addicts, pushers, and criminals). According to Curato, Duterte’s War on Drugs was a way to legitimize political power by pitting the virtue versus vice and punishing the latter who in the end victimizes the innocent.

The above is the background condition for Dutertismo, a term first coined by UP Professor Randy David.¹² But the term is not original, explains Maboloc.¹³ It is copied from Chavismo, a movement patterned after the populist regime of the late Venezuelan President Hugo Chavez. Chavez nationalized the Venezuelan oil industry. He distributed money to the poor in the rural areas. He often criticized US foreign policy. As a result, the US imposed trade sanctions and an oil embargo against Venezuela resulting to the eventual downfall of its economy. When Chavez died, the country spiralled into economic collapse, which accelerated to its present situation as a failed state. David’s intent in using Chavismo is to label Duterte as a populist leader like Chavez.

However, while President Duterte is labelled by Manila scholars as populist, it can be said that Duterte actually fought against the elites in Philippine society who have, since the colonial period, abused and exploited the Filipino people, ignored Mindanao, and perpetuated an Old Order that simply enabled the oligarchs to control the economy and influence the country’s politics. This is the gist of the work of Mansueto, who wrote about the concept of decoloniality in the Philippine South.¹⁴ President Corazon Aquino had the opportunity to reform Philippine society after EDSA but instead, she reinstalled the Old Order. The same had tremendous repercussions in the lives of the people. It defined the post-Marcos power dynamics in Philippine society. The same dynamics of power extends into the regionalistic approach to politics. Manila projects itself as the center of power, where Mindanao, being at the margins and victim to historical as well

¹¹ Nicole Curato, “Politics of Anxiety, Politics of Hope: Penal Populism and Duterte’s Rise to Power.” In *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, no. 3 (2016): 102.

¹² Randy David, “Dutertismo,” *Inquirer.Net*; [article online]; available from <http://opinion.inquirer.net/94530/dutertismo#ixzz5MnDSO63X>; 01 May 2016.

¹³ Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 156-157

¹⁴ Menelito Mansueto, *Decolonial Turn in the Philippine South*. (USA: KDP Publishing, 2025), 10.

as economic exclusion, ultimately desires to topple. Duterte changed the center of power during his term, giving the southern region the autonomy it sought for, for decades, to correct a structural injustice that was rooted in colonial rule and ilustrado politics.

Radical Politics and the Davao School

Radical politics in the Philippines is a nascent perspective. It was emboldened by Duterte's emergence into the national consciousness. *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte* provided the theoretical as well as historical framework for such type of analysis. The book immediately gained attention, especially from critics. Professor Julio Teehankee, nevertheless, acknowledged in a lecture that the author is the first to use a postmodern political analysis on the Duterte presidency. Authors from Mindanao such as Benjiemen Labastin, Rogelio Bayod, and Gerry Arambala, who used the framework of radical politics following the lead of Maboloc, are aware of the risk in navigating the political terrain and impact of Duterte's politics. Like Maboloc, the only motive on their part is to present an alternative perspective to interpret politics in the country. Radical democracy is about how a Mindanawon showed his resolve in the struggle against the political and economic elites.

Radical democracy, indeed, is primarily attributed to the seminal works of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. Maboloc's appropriation or use of Mouffe's novel theory was criticized by UP Cebu and UP Diliman academics, pointing out that Mouffe would not agree to Duterte's governance style and perceived bravado, however, their common analysis is left-leaning, says Symel Deguzman-Daulat.¹⁵ She has written a magnificent book review of Maboloc's work. In response to critics, Mansueto argues that leftist academics are only showing their disdain for Duterte, even to the point of leveraging Mouffe, saying that she has expressed her disapproval in one interview, as stated in an article, but without showing proof whether the said interview actually happened.¹⁶

¹⁵ Symel De Guzman Daulat. 2022. "Christopher Ryan Maboloc's Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte." *Budhi: A Journal of Ideas and Culture* 26 (3): 102.

¹⁶ See Mansueto, *Decolonial Turn in the Philippine South*, 6.

The theory of radical politics in the country is making its mark. Arambala, for instance, provided an important case study to understand the meaning of the return of the political. This is paradigm-changing as such type of radicalism was needed to counter mafia-like predatory politics in a local setting. The Parojinogs were the alleged leaders of a big crime syndicate. Duterte exhibited his radical leadership in addressing such a difficult issue. It is not a simple course of action. The idea of radicalism means that the former President had to fight cunning figures in order to realize the public good for the people. In fact, while the former President has been rendered to the International Criminal Court at The Hague, he still exerts much philosophical influence in terms of the unfolding of politics in the country.

For Maboloc, the former President's biggest legacy is the peace agreement he has forged between the government and Moro rebels in Muslim Mindanao. Mindanao deserves fair treatment because it has been deprived of its just share of the country's resources. Mindanao scholars, in this regard, are writing about what they believe the people deserve. EDSA People Power was actually the project of liberal reformism, though behind the movement was not just the institutions that had legitimate demands against Ferdinand Marcos Sr. The revolution was supported by the oligarchy whom President Corazon Aquino rewarded handsomely by handing them back the reins of the economy. EDSA People Power was a failure.¹⁷ Hence, thirty years thereafter, Filipinos longed for a leader who would give them a voice against what ails the country.

For many years, top academics in the capital have debated about what a Filipino philosophy would be like. Such debate is misguided. What truly matters in the lives of the people are their everyday experiences and how the same have shaped the way they view themselves and see the world. That world, in our case, is a difficult one. Such an attitude has deprived people from the South of the respect they deserve. Mindanao has been denied of its important role in the country's development, so that even in the world of philosophy, there is a form of divide that undermines local researchers and scholars. This is not to diminish the contributions of the scholars such as Leonardo Mercado, Emerita Quito or a Roque Ferriols. However, there is always something beyond the four corners of Manila's classroom.

¹⁷ Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Philippines*, 215.

In truth, philosophy is completely distant from the ordinary Filipino. If philosophy must define for people the meaning of life because as Gabriel Marcel put it, one can only reflect on important things, what is crucial is not the search for what is originally Filipino in terms of thinking but how we as a people have actually reflected on the important and difficult questions of the day for us to be able to understand not Plato, Nietzsche or Derrida, but ourselves. Philosophy can be an inward search, but it is also about preserving our historical and cultural identity as a people who are forged in the endless struggle against those who try to steal from us the meaning and value of our lives and ultimately, our freedom. Philosophy instructs that just like the foreign thinkers many among us idolize, we too are entitled to have our special place in the world of thought, discourse, and letters.

The Davao School, or the movement, does not seek to put forward a treatise that is meant to defend someone. It is critical of some of the policies of the former President. In this way, the course of action taken by Southern scholars is a rugged path purely meant to dismantle the grand narratives so confidently peddled by some “elite” academics. It opens the discourse against *ilustrado* drama in the nation’s democratic narratives. The authors who are exposing the issues associated with elite democracy are simply attempting to make add a significant stroke to those walls that paint the tapestry of the Filipino people’s persistent struggles. Radical politics gives a fresh look into the discourse on the country’s history and politics, including philosophy, which has been dictated by academics from the country’s capital. While urbanist ideology is a generalized feature in the world of elitism, oligarchy and the like, Filipinos have their own attributes and attitudes that manifest the importance of solidarity. Hence, this philosophical path is nothing accidental. It is a part of a historical unfolding that is premised in the exclusion of Mindanao from the contours of Philippine academic life.

Radical Shift and Theoretical Underpinnings

We, along with other scholars from the South, saw the ascent of Duterte to the presidency as a “radical shift,” thereby departing from the “conventional norms of political elite governance.”¹⁸ When we think of radicalism, we think of something that is out from the center,

¹⁸ Maboloc, *Radical Democracy in the Time of Duterte*, 90-91.

the qualifying point should be out from what kind of center or core? I tend to think of radical along the lines of human rights or justice, such as liberal justice, as one of the movements to which this group is connected. Maboloc does argue within this particular kind of radicalism in mind that we could say on the state level comes out of the radical humanism of the Enlightenment with indigenous qualities from Philippine culture. Maboloc says that unconventional methods and strongman politics represent this form of radicalism that does not necessarily follow “in a traditional ideological sense, but in the sense of challenging established liberal norms and practices.”¹⁹

It should be no wonder, of course, that democracy is a central issue in the works of the above-mentioned authors, and the use of the term “radical democracy” might be expected. Radical democracy is a term that scholars from Mindanao have wrestled with under difficult, next to impossible conditions in the real world. Mouffe and Laclau argue on the smaller-scale that conflict is inherent to politics and cannot be eliminated through rational consensus, proposing instead that we transform the idea of antagonism (hostility, or enemy relations) into agonism (opponents, quasi-adversarial)—passionate.²⁰ Contestation is thus a sublimation of hostility into a *potential* leading to fruitful disagreement or at least a neutral outcome; or at worst, a mildly disagreeable outcome. In response to some critics, Laclau and Mouffe actually emphasize deepening democratic practices “beyond liberal institutions” and to not attempt to transcend partisanship, supposedly because the latter is simply unlikely, requiring too much effort, when the former process can be effective enough for the real world and eliminate extreme risk.

We therefore agree with the context upon which Southern scholars like Bayod, Ocay, and Arambala are working on, Bayod has done work on indigenous peoples in terms of understanding their traditional practices. Arambala applies radical politics into the reality of bossism in his local Ozamiz. In fact, reducing the risk of the “enemy” can be constructive and done so without expecting a fully unified group, though a certain harmony socially and ecologically can be achieved. Therefore, at minimum, it is agonism over antagonism, basic tolerance over vicious intolerance, so as to get the various positions into real dialogue rather than fragmenting into adversarial or enemy

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Parcon, “Complexity, Agonism and Solidarity,” 3-4.

entrenched positions. The idea is clear, and much wider than existing liberalism; therefore, perhaps being able to censure threats such as the effects of disruption of something like an ethnostate project or other similar extreme form.

As we mentioned at the outset, democracy, which foundationally is democratic process from the *demos* concerning the human being in society and the common system, whether rural or urban, where the ontological foundation is the human being and what we call inalienable rights follow from metaphysics and natural rights, and particularly the realized rights to real world access what we need for basics and for thriving. Security is found in protection of the individual human being from the excess of others, particularly the government.²¹ This is a thin ice that the works of the scholars above are walking on. Also, it is important to be careful to not synonymize “individual” with the human being or risk conflation of an adjective with the actual ontology of being human; rather than a focus on individual liberty, life itself should be asserted as foundational to social and public deliberation concerning liberty and equality.

While life and then liberty are foremost, without equality and equity, life itself will be under threat, thereby eliminating any talk of liberty. Progress follows with the flourishing of human beings in modern societies.²² While Mouffe is correct that contestation might not be overcome due to power relations in the public, the picture can be sharpened to bring in the matter of civilization. If we take politics as the management of the affairs of power in the city, of the *polis*, Mouffe’s ‘power relations’ become more accurate in that while entering into a dialogue on equal ground is the ideal; however, it cannot be attained in a public (*res publicans* or public state) because the actual relations of power within a state are not equal. President Duterte, in this way, used his position in order to challenge the prevailing structures and put to task the oligarchs who have benefited from the unequal configuration of power in the Philippines, which is a different matter than retaining urbanists as his support base.

Theoretically, the concern for equality is not just for the state but any society that does not significantly protect the human being from the group in its power dynamics; dismissal of this foundational matter

²¹ This should take into consideration the Drug War as well.

²² In integrity with the biotic community.

can put the social order at risk is disintegration. In the Enlightenment, and in contact with indigenous thinkers and leader in the Americas, liberal democracy proposed a state that is distributed to a degree where individuality and freedom of expression are strengthened and thus there is a state protected public in the “town square” and streets, and there was a knowledge-commons seen in the university. The relative equality in liberal democracy allowed a much wider area for free expression without fear of negative consequences that would of course suppress free expression and increase inequality when before the law and society. Liberal reformism failed. In the Philippines, the radicalism that now characterizes its public sphere can be found in social media as netizens call out abuses in the government.

The struggle for social equality is indeed a continuing saga. Great progress was made in the ensuing centuries after the Enlightenment, though today, even this fairly decent unfinished project is being crushed by a new imperialism, techno-utopian in nature, as the previous had been taken over by industrial capitalism, though this techno-social emergence is beyond the current discussion. The only thing to say at this point is that the state protected areas of common life played a large part in creating at least an equal space for dialogue and democratic deliberation, where power relationships are deemphasized, individual human beings were protected from the group, and the arguments and explanations within such a system can be accepted, adjusted or rejected based on the dialogue itself, and not fear of repercussions personally. In the present scheme of things, there is a danger that Philippine society might collapse with the unabated abuse of power by corrupt politicians who continue to steal from the country’s treasury. As we recall the attitude of moral reformists as exhibited by the like of Llamas who are promoted by mainstream media, the failure in the country’s democratic processes cannot be pinned down on one party while excluding other by means of its self-declared moral uprightness.

Thus, while Mouffe’s clarification of John Rawls, for example, is excellent, we argue the definition of *political* according to the terms and cultural production.²³ Where politics is referred to as the dimension of antagonism that is inherent in human relations and then for the larger institutions, we seek to clarify the picture that much writing involves urban systems or politics of the *polis or civitas* as

²³ Mouffe, “Liberalism and Modern Democracy,” 185.

urban institutions, which is at best called civilization with its high development in the phenomenal urban world, and while amazing, it is also a war against species and Nature. Therefore, Mouffe's, like many political theorists, are bound within a civilizational framework and arguing within a certain neolithic ideology from the ancients up to the modernity, when civilization was coined as a term in the Enlightenment. In this sense, Mindanao scholars deserve a right to be 'at the table' of political theorizing with their courageous approach and radical interpretation of the scheme of things that define the fate of their region and nation.

Conclusion

There is no absolute, real interpretation of any theory. Movements are shaped by history and context. The Mindanao experience and the rise of Duterte are not to be considered as building blocks for a new theory; rather, these realities can be seen as fuel to a fire. The fire of democratic process that is a true revolution that seeks to dismantle elitism and the dominance of an oppressive structure that has undermined not only the growth of a region but also the intellectual progress of its people. The Davao School is a testament that knowledge is not the exclusive property of any class, group or people. What remains critical, in this sense, is the recognition of the driving force that makes people fight for their rights and uphold the basic democratic principles that define for us the true meaning of freedom. For many people of the region, and its indigenous, it is literally a fight for their lives and subsequent well-being.

The Davao School, in this sense, is a tree that is starting to take root. It is not to be seen as an exclusive or even unitary experience. It is simply the response of a group of academics in dialogue with indigenous peoples, all who desire to be heard. Kusaka is right in saying that radical democracy in the works of Maboloc come to define the underrepresented voices from the Philippine South. Philosophy is about discourse, not domination. It is about opening new paths and understanding new methodologies and various perspectives in order to see the world in a much broader context. The antagonism against the Davao School or its brand of political thinking is not its own making. The Davao School of Radical Democracy is a result of the

challenge that it has put forward against urbanist ideology and the structural, social, moral, ecological conditions.

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